



RECREATION - Executive Summary Wantastiquet Region River Subcommittee

The Connecticut River is the centerpiece for a wide variety of recreation in the Wantastiquet region, from paddling trips down New England's largest waterway, to hikes affording expansive river views from atop Mt. Wantastiquet itself. The river's return from years of pollution has transformed the Connecticut into a rich recreational asset for valley residents and visitors. Swimming, fishing, boating, camping, hiking, bicycling, wildlife observation, and sight-seeing are more widely enjoyed and appreciated in the Wantastiquet region than ever before.

TOP PRIORITIES FOR RECREATION

1. Reduce mercury contamination in the Connecticut River system.
2. Ensure that the river's water quality is safe for recreation.
3. Protect shoreland and riparian buffers.
4. Invest in land conservation to ensure that open space remains for public recreation.
5. Address the growing problem of ATVs.
6. Encourage creation of more river access, especially for small, cartop boats.
7. Be prepared for water rescue at all seasons.
8. Understand respectful use of private land.
9. Prevent the spread of invasive plants and animals.
10. Discourage use of "jetskis" on the river.

Water-based Recreation

Boating activity - Things have changed since Henry David Thoreau visited the Connecticut River at Brattleboro in 1856, noting in his journal, "Not a boat to be seen upon it." On a sunny summer weekend these days, motor boats, water skiers, pontoon boats, jet skis, rowing shells, canoes, and kayaks share the river as fishermen angle from shore. The Wantastiquet section offers easy flatwater paddling, with some quickwater below the Bellows Falls and Vernon Dams. The river's depth permits power boating from central Westmoreland to Vernon Dam. The few miles from the Ashuelot River to the Massachusetts line are passable by canoe, kayak, and small motor boat.

River Access - Fourteen boat launches provide access to the Connecticut River in the this segment, including eight ramps accommodating all boats, one serving small outboard motor boats, and five serving only car-top boats. There is currently no public boat access in Westminster or Westmoreland. There are public boat ramps located in every town (other than these two towns) where the river is deep enough for power traffic. In general, adding further access for trailered boats to already congested parts of the river will create additional boating conflicts and strain the limited enforcement ability of NH Marine Patrol. However, a launch is needed for small motor boats at the mouth of the Ashuelot River below Vernon Dam in Hinsdale. Currently, the only access to this section is from Northfield, forcing fishermen to abide by Massachusetts fishing regulations even if their catch comes from New Hampshire waters.

Boating law enforcement - The reach between the Chesterfield/Brattleboro bridge and Vernon Dam is often congested with heavy power boat traffic, small boats, and jet skis, and reports of boaters and jet ski operators disregarding boat speed laws are common. More consistent and effective enforcement of boating laws is necessary, for public safety and to protect the river's banks from erosion from boat wakes.

Jet skis - These craft are more common in the Wantastiquet segment than elsewhere on the northern river. While only a small section here is wide enough for legal use of ski craft over headway speed, they are common in a much larger area. New Hampshire's definition for these craft is outdated, making enforcement difficult and threatening erodible riverbanks.

Invasives - The alarming increase of invasive aquatic species threatens the quality of river recreation. Eurasian milfoil was introduced in the mid-1990s to the Connecticut River north of this area, and the aquatic weed is now abundant here, especially in Retreat Meadows.

Docks and Marinas - Many new private docks have been installed on the Connecticut River, particularly in Chesterfield and Dummerston, sometimes without a permit. River docks must be anchored and tethered securely to the shore. There is little control over docks on the Vermont side. New Hampshire jurisdiction extends to the low water mark here, and both states have been reluctant to apply their dock rules to this area, leaving the shoreline vulnerable to uncontrolled

development. The Wantastiquet segment has the most concentrated marina development anywhere north of Massachusetts.

Swimming - Recent studies by New Hampshire indicate that the entire reach of the river in the Wantastiquet Region is safe for swimming, except perhaps after heavy storms. Bacteria in the water can affect the safety of swimming and reach rivers through runoff, such as stormwater washing over a city street, drainage from a pasture, or combined sewer overflows, where runoff from heavy storms can send untreated sewage into the river. There is no regular water quality monitoring program on the Connecticut River.

River camping - There are presently three public canoe campsites on the river in this area. Two are owned and managed by the hydro power company, and the other is in the care of a private landowner. There are also two private commercial campgrounds. Interest in canoe camping on the river is on the rise, and creation of several more sites will help prevent trespassing and disperse camping impacts.

Fishing - Residents and visitors enjoy fishing nearly year-round in the Wantastiquet region. The tributaries offer fine fishing for cold water species such as rainbow, brown, and the native brook trout. The impounded river behind Vernon Dam provides habitat for warm water species such as perch, pickerel, bass, and walleyed pike and draws boats from all over New England for fishing tournaments. Mercury, largely delivered by prevailing westerly winds, has accumulated in resident fish to the point where the State of New Hampshire considers the entire river system, and others in our region, to be contaminated.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Water-based Recreation

- NH Marine Patrol should increase enforcement of existing boating laws, to prevent boating conflicts and minimize boat wake-induced riverbank erosion, and could consider the use of unmarked boats. Boaters must obey boating speed laws, dispose of litter properly, and avoid creating erosive boat wakes. Fishing tournament organizers should inform visiting fishermen of boating laws on the Connecticut River. Managers of river access points should provide signage, aesthetically in keeping with the rural nature of the region, reminding the public of the boat speed law, the problem of bank erosion, nuisance aquatics, and boater responsibility. Local fire departments should have water rescue equipment available for river recreation emergencies.
- The NH General Court should pass legislation updating the definition of personal water craft to include all such craft under the definition of ski craft, retaining the 300' distance from shore as a requirement for travel over headway speed. Jet ski operators should understand where they can legally operate their craft.
- Vermont should follow New Hampshire's example in adopting statewide shoreland protection. Towns should consider and adopt shoreline protection, and encourage retention of riverbank vegetation. Landowners should understand and obey state and local protection of riverbanks and buffers.
- Vermont should assist Westminster with construction of a public car-top boat access. New Hampshire should assist Cheshire County with a public boat access at the County Farm in Westmoreland, after ample public discussion about its design, and build an access for small motor boats below Vernon Dam. The NH Department of Transportation should create a small parking area and cartop boat access at the Route 9 bridge.
- Vermont should adopt rules for docks on the Connecticut River similar to those of New Hampshire. Towns should consider local control of docks, especially in Vermont in the absence of state oversight. Property owners should check if a permit is needed before installing a dock. Docks should be removed well before the river begins to freeze. Towns and state agencies should discourage further marina construction on the river.
- Town conservation commissions should monitor local boat access points for invasive species. Marina owners and fishing tournament organizers should encourage inspection of trailers and boats for invasive species. Boaters must check their boats, trailers, and fishing equipment.
- State water quality agencies should monitor water quality in the mainstem and tributaries, working with citizen volunteers, to ensure that these waters are safe for swimming and other recreation.
- The NH Fish and Game Department should work with local volunteers to develop a canoe campsite at Dunshee Island in Walpole. Recreation groups should identify other potential campsite locations, work with state historical resource agencies to screen sites for archeological resources, and enlist nearby businesses and

paddling groups to adopt and maintain a campsite. Campers should avoid disturbing the eagles nesting near Vernon Dam.

- Fishing tournament organizers must notify the NH Fish and Game Department and NH Marine Patrol before an event and contact hydro dam operators for scheduled water level changes. Tournament organizers should make provisions for legal parking for participants.
- Congress should act to reduce the amount of air-borne mercury delivered to the Connecticut River Valley. State legislatures should support this action and find ways to reduce locally-generated mercury.

Land-based Recreation

Room for Public Recreation - The Wantastiquet region of the Connecticut River valley has enticed recreational hikers for well over a century. The long-standing tradition of public access to private land is threatened as the pace of development quickens, land is posted and trails are blocked. With increased development and posting of land, state government may have to purchase more land to dedicate to public recreation.

Walking & Hiking Trails - Most towns in the Wantastiquet region offer trails enriched by views of the river and surrounding hills. The Wantastiquet Trail in Chesterfield and Hinsdale, which parallels the river and ascends Wantastiquet Mountain, is a popular hiking route. The Wantastiquet-Monadnock Greenway Trail now reaches Chesterfield. Interpretive trails at the Cheshire County Farm feature a fine remnant of floodplain forest and lead visitors to benches at the water's edge. A trail now connects Windmill Hill and Pinnacle Ridge from Rockingham to the Putney-Dummerston Line, and another riverfront trail connects Route 119 in Hinsdale with the Route 9 bridge in Chesterfield. The Whetstone Pathway is under development in Brattleboro. A long-held dream to create cross-river trail connections will be realized when the historic Hinsdale/Brattleboro Bridge becomes a bridge for pedestrians and cyclists, as has recently happened at the Chesterfield/Brattleboro Route 9 bridge.

Rail Trails - Three former railroad beds on the New Hampshire side have been converted to recreational trails in this region: the Cheshire Recreational Trail, the Ashuelot Recreational Trail, and the Fort Hill Recreational Trail. Many provide good birding and wildlife watching.

Bicycling - Bicycling is a popular family and touring sport especially along the river. A hope is to create a system of scenic and informative cross-river bicycle "theme rides" in Windham County, VT and Cheshire County, NH. Safe traveling for cyclists is sometimes a concern, especially in Brattleboro. A limited number of mountain bike trails are open in Pisgah State Park.

Nature Observation - Bird and wildlife-watching are growing in popularity among all age groups and offer a way to enjoy natural places with little or no harm to the land or river. The river's role as a migration corridor brings a richer variety of birds to the region in spring and fall. In winter, open water near Vernon Dam is a favorite bald eagle observation point. Eagles have returned to nest here, drawing admirers sometimes too close. The Connecticut River Birding Trail has been extended into the Wantastiquet region, as part of a river-long network of nature observation sites where the public is welcome to explore and enjoy the area's natural heritage. The region is recognized as part of the Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area.

All-Terrain Vehicles - Compared to foot traffic, motorized travel by ATVs, dirt bikes, and other machines creates damage which can be especially harsh depending on the season. Most private landowners do not want ATVs on their property, because they cause erosion, degrade wetlands, and disturb wildlife. There is growing pressure to open up public lands to all-terrain vehicles and to develop trails on private lands. Pisgah State Park in Hinsdale has 20 miles of trails open to ATVs. No appropriate location for an ATV trail system exists in the Connecticut River corridor in the Wantastiquet Region.

Winter Recreation - Winter brings a different kaleidoscope of recreation opportunities to the Wantastiquet region. The area's rail trail system hums with snowmobile traffic and provides easy grades for cross country skiing and snowshoeing. Downhill skiers flock to the many ski areas of southern Vermont and New Hampshire. Well-coordinated and managed snowmobile trail systems link most towns through the efforts of local clubs. Cross country skiers and snowmobiles now share the trail in most places with no conflict, due to good communication and care in observing trail etiquette. Ice fishermen populate ponds and river setbacks, and people enjoy skating on the river. Ice thickness can vary greatly, and the area near Vermont Yankee no longer freezes because the plant discharges warm water from its cooling operations.

Connecticut River Byway - The Byway, designated by the states in 1999 and as a national scenic byway in 2005, represents a custom- made opportunity for regional economic development based upon the features that set our valley apart: fine and varied river recreation, scenic beauty, tangible history, and a rich agricultural heritage. The Byway also provides an economic reason to protect those aspects that give the region its flavor, such as its extraordinary collection of historic buildings, covered bridges, scenic farmland, and a clean environment. The region's dramatic scenery is dominated by the forested slopes of Fall Mountain in the north and Wantastiquet Mountain in the south. Brattleboro is the waypoint community serving the Wantastiquet region, sharing the history and appeal of this and surrounding towns.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Land-based Recreation

- Towns and the Connecticut River Scenic Byway Council should encourage protection of scenic views of the river corridor. Towns should explore the purchase of small parcels of land along waterways for public parks, and identify opportunities, when land is developed, to retain easements for public access for trails, birding, car-top access, or other public recreation. Land conservation organizations should pursue protection for open space and scenic views. The New Hampshire General Court should provide adequate funding for LCHIP.
- Recreation groups can provide monitoring, trail watches and maintenance, and peer education on the proper use of private land to help prevent unwanted trespassing and littering, and educate NH landowners about the 20% recreational adjustment under current use and the liability protections offered by existing laws.
- Recreation groups should develop more published information on trail systems, and explore possible connections between trail systems. Trail users should avoid trails in wet conditions and help with trail maintenance.
- State transportation agencies should work together to connect the historic Route 9 bridge with bicycle lanes on Routes 9 and 5 to improve cross-river bicycle and walking trail connections. They should make efforts to improve bicycling safety, such as working with towns to create bike paths.
- The Connecticut River Scenic Byway Council should encourage birdwatching and other nature-based, low impact forms of recreation.
- New Hampshire Division of Trails should not expand the ATV trail system in Pisgah State Park. Proposed ATV trails on other state lands should be developed only after ample public discussion, and if the responsible state agency can adequately monitor the trails, with active cooperation from a local club. State Parks and Recreation agencies should provide more enforcement to discourage ATV violations, and establish a registration fee that is adequate to provide funds for trail development and enforcement. Towns should control establishment of ATV trails within the town. States should require ATV riders to be members of a statewide ATV organization. ATV riders should respect private property and ride responsibly.
- Snowmobile owners should consider replacing older machines with four-stroke engines, for better sound and pollution control.
- The Federal Highway Administration should award Scenic Byway grant funding to establish the Brattleboro waypoint center.