ENVIRONMENTAL
Fact Sheet

NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF Environmental Services

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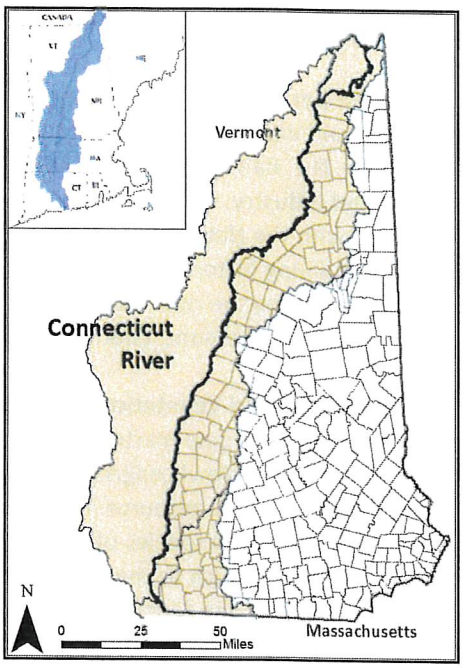
The Connecticut River



Acclaimed as both the largest river in New England and the longest river designated under the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program, the Connecticut River is 255 miles long, flowing through 26 New Hampshire communities and along 27 Vermont communities before entering Massachusetts, then continuing through Connecticut on its way to Long Island Sound. The Connecticut River's designation into the New Hampshire Rivers Program is unique in that members of the local river management advisory committees for the Connecticut represent communities in both New Hampshire and Vermont, creating an interstate partnership for protection of the common and valuable resource. The river was designated into the program in July 1992.

The Connecticut River begins at the outlet of Fourth Connecticut Lake in the town of Pittsburg, NH and carves its course past rolling hills, forests, fields, communities, and residential areas, dropping more than 2,480 feet in elevation as it winds south to the border of Massachusetts. The Connecticut River watershed drains approximately 11,250 square miles, 3,046 of which are in New Hampshire. The river is also unique as a state border in New Hampshire, as it is the river's western bank at the normal high water mark that defines much of the border between New Hampshire and Vermont, rather than the river's centerline.

To conserve, protect and enhance the diversity of species that exist in the vast Connecticut River watershed, the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act was passed in 1991. The Act led to the establishment of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, a refuge designed to provide protection for the entire 7.2 million-acre Connecticut River watershed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the program, has identified special focus areas throughout the watershed, including sites in Vermont and New Hampshire, where resources are deemed highly valuable. Efforts focus on environmental education, habitat conservation and management on public and private lands. Land acquisition activities have resulted in the protection of key habitats for migratory, native, and threatened and endangered species. Currently, the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge itself encompasses 36,000 acres within parts of New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

New Hampshire has also long recognized the importance of safeguarding the recreational, habitat and economic value of the Connecticut River and its tributaries. In 2003, New Hampshire invested in protecting 171,500 acres at the headwaters of the Connecticut River. Today, known as the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Forest, the land investment is the largest land protection project in New Hampshire history.

History and Geology

The Connecticut River Valley is internationally-renowned as a glacial geology research site for the examination of sediment deposition that occurred in glacial Lake Hitchcock as the ice sheet receded. Lake Hitchcock was one of the largest glacial lakes of the time, once spanning the area from Middleton, CT north to Bath, NH. Bedrock exposures and cuts are the principal source of observation and collection for scientific research and refinement of the geological history of the Appalachian Mountains, dating back 450 million years.

There are numerous archeological sites along the Connecticut River as well. The Sokoki people and their ancestors, of the Abenaki language family, settled the area, hunting, fishing and gathering in its waters and along its banks. It is estimated that the population of Native Americans in the valley exceeded 4,000 before declining due to warfare and diseases such as smallpox in the 1630s. Large archeological sites occur throughout the valley on upper and lower terraces as well as near tributaries' confluences with the Connecticut. Two sites of particular interest, both of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, are rock engravings of numerous faces at Bellows Falls, VT, and a site in Claremont, NH, settled by Native Americans around 800 A.D.

The earliest permanent European settlement took place in 1743 at Fort #4 in what is now Charlestown, NH. In the 1790s and early 1800s, a system of canals was built on the Connecticut River that allowed access upstream to Woodsville, NH. Railroads, built in the 1850s, introduced even greater access to the area, allowing for increased tourism and industry, which continue to grow today. There are ten bridges on the Connecticut River that are registered with the National Register of Historic Places, including the famous Cornish-Windsor Bridge, the longest remaining historic covered bridge in the United States, spanning 460 feet. Numerous New Hampshire communities along the river are home to sites also registered as historic places including those in Haverhill, Lyme, Lebanon, Claremont, Charlestown and Hinsdale.

Wildlife, Habitat and Vegetation

Whether it is lynx or pine marten in the boreal white spruce-balsam fir forests or migrating Canada geese, songbirds, and waterfowl congregating along the river and its agricultural areas, wildlife and wildlife habitat is an abundant and valuable resource in the Connecticut River Valley. The river and its corridor provide a variety of habitats for nearly 300 species of native animals including several state and federally-endangered and threatened species, such as the state endangered cobblestone tiger beetle. The dwarf wedge mussel is a species that is both a state- and federally-listed endangered species found in the river. The Connecticut River boasts the largest population of this species in the world.

The Connecticut River Valley also supports a rich and diverse selection of plant communities. The silver maple - wood nettle - ostrich fern floodplain forest lies immediately adjacent to the river and depends on the annual spring floods to survive. A few of these floodplain communities also contain the state-listed endangered green dragon growing amongst the ostrich fern. In New Hampshire, calcareous riverside seeps occur only in the Connecticut River valley at river narrows, on outcrops, and occasionally on rocky or sandy substrates where groundwater emerges and annual ice scour removes woody vegetation and creates fen-like conditions. Circumneutral riverbank outcrop communities can also only be found in New Hampshire along the Connecticut River and contain flood-tolerant plant species, especially Jesup's milk-vetch, a federally-listed endangered species of which the only known occurrences are along the Connecticut River.

Recreation

The Connecticut River and its valley provide New Hampshire and Vermont with some of their most spectacular scenic views. The river offers glimpses of long stretches of whitewater surrounding wetlands full of wildlife, and vast expanses of agricultural fields and farmlands. Distant peaks, town hall steeples, and traditional New England homes, such as those in Orford, are other sites admired by tourists and recreationalists alike. Scenic highlights of the region include several covered bridges and the St. Gaudens' National Historic Site, with its commanding view of Mt. Ascutney.

Snowmobile trails are very popular along the northern reaches of the river, while bike trails are cited in almost every town from Littleton to Walpole. The trails on Mount Pulaski, Percy Peaks, and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail offer picturesque views of the river. Various towns have recreational stops offering swimming, hiking, ball fields and picnic sites.

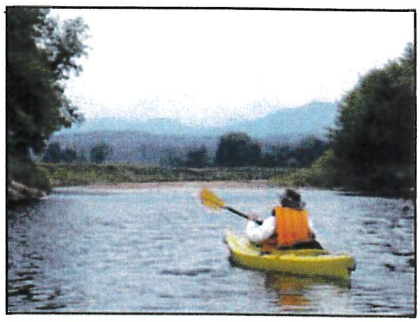
Fishing

The Upper Connecticut River offers exceptional fishing opportunities for trout and salmon and is often listed as a premier destination in national fishing publications. Hundreds of people from across the country and Canada visit the river each year to fish in its waters. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department helps to meet angler demand by stocking approximately 25,000 trout into the Connecticut River each year. As the river continues southward, both the mainstem and its tributaries provide year round angling opportunities not only for brook trout, brown trout and rainbow trout, but for over 30 additional species that reside in the river.

For most of its meandering course through western New Hampshire, access to the river is abundant and anglers take advantage of shore bank opportunities as well as boat launches and car top areas. The habitat is diverse and many different types of angling are utilized. Fly fishing the fast currents of white water and bait fishing the deep pools that can be found in slow, river bends are proven methods to catch fish.

Warmwater species including yellow perch, largemouth and smallmouth bass, chain pickerel, black crappie, pumpkinseed sunfish and brown bullhead can be found in the mainstem and setbacks of the Connecticut River from Lancaster downstream. Walleye and bluegill inhabit the river from Woodsville downstream and channel catfish can be found from the Bellows Falls impoundment downstream. Fish ladders at the Vernon and Bellows Falls dams have aided in restoration efforts of anadromous fish like the sea lamprey and American shad, which rely on fish passage for migration upstream in the spring and early summer to access historical spawning grounds.

Boating



The Connecticut River offers a wide variety of boating opportunities from the Third Connecticut Lake to Long Island Sound. In New Hampshire, boating begins in Pittsburg with whitewater stretches for expert kayakers and canoeists and continues to Hinsdale where hundreds of people enjoy flatwater paddling and motorized boating. Two popular whitewater sections are at Lymans Fall in Columbia, and at Sumner Falls in Cornish. Access can be gained at any of the approximately 80 access sites along the river in New Hampshire and Vermont.

Local Advisory Committees

Due to its great length and land area, the Connecticut River has five local river management advisory subcommittees that work together to create and implement water resources management plans and recreation plans for the river. These are the Headwaters, Riverbend, Upper Valley, Mount Ascutney and Wantastiquet Subcommittees. The Connecticut River Joint Commissions, made up of the Vermont Connecticut River Watershed Advisory Commission and the New Hampshire Connecticut River Valley Resources Commission, is the supervisory unit for these subcommittees and works to coordinate efforts between the two states' protection and management goals for the river. More information on the Connecticut River Joint Commissions can be found on their webpage at http://www.crjc.org/.

For More Information

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program visit the NHDES website at http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/rivers/, or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; (603) 271-2959; riversprogram@des.nh.gov.