



## RECREATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Mt. Ascutney River Subcommittee

Swimming, fishing, boating, camping, hiking, bicycling, hunting, and wildlife observation along a cleaner, more appealing, and still relatively undeveloped river are widely enjoyed and appreciated in the Mt. Ascutney region. The upper reach of this segment offers first-class canoeing, kayaking, and trout fishing, while the Bellows Falls impoundment provides deeper water throughout the season for summer motor boating and angling for warm water fish. Hiking trails on Mount Ascutney and a growing number of bicycle and snowmobile routes round out recreation opportunities in the region. Places like Herrick's Cove at the Williams River confluence in Rockingham provide pleasant areas for picnicking and watching wildlife.

#### TOP PRIORITIES FOR RECREATION

- Reduce mercury contamination of fish in the Connecticut River system.
- Improve water quality, which is currently considered unsafe for recreation in some parts of this region.
- Invest in land conservation to ensure that open space remains for public recreation.
- Protect shoreland and riparian buffers.
- Improve bicycling safety.
- Continue to maintain public river access facilities associated with hydro dams.
- Protect the river against invasive species.
- Discourage use of "jet skis" on the river.
- Increase enforcement of boating laws.
- Address the growing problem of ATVs.

#### Water-based Recreation

**Boating activity** - The northernmost 26 miles of the Mt. Ascutney reach, from Hartland/Plainfield to the Ascutney Bridge in Weathersfield/Claremont, offer some of the best canoeing and kayaking anywhere on the entire Connecticut River. Most is Class I, quick flatwater, with a few Class II riffles. Sumner Falls attracts advanced kayakers, but must be portaged by others. Flows depend upon activity at both Wilder Dam upstream and Bellows Falls Dam at the foot of this segment. In the impoundment between the Ascutney Bridge and Bellows Falls, the river is actively used by power boats as well as canoes.

**River Access** - There are eleven boat launches in the Mt. Ascutney segment. Further access to the Connecticut River for canoes and kayaks is needed. Adequate public access to the Connecticut River for trailered boats already exists. Major public boat ramps are located in every town (Charlestown, Claremont, Springfield, and Rockingham) where the river is deep enough for power boat traffic, except for Weathersfield. Boat landings in the region sometimes suffer from litter problems, and vandalism occurs at Herrick's Cove, Sumner Falls, and Lower Landing at Charlestown.

**Boating Law Enforcement** - Better enforcement and public awareness of boating laws will help improve public safety and the quality of the river experience. Power boat wakes are also one of the key causes of bank erosion on this part of the Connecticut River.

**Jet skis** - The Connecticut River is not well suited to ski craft or personal watercraft, since only a small area is wide enough to allow them to travel above headway speed. The Subcommittee discourages use of jet skis throughout the Mt. Ascutney segment. The State of New Hampshire's definition of the craft is outdated.

**Invasive Species** - The river is highly vulnerable to invasive plants and animals hitchhiking on trailered boats. Hoyt's Landing, the first known site for Eurasian milfoil on the river, is now heavily infested. While boat wash stations would help to reduce this threat, they are expensive and require space that most access sites do not offer. Boaters must check their equipment before launching, to ensure they are not unwittingly introducing unwanted invasive plants and animals into the Connecticut River.

**Outfitters and Marinas** - Several outfitters offers canoe livery services, river access, and river tours. Green Mountain Marina, on the river in Rockingham, serves local boaters. The depth, width, flow, and fluctuating level of the river in this segment discourage further development of marinas on the river.

**Docks** - A number of private docks are installed on the Connecticut River, especially in Charlestown. Some have resulted in banks that are cut, re-graded, and cleared of their natural buffer, degrading the scenic quality of the river shore. Each year some

docks are torn loose by high water and float down to the Bellows Falls Dam, where they are a nuisance to dam operations. There is little control over dock installation on the Vermont shore, since New Hampshire jurisdiction extends to the low water mark here. Neither state applies its dock rules to this area, leaving the Vermont shoreline open to uncontrolled development.

**Swimming** - Island beaches, rope swings, and hot summer days invite swimming in the river, although the water is not always safe for swimming in the northernmost ten miles of this segment. The State of New Hampshire considers that combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in the wastewater collection systems in White River Junction and Lebanon render the Connecticut River unsafe for swimming from the White River to Blow-Me-Down Brook in Cornish. This includes Sumner Falls, where kayakers and swimmers often immerse themselves. CSOs can allow runoff from a heavy storm to mix with untreated sewage, sending it into the river. Below Blow-Me-Down Brook to the Bellows Falls Dam, the river is considered safe for swimming. Unsightly algae blooms at the mouth of the Black River near Hoyt's Landing are becoming a thing of the past now that Springfield has updated its wastewater treatment plant to remove most of the phosphorus from its discharge.

**River Camping** - The Mt. Ascutney region features a string of five primitive canoe campsites managed by the Upper Valley Land Trust, Student Conservation Association, and TransCanada Hydro Northeast, in addition to Vermont's Wilgus State Park. An informal campsite on Chase Island in Cornish, owned by the NH Fish and Game Department, has become overused, resulting in a human waste problem that threatens water quality. Unauthorized camping at Hubbard and Jarvis Islands in Claremont has become a problem for the landowner.

**Fishing** - Fishing is nearly a year-round sport in the region, particularly at Hoyt's Landing and in river setbacks. The tributaries offer fine fishing for cold water species such as rainbow, brown, and the native brook trout. The slow water behind Bellows Falls Dam provides habitat for warm water species such as perch, pickerel, bass, and walleyed pike. The Bellows Falls impoundment is popular for fishing tournaments, drawing boats from all over New England. Mercury contamination makes Connecticut River fish no longer completely safe for eating, and the states have issued fish consumption advisories.

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

- NH Department of Safety should increase enforcement of boating speed laws, to prevent boating conflicts and minimize boat wake-induced riverbank erosion, and seek funding to support full-time marine patrol presence on the river. NH Marine Patrol should make a special effort to be present at fishing tournaments.
- The New Hampshire 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. People should avoid using these craft on the Connecticut River, especially at night.
- Boaters should check and clean their boats and trailers before launching and after taking out of the Connecticut or its tributaries to avoid transporting Didymo, milfoil, Zebra mussels, or other unwanted invasives.
- The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources should adopt and enforce rules for docks on the Connecticut River similar to those established by New Hampshire, and inform its riverfront towns where the rules apply. Towns should consider adopting local control of docks, especially in Vermont in the absence of state oversight. Regional planning commissions should draft a model ordinance on dock construction for towns.
- Towns and state agencies should discourage further development or expansion of marinas on the river.
- 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 for its scenic value as well as for its role in limiting boat wake erosion and protecting water quality for recreation. Landowners should understand and obey state and local protection of riverbanks and buffers.
- TransCanada and its successors should continue to maintain existing public river access facilities, including at Herrick's Cove, Charlestown Lower Landing, and the primitive canoe campsite at Lower Meadow. TransCanada should conserve Sumner Falls and continue to work with the Town of Hartland to ensure adequate patrol to discourage vandalism and overnight use.
- State agencies and towns should avoid construction of further access for trailered boats, since adequate access already exists in the areas of the river deep enough to accommodate them. Vermont agencies and towns considering expanding such access should confer with NH Marine Patrol about the potential for increased enforcement needs.

- Local fire departments should be sure they have adequate water rescue equipment.
- State environmental agencies should assist Lebanon and Hartford with elimination of combined sewer overflows and improvement of water quality, to ensure that the river becomes safe for swimming once again. EPA should assist with funding for these expensive projects.
- Paddlers should help monitor campsites and avoid camping on Hubbard and Jarvis Islands and walking on the upstream ends of cobble islands which are habitat for rare and endangered beetles.
- NH Fish and Game Department should address unauthorized camping and the human waste problem at Chase Island.
- Congress should act to reduce the amount of air-borne mercury delivered to the Connecticut River Valley. State legislatures should urge Congress to take meaningful action.
- Fishing tournament organizers should notify the NH Fish and Game Department before an event and inform visiting fishermen of boating laws on the Connecticut River, especially with respect to legal speed. They should contact TransCanada Hydro Northeast to avoid scheduled draw downs that could affect launching on the day of a fishing tournament, and arrange for boat and trailer checks to avoid spreading invasive aquatics.

## **Land-based Recreation**

**Room for Public Recreation** - Trails and other open space for active and passive recreation require plenty of room where the public is welcome. As development continues, more and more land that was previously open to the public is becoming subdivided, sold, and posted. The riverfront is especially threatened. The number of posted acres in Windsor County increased from 1083 in 1991 to 25,960 in 2004, a change of 2296%. 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** - There are few trails close to the river, but a number are open to the public nearby, of which the trails up Mount Ascutney are best known. The Upper Valley Land Trust has helped generous landowners to permanently protect most of the trail network. Trails at Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish are also receiving more use. Trail erosion can become a water quality concern, especially where trails run near small headwater streams.

**Bicycling** - Bicycling is an increasingly popular family and touring sport in the region, especially along the river. The Toonerville Trail, a three-mile, shared-use path on a former trolley line along the Black River from the Cheshire Bridge to the center of Springfield, opened in 2000. The trail has quickly become very popular, and hosts cross country skiers in winter and pedestrians and cyclists in summer. Route 5 is popular for bicycle touring but dangerous due to narrow shoulders.

**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 Connecticut River Birding Trail, a series of nature observation sites, was established in 2001, and includes six stops in this area. Among them, Herrick's Cove is a designated Important Bird Area, offering high quality habitat for migrating birds. Herrick's Cove also hosts a popular annual wildlife festival.

**Quests** - Vital Communities of the Upper Valley has created innovative treasure hunts known as Quests that share natural and cultural history using hand-drawn maps and riddle-like clues to lead to special places such as remote lakes, historic landmarks, and forgotten cemeteries. Twenty-seven Quests have been developed in the Mt. Ascutney Region.

**All-Terrain Vehicles** - Compared to foot traffic, mechanical travel by ATVs, dirt bikes, and other machines creates damage which can be especially harsh depending on the season. However, if used responsibly, ATVs can provide enjoyment to those who want to explore the woods this way. There is rising demand among ATV riders for trails similar to those used by snowmobiles in winter. Inadequate enforcement of responsible riding and unauthorized trails are concerns, as is damage to private land.

**Winter recreation** - Snowmobiling, skiing, snowshoeing, pond skating, and ice fishing are a few of the area's many winter outdoor recreation opportunities. Downhill skiers gather at Ascutney Mountain in West Windsor or at Claremont's Arrowhead ski area. Okemo Mountain and Mt. Sunapee ski areas are located at the edge of the watershed. Snowmobiling has become a winter way of life for many, and there are well-coordinated trail systems linking most towns. Local snowmobile clubs deserve support of the general public, to help them maintain trails that others can also use, and to ensure safe and legal use of the trails. Snowmobiling on the river is not safe, but is common.

**Connecticut River Byway** - The Federal Highway Administration designated the 500 miles of byway as a national scenic byway in 2005, six years after New Hampshire and Vermont established the Byway. In the Mt. Ascutney region, the Byway follows Routes 5 (Vermont) and 12A (New Hampshire), visiting the historic villages, scenic river overlooks, and the famed Cornish Windsor Covered Bridge along the way. The Byway provides a custom-made economic reason to pursue protection of the values that give the region its appeal: extraordinary historic buildings, scenic farmland, and a clean environment. In this region, Windsor, Claremont, and Bellows Falls have stepped forward to offer education and services to visitors.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS for Land-based Recreation**

- Land trusts should continue their work in land conservation, protecting scenic views and providing public recreation access where appropriate. The New Hampshire General Court should provide full funding for the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program.
- Recreation groups should provide trail watches and peer education, and encourage local stewardship of recreation areas including campsites, trail heads, and trails.
- Towns should consider establishing trails on town properties, creating guides to these lands, and organizing trail maintenance activities with the help of conservation commissions. Regional planning commissions should coordinate multi-community recreation plans.
- State transportation agencies should work to improve bicycling safety, and add a bicycle lane on Route 5, a popular but dangerous bicycle route. Regional planning commissions should help identify places where bicycle shoulders could be added without destroying the character of a local road. Recreation groups and the Connecticut River Byway Council should promote a network of bicycle tour routes with published maps.
- The New Hampshire General Court should identify a new source of funding for the Trails Bureau that will allow it to better serve non-motorized users.
- State agencies should develop ATV trails on state lands only after ample public discussion, and if the responsible agency can adequately monitor the trails with active cooperation from a local club. They should set a mandatory ATV registration fee adequate to provide funds to build trails, provide law enforcement, and create a landowner restitution fund. States should require a safety education course for ATV riders and require riders to be members of a statewide ATV organization which would provide training.
- Towns should take advantage of nearby opportunities for local children to learn to ski, through the school system.
- Snowmobile clubs should discourage their members from riding on the river and also on trails when there is inadequate snow cover.