



RECREATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upper Valley River Subcommittee

The Upper Valley reach of the river, largely impounded by Wilder Dam, features pleasant paddling and deep water throughout the season for summer boating. Many people enjoy ice fishing in the river shallows and on ponds during the winter. Growing networks of foot trails, including the famous Appalachian National Scenic Trail, offer excellent local hiking, while marshes at tributary confluences offer good wildlife watching.

TOP PRIORITIES FOR RECREATION

1. Ensure that new riverfront recreational facilities maintain a healthy riparian buffer and keep parking well back from the river.
2. Reduce mercury contamination in the Connecticut River system.
3. Protect shoreland and riparian buffers.
4. Increase enforcement of boating laws.
5. Provide boat washing stations to reduce threat of invasive aquatic species.
6. Provide consistent review of dock construction on both sides of the river.
7. Discourage construction of beaches.
8. Discourage use of “jet skis” on the river.
9. Discourage further construction or expansion of ramps for trailered boats; encourage new car-top boat access.
10. Invest in land conservation to ensure that open space remains for public recreation.

Water-based Recreation

Boating activity - Because of its quiet waters, beautiful scenery, and easily observable wildlife, the Connecticut River is very popular for canoeing and kayaking. The Upper Valley reach offers easy flat-water paddling with some quick water below Wilder Dam. Rowing and sculling are becoming very popular, particularly at Hanover. A 1000-foot no-wake zone above the Ledyard Bridge protects swimmers and small craft. Wilder Dam creates a long reach for power boat travel. On a sunny weekend day, motor boats, water skiers, jetskis, rowing shells, canoes, and kayaks share the river.

River Access - Sixteen boat launches provide public access to the Connecticut River in the Upper Valley, including nine ramps serving trailered boats and seven sites serving only car-top boats. Boat landings sometimes suffer from litter problems, and there is occasional vandalism. Adequate public access to the Connecticut River for motor boats already exists. Further access for canoes and kayaks is needed because these craft cannot travel as far and as fast as power craft.

Boating Law Enforcement - More consistent and effective enforcement of boating laws by NH Marine Patrol is necessary, particularly with the steady increase in many kinds of potentially conflicting boat traffic and the vulnerability of the river’s banks to erosion from boat wakes. Power boat wakes are one of the key causes of bank erosion on the mainstem above Wilder Dam.

Jet skis - The Connecticut River is not well suited to these watercraft, since only the small area immediately above and within sight of Wilder Dam is wide enough to allow those registered as “ski craft” to travel above headway speed. However, jet skis commonly use the river as far upstream as Orford.

Water skiers - Boats towing water skiers use the portion of the river that is impounded by Wilder Dam above the Ledyard Bridge, especially between Fullington Landing and the Lyme/Thetford Bridge, often in places too narrow to keep a proper distance from other boats. Floating debris, particularly after heavy rains, can make water skiing dangerous on the river.

Docks - The past five years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of new docks on the Wilder impoundment. While this may reduce pressure on public access points, it can lead to loss of riparian integrity and threaten water quality, as riverbanks are cut, re-graded, and cleared of their natural buffer. Although impounded, the Connecticut River is not a lake, and dock design must accommodate both regular water level fluctuations and occasional high flows and strong currents. Each year loose docks float down to Wilder Dam, becoming a safety hazard to boaters and a nuisance to dam operations. Neither state applies its dock rules to the Vermont side of the river. New Hampshire’s rules are inadequate for controlling dock construction on the many large parcels that remain along the Connecticut River.

Marinas - Although there are no marinas sited on the river, there are several marine dealers and boat shops that serve local boaters. The river's depth, width, flow, and fluctuating level in this segment are incompatible with development of marinas with conventional docks and gas service on the water.

Invasive Species - Invasive aquatic animals and plants are spreading throughout northern New England, and are a direct threat to recreation on the Connecticut River. Eurasian milfoil has become established near the mouth of Clay Brook in Lyme and at the outlet of Lake Morey in Fairlee. It is also present in Lakes Morey and Fairlee, where an expensive control program is underway. Purple loosestrife and Japanese knotweed are becoming common at some of larger access sites. Didymo, discovered in the White River and on the northern Connecticut River in 2007, is a major threat.

Swimming - On hot summer days, swimming occurs anywhere along the river where access is suitable. There's often someone swimming in the roped area at the Ledyard Boathouse in Hanover or from the many private docks. The State of New Hampshire assessed the river in 2004, finding it safe for swimming throughout the Upper Valley region down to the mouth of the White River. From the White River down to Cornish and Windsor, however, bacterial contamination from combined sewer overflows sometimes renders the river unsafe for swimming. This reach receives treated wastewater from Hanover, Lebanon, and White River Junction. Boaters in this area occasionally report an odor that detracts from the river experience.

River Camping -The natural appeal of the still-rural river corridor, the increased pace of land conservation by landowners willing to share their property with the public, and the rising numbers of paddlers seeking an extended river experience prompted the Upper Valley Land Trust to create a string of primitive canoe campsites in the Upper Valley and beyond, beginning in 1992. The six sites managed by UVLT, TransCanada, and others are well used, and are intended for canoe and kayak access from the river only, although there have been problems with overuse, pre-emption by power boaters and homeless people, and trespassing.

Fishing - Fishing is nearly a year-round sport on the Connecticut River, where ice fishermen enjoy the frozen setbacks. The tributaries and the mainstem below Wilder Dam offer fine fishing for cold water species such as rainbow, brown, and the native brook trout, and the Wilder impoundment provides habitat for warm water species such as perch, pickerel, bass, and walleyed pike. Mercury contamination of fish and the threat of VHS disease are strong concerns.

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. Area towns should coordinate water rescue training and equipment.
- Towns and state recreation agencies should encourage additional car-top boat access, especially in Fairlee, Piermont, and at Mink Brook in Hanover, and discourage construction of new public and private boat ramps or expansion of existing ramps for trailered boats.
- The N.H. General Court should pass legislation updating the definition of personal water craft. Recreationists should avoid operating jet skis on the river, especially at night and in areas too narrow for their legal use.
- The Connecticut River Joint Commissions should convene a joint NH/VT dock rules committee to agree upon how to achieve consistent oversight for dock construction on the Connecticut River that includes revision of NH dock rules to reflect large riverfront parcels, and to address the lack of oversight of dock construction on the Vermont side. The Vermont Legislature should adopt shoreland protection legislation. Area towns and state agencies should discourage construction of marinas on the river. NH DES and area towns should discourage construction of new public and private beaches on the riverfront.
- State agencies should consider providing boat washing stations at ramps for trailered boats, and at Lake Morey, Lake Fairlee, Mascoma Lake, and other water bodies with infestations of aquatic invasive plants.
- NH DES should assess water quality, to assure that the river is safe for swimming. The City of Lebanon should continue its program to eliminate combined sewer overflows. Wastewater treatment plant operators should notify the public immediately if there is a suspected water quality violation at a wastewater treatment plant.
- CRJC should encourage an organization to take active responsibility for overseeing the system of primitive canoe campsites.

- Congress should act to reduce the amount of air-borne mercury delivered to the Connecticut River Valley. State legislatures should urge meaningful action.

Land-based Recreation

Room for Public Recreation - States and towns should invest in land conservation to ensure that open space remains for public recreation. The trend of posting land has continued in the Upper Valley, and more and more land that was previously open to the public is becoming subdivided, sold, and posted. The number of posted acres in Orange County, Vermont, increased from 1,782 acres in 1991 to 19,892 acres in 2004, an increase of 1016%. Fear of liability is often cited as a factor in the decision to post land. Conserving land brings new opportunities for public recreation.

Walking and Hiking Trails -Every town in the Upper Valley offers hiking and walking trails enriched by views of the river and surrounding hills. The Appalachian Trail is the best known, crossing the Connecticut River on the Ledyard Bridge. The Cross-Rivendell Trail starts on Mt. Cube in Orford and crosses the river and travel through Fairlee and West Fairlee to Flagpole Hill in Vershire. The Upper Valley Trails Alliance, founded in 1999, has piloted a five year “Upper Valley Trails for Life” project with Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, aimed at enhancing physical activity and public health through walking and the use of trails. Trail erosion can become a water quality concern, especially for nearby small headwater streams that harbor trout.

Bicycling -Road bicycling is a popular family and touring sport in the Upper Valley. The river roads are especially attractive routes for their easy cycling and fine views, and Route 5 north of Norwich and the cyclist-friendly wide shoulders of Route 10 between Hanover and Lyme are busy road bike routes. Many commercial bicycle tours visit the region, with overnight stays at local inns and bed-and-breakfast facilities. Safe traveling for cyclists is a concern. Back roads, logging roads, and even hiking trails have attracted many Upper Valley cyclists in recent years.

Northern Rail Trail - Fifteen miles of a former rail line along the Mascoma River from Lebanon have become a trail through the efforts of local volunteers. The trail is open for hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and dog-sledding. ATVs and motorbikes are allowed only when there is snow cover in winter.

Nature Observation - The Connecticut River Birding Trail, a series of nature observation sites with a descriptive map, includes 25 stops in the Upper Valley. Among them are waterfowl observation areas at the Ompompanoosuc flats, Reeds Marsh, and Wilder Wildlife Management Area.

Quests - Vital Communities of the Upper Valley has created an innovative series of treasure hunts, known as Quests, that share the natural and cultural history of the region at 66 sites in the Upper Valley.

All-Terrain Vehicles -Compared to foot traffic, motorized travel by ATVs, dirt bikes, and other wheeled vehicles creates damage that can be especially harsh depending on the season. One vehicle in one day can do damage that may take years to heal. This is a particular threat to small streams. Snowmobile clubs present a good model for ATV riders. Private landowners need to know about the effects of allowing trails over streams and up steep hills on their land.

Winter recreation -There are just as many opportunities for snowbound outdoor recreation in the Upper Valley as there are in warmer months. Many groups offer snowshoe walks and winter hikes. The Hulbert Outdoor Center hosts an annual winter festival on Lake Morey, and the Dartmouth Winter Carnival is a long-standing tradition. Upper Valley people enjoy skiing in all its forms. Cross-country skiers glide on miles of groomed trails or explore conserved public and private land. Downhill skiers gather at the Dartmouth Skiway in Lyme or at Lebanon’s Storrs Hill. The Ford Sayre ski program offers training for area youth. Snowshoeing on open fields or on woods trails is a favorite, and dog sledding, ski-joring, and other relatively new winter sports are becoming more popular. Snowmobiling is a long-established winter way of life for many, and well-managed trail systems link most towns. Nordic skating has gained interest in the Upper Valley, and Lake Morey has the country’s longest Nordic skating track.

Connecticut River Byway - Designated a national scenic byway in 2005, the Byway follows the river on both sides throughout New Hampshire and Vermont. In the Upper Valley, it follows Routes 5,10 and 12A, visiting the historic villages, scenic river overlooks, and Dartmouth College along the way. Scenic views along the Byway are being inventoried to help towns and conservation organizations prioritize their protection. In the Upper Valley, the State of

Vermont has opened a downtown visitor center in the White River Junction train station, sharing the history and appeal of this community and its neighbors.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Land-based Recreation

- Recreation groups can provide monitoring, trail watches, and peer education on the proper use of private land to help prevent trespassing and littering, and to encourage landowners to keep their land open to the public.
- States and towns should invest in land conservation to ensure that open space remains for public recreation. The New Hampshire legislature should provide sustained funding for the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program. The Upper Valley Land Trust should continue with its exemplary work in land conservation, providing public recreation access where possible and appropriate.
- Trail groups should actively encourage hikers and horseback riders to avoid trails in wet conditions, especially when they are saturated from snow melt and rain.
- Upper Valley towns should enhance bicycle safety by promoting construction of bike paths, both dedicated and adjacent to highways.
- State recreation agencies should consider designating limited special areas for ATV trails and require that their design, construction, and maintenance are consistent with state and local planning and zoning, that water stays on site and trail erosion does not contribute to water quality degradation. Proposed ATV trails on state lands should be developed only after ample public discussion, and only if the responsible state agency can adequately monitor the trails, with active cooperation from a local club. A mandatory registration fee for ATVs should be large enough to provide funds for law enforcement.
- Snowmobile clubs should enforce the rules on trail travel under erosion-prone conditions and discourage their members from riding on the river. Distance skaters using the Connecticut River should approach this activity with caution. Snowmobiling on the river is not safe.
- Upper Valley towns should define “recreational facilities” in their zoning ordinances, to allow them to better guide these developments, particularly along waterways, and ensure that they maintain a healthy riparian buffer and keep parking well back from the river.
- The Connecticut River Byway Council should help educate new residents and visitors to the region on respectful use of private land and assist efforts by area land trusts to conserve views, including riverfront lands. Waypoint centers should provide information about places of interest on both sides of the Connecticut River.