



## RECREATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Headwaters Subcommittee

There are few places more appealing for recreation than the headwaters of the Connecticut River. Swimming, fishing, boating, camping, hiking, bicycling, snowmobiling, hunting, trapping, and wildlife-watching are popular with residents and visitors, many of whom come to see for themselves the source of this legendary river. The river's only designated natural segment draws canoeists and kayakers, and the Northern Forest Canoe Trail follows a section of the Connecticut River here. Hiking opportunities are growing, most notably the Cohos Trail, and mountain summits reward hikers with long views of the river valley. In winter, the region's vast network of snowmobile trails has become a destination for riders from throughout the Northeast. The Headwaters region has a long and honored history as a working landscape of industrial timberland and family farms, and farm and forest views contribute to the region's magnetism for recreation.

#### **TOP PRIORITIES of the Headwaters Subcommittee for recreation**

1. Recognize and reward landowners for keeping their land open to the public.
2. Encourage protection of open space for public recreation and scenic views.
3. Encourage limited new car-top boat access and encourage non-motorized boating.
4. Monitor water quality.
5. Protect riparian buffers for their scenic value and to protect water quality.
6. Capitalize on the scenic value of local rail lines.
7. Educate visitors on respect for private land.
8. Provide more primitive camping opportunities.
9. Address the growing problem of ATVs.
10. Provide more hiking trails and options for low-impact, non-motorized recreation.

#### **Water-based Recreation**

**Boating activity** - From a quiet paddle on the designated "natural" segment in Stratford/Brunswick/Maidstone to a morning spent trawling for lake trout on the Connecticut Lakes, there are many ways to enjoy boating in the Headwaters region. More people are planning multi-day paddling trips and seeking to camp along the river. More large groups are paddling down the river, although litter problems have not followed. The stretches from Canaan to Colebrook and from North Stratford/Bloomfield to the Stratford-Maidstone Bridge are the most frequently used portions of the river. The Northern Forest Canoe Trail joins the Connecticut River for 21 miles from Bloomfield to Northumberland.

**Boating Laws and Safety** - With the exception of the seven-mile natural segment, motor boats are currently allowed on the entire Connecticut River in the Headwaters section, although few parts of the river below the lakes are deep enough for propeller-driven boats. The river is too narrow in this region to allow legal travel over headway speed and is therefore a no-wake zone. Yet, motor boats sometimes travel between Colebrook and Canaan above this speed, in an area vulnerable to erosion. The northern Connecticut River attracts some recreationists who do not have the skills to navigate more challenging parts of the river, such as the breached dams at Lyman Falls and Northumberland.

**Boat Wakes and Erosion** - The Headwaters reach is renowned as a trout fishery, and should be protected from turbidity, sedimentation, and gasoline pollution, all of which can result from motor boat use on relatively narrow, shallow rivers. Therefore, the Subcommittee believes that non-motorized boats are more in keeping with the nature of the river here.

**Connecticut Lakes** - The Connecticut Lakes, a chain of four ponds and the impoundment of Lake Francis, are the source of New England's largest river and a symbol of New Hampshire's remote wilderness. The lakes are vulnerable to drought because they are located at the very head of the watershed. Their role in water storage for hydro generation and flood control sometimes conflicts with their use as a recreation destination during very dry summers. Jet skis have become much more common in the last few years. These craft disturb wildlife and are inconsistent with the remoteness and quiet of the region. The ban on their use on many local ponds should be extended to the Connecticut Lakes.

**River and Lake Access** - There are eighteen sites for public boat access to the Connecticut River in the Headwaters segment, including seven launches at the lakes for all kinds of boats and eleven sites on the river serving car-top boats. The southernmost portion is also accessible from a boat ramp at the Route 2 Bridge in Lancaster. There are also three places where the public can walk to the river for fishing and swimming. A new, safer public access is needed above Canaan Dam, and on the long and meandering section between the Stratford Maidstone Bridge and Guildhall. A new

public access at the Stratford/Maidstone Bridge is now open after years of planning. At First Connecticut Lake, not all property owners are aware that they must seek permission from TransCanada if they wish to construct a dock, since the company owns the part of the lake bottom inundated by the dam.

**Invasive Species** -The Connecticut River system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to non-native nuisance plants and animals that could interfere with boating, swimming and fishing, drive down property values, and overwhelm native river life. Didymo, or rock snot, was found in the region in 2007 and poses a grave threat to fish habitat. While the Zebra mussel has not yet invaded the Connecticut River, the river's water chemistry is suitable for this pest, which has already infested Lake Champlain. Eurasian milfoil and water chestnut are now present in the Connecticut many miles south of this region, but have not yet reached this area. Vigilance is needed to protect these waters.

**Swimming** - The Headwaters region offers fine swimming, whether at a public beach such as at Lake Francis State Park, or at a natural beach on a sandy river bend. As with all other forms of recreation in this wild and scenic country, swimming is dispersed and generally not supervised. The 53 miles of river below Indian Stream to Groveton are unsafe or could be unsafe for swimming, due to bacteria from largely unknown sources. Ironically, this part of the Connecticut River, which includes the natural segment, is very popular for swimming. The possibility of sudden water level changes make swimming hazardous just above and below the dams at First and Second Lakes and below Murphy Dam.

**River Camping** -Interest in canoe camping in the Headwaters region is rising sharply as more people take longer trips on the river. People often camp on private lands, not always with the permission of landowners, and leave trash, damage crops, and leave farm gates open. Below the state parks in Pittsburg, there are currently only four places on the river in the Headwaters segment where the public is allowed to camp overnight. More dispersed primitive canoe campsites on the river would help prevent trespassing and disperse camping impacts. Nearby businesses and paddling groups could adopt a campsite to assist with maintenance. There is currently no coordinated management of the canoe campsite system.

**Fishing** -Residents and visitors enjoy fishing nearly year-round in the Headwaters region for cold water fish such as rainbow, brown, and especially the native brook trout and land-locked salmon. Lake Francis is popular for fishing tournaments. Fish consumption advisories are in effect for the entire river system. Mercury levels in Headwaters region fish were studied in 2000 and were above the minimum risk level. However, trout were not sampled in this study, and only a few white suckers were sampled from the reach above Canaan Dam.

#### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Water-based Recreation**

- NH Marine Patrol should patrol the Headwaters reach of the river more regularly to enforce existing boating laws, including non-motorized boating on the natural segment, to prevent boating conflicts and minimize boat wake-induced riverbank erosion. Residents should report problems to NH Marine Patrol.
- Owners of motor boats launch sites should post signs alerting boaters that the river is a no-wake zone in this area. Those operating motor boats on the river must not create a wake.
- Citizens should petition NH Marine Patrol to close First, Second, and Third Connecticut Lakes to jet skis, in order to protect nesting loons and other wildlife.
- Landowners should leave a thick riparian buffer of native vegetation on their streambanks and riverbanks to help keep soil in place and reduce erosion.
- Public Service Company of New Hampshire should provide a safer river portage around Canaan Dam.
- New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and/or Vermont Forests, Parks and Recreation Department should establish a car top river access between the Stratford/Maidstone Bridge and Guildhall.
- Boaters must check their boats, trailers, and fishing equipment before launching in the lakes, river or its tributaries, to ensure that they are not bringing unwanted invasive plants and animals, and wash their gear carefully to avoid spreading Didymo.
- NH DES should assist local volunteers in monitoring water quality in the mainstem and identifying sources of bacteria.

- State parks and recreation agencies should work with local volunteers and willing landowners to develop more primitive canoe campsites in places that are not ecologically or archeologically sensitive. Campers must camp responsibly, by asking permission, carrying out trash, and leaving no trace of their visit.
- Congress and the states should continue to act to reduce the amount of air-borne mercury delivered to the Connecticut River Valley, and reduce local sources of mercury. Further testing of fish for toxins should be done in wild resident trout, especially in the Pittsburg-Clarksville section of the river.

## Land-based Recreation

**Private land and public access** - Much public recreation in this region makes use of private land. A growing number of property owners complain that some users of their land treat access as a right, not a privilege, and abuse that privilege. The problem worsens as land that was previously open to the public is subdivided, sold, and posted. Safeguarding the tradition of public use and expanding opportunities for public recreation in the future will take work by citizens, the state legislatures and agencies, the federal government, recreational groups and clubs, and private landowners. Conservation of the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Working Forest in New Hampshire and West Mountain and the Nulhegan River basin in Vermont are examples of major efforts to protect a long tradition of public access for recreation.

**Walking and Hiking Trails** - Most towns offer hiking and walking trails enriched by views of the river and surrounding hills. A favorite is Lemington's Monadnock Mountain. The 162-mile Cohos Trail, nearly completed, will be the longest single foot-trail system in New Hampshire. The Subcommittee hopes that the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Forest will become known for mountain hiking. There is a need for more hiking options that are separate from snowmobile trails.

**Bicycling** -Bicycling is a popular family and touring sport along the Connecticut River, particularly on a loop along Route 102 and Route 3, which are especially inviting for their easy cycling and fine river views. Safe traveling for cyclists on busy highways is sometimes a concern.

**Rail Trails** - The Upper Coos Recreational Trail runs 10.5 miles between Colebrook and Beecher Falls. Hikers, bikers, horseback riders, snowshoers, cross-country skiers, and sled dogs can legally use this trail along the former railroad bed, and OHRVs can use it when there is continuous snow cover. However, this trail is groomed for and heavily used by snowmobiles, making it difficult for snowshoers, cross-country skiers, and sled dogs to use the trail safely.

**All-Terrain Vehicles** - There is rising demand among ATV riders for trails similar to those for snowmobiles. Snowmobiles traveling on frozen, snow-covered ground do not have the same ability to cause erosion, degrade wetlands, or disturb breeding wildlife as do ATVs and dirt bikes, although ATVs are usually not a problem when riders stay on hardened trails. All such vehicles are capable of causing erosion, threatening nearby trout streams. Landowners near ATV trails report that riders sometimes stray onto their property, and ATVs leave ruts in the earth fill at Murphy Dam at Lake Francis that create gullies and a hazard to the dam. Because there are already several ATV trail systems in the Connecticut River valley, and a large new network has opened in nearby Berlin, the Subcommittee believes that there is no need to expand ATV access in the Connecticut Lakes region.

**Winter recreation** - The Headwaters region is well known for its hundreds of miles of well-coordinated and managed snowmobile trails. During the last five years, Route 3 has become a dangerous major artery for snowmobilers driving north to ride in the Headwaters region, as wide trailers travel the often narrow lanes at high speed. During times of thin snow cover when the trails can be damaged, there are riders who ignore trail closings or ride in spite of poor conditions, and trails are suffering. There is strong interest in healthy, non-motorized outdoor winter sport. Trails for winter hiking, snowshoeing, and cross country skiing in the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Forest could provide opportunities for winter exploring and wildlife tracking, and for times when snow and ice cover is not sufficient for snowmobiles. Cross country skiers and snowmobiles now share the trail in most places with little conflict, although problems still occur.

**Wildlife-related recreation** - 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. People regularly visit the area to view moose, loons, and bald eagles. The Colebrook visitor center features exhibits about wildlife and habitat in the region, and the Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge has opened a visitor center in the Nulhegan River basin. The Connecticut River Birding Trail, a series of sites from Fourth Lake to Brattleboro where the public is welcome to enjoy the area's wildlife and natural heritage, now includes over a dozen stops in the Headwaters region. Hunting as a recreational pastime has decreased in recent years, although it is still an important part of life in the North Country. Keeping large tracts of land open and undeveloped protects wildlife habitat and water quality, and can help protect the tradition of hunting.

**Connecticut River Byway** - Open scenic views of the river valley provide pleasant auto and bicycle touring, particularly along Routes 3 and 145 in New Hampshire, and Route 102 in Vermont, part of the Connecticut River Byway. The Byway was designated a National Scenic Byway in 2005. A Byway visitor center in Colebrook, along with nine others in Lancaster, St. Johnsbury, and farther south, is now introducing residents and visitors to the region's natural and cultural heritage.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Land-based Recreation**

- State parks and recreation agencies should work with recreation groups to seek ways of recognizing and rewarding landowners who keep their land open to the public. Recreation groups should continue to educate their members about the respectful use of private land.
- The New Hampshire legislature should provide adequate funding for LCHIP to help protect wildlife habitat and to keep land open for public recreation. Towns should take advantage of opportunities to protect land, especially on the riverfront, for public recreation and open space.
- State recreation agencies should train deputy wardens who are members of local ATV and snowmobile clubs, promote club management of ATV activities similar to that of snowmobile clubs, and establish a required safety education course for recreational ATV riders. State legislatures should establish a registration fee for ATVs to provide adequate funds for law enforcement and trail construction and a landowner restitution fund.
- NH Division of Parks and Recreation should avoid inviting ATV use in the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Forest and in the Connecticut River corridor, particularly near the designated natural segment.
- The New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation should work with forest landowners to provide more non-motorized winter recreation trails in the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Working Forest.
- Parks & Recreation agencies should support snowmobile license reciprocity between the states. State and local police should provide more traffic control on highways during peak travel times for snowmobile trailers.
- The Conte Refuge should expand education for residents and visitors about wildlife and wildlife habitat in the region. The Connecticut River Byway Council and the Nulhegan Gateway Association should encourage bird watching and other nature-based, low-impact forms of recreation.
- The Connecticut River Scenic Byway Council, Nulhegan Gateway Association, and chambers of commerce should help educate residents and visitors about the region's distinctive heritage and respectful use of private land, and help seek protection of scenic areas and sensitive recreational features, to avoid problems with overuse by tourists.