

The Taunton Wild and Scenic River

Corridor Description

The Taunton River Wild and Scenic River study was authorized by congress in October, 2000. This legislation included 22 miles of the upper Taunton River from Bridgewater to Taunton. In September 2002, the study area was expanded to include the lower Taunton River extending to the Braga Bridge in Fall River. The primary focus area of the study and the proposed Wild and Scenic designation include a one half mile corridor along the 44 miles of the Taunton River mainstem beginning at the confluence of the Town and Matfield Rivers and including the communities of Bridgewater, Halifax, Middleborough, Raynham, Taunton, Berkley, Freetown, Dighton, Somerset and Fall River.

In addition, eight tributaries to the river were included in study efforts, but were not included in the congressional designation. These tributaries include the Matfield, Town, Winnetuxet, Nemasket, Forge, Three Mile, Segreganset, and Assonet Rivers.

Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Taunton River

The outstandingly remarkable values of the Taunton River which were identified during the study include:

- Agriculture
- Ecology and Biological Diversity
- Estuary
- Fisheries
- History and Archaeology
- Recreation

Background

In 1968, the United States Congress established a National Wild and Scenic Rivers system to protect outstanding rivers from the harmful effects of new federal projects such as dams, hydroelectric facilities, bank stabilization and bridges. To be considered "Wild and Scenic" a river must have at least one "outstandingly remarkable" natural, cultural or recreational value pursuant to federal law (Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, 16 U.S.C. 1271-1287).

As part of the study process, the Study Committee developed a Taunton River Stewardship Plan which focuses on management and protection of the six outstandingly remarkable characteristics of the Taunton River. The plan was developed through a public process facilitated by the Study Committee which consisted of volunteers appointed by their respective Select Boards or Mayors and representatives from the National Park Service, the Massachusetts Riverways Program, the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, Save the Bay, The Nature Conservancy, the Taunton River Watershed Alliance, the Natural Resources Trust of Bridgewater and the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District. Several Stream Teams were also started in conjunction with the Massachusetts Adopt-A-Stream Program on tributary rivers, and dozens of volunteers helped to assess outstandingly remarkable characteristics throughout the watershed during the study.

Each town in the study corridor brought the Stewardship Plan to vote in their communities during the Fall and Spring of 2004/2005. After the last town vote in July, 2005, legislation was written to ask congress to include the Taunton River in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers program.

Some of the outstanding attributes of the Taunton River corridor include:

- the longest undammed coastal river in New England
- over 154 species of birds and 45 species of fish, including the bald eagle and the globally rare endangered Atlantic sturgeon

- more than 360 identified plant species, including 3 globally rare species, Long's bittercress, Long's bulrush and Eaton's beggar ticks
- globally rare freshwater and brackish tidal marsh habitats
- economically important agricultural products including cranberries, blueberries, strawberries, pumpkins, Christmas trees, corn, and nursery products
- the largest alewife run in the state including the Nemasket River with headwaters at the Assawompset Ponds, the largest natural lakes in Massachusetts
- habitat for the globally rare bridle shiner and rainbow smelt; recently listed by NOAA as a species of concern
- the state designated Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage, the ancient Native American waterway from Massachusetts Bay in the east, to Mount Hope and Buzzards Bays in the south
- Wampanucket, located at the Assawompset Ponds in Middleborough; the location of one of the most significant Paleoindian depositions known in New England. This site contains evidence of dwellings dating from 12,000 – 8,000 years before present day
- the first four, five and six masted schooners were designed and/or registered in Taunton; the only seven-masted schooner to exist was also captained by a Tauntonian
- the first iron forge was set up on the Forge River in Raynham in 1652. This forge became the longest operating one of its kind in the country after more than 230 years in operation.
- iron fittings for the USS Monitor were forged in Bridgewater during the Civil War.
- historically important recreational activities including pleasure crafts, canoe launches and yacht clubs; resorts including amusement rides, dance pavilions and clambakes.
- current recreational activities including swimming, canoeing, sailing, motor boating, and fishing.