
I. BACKGROUND

Taunton River Overview

The Taunton River is perhaps the most diverse and intact coastal riverine ecosystem in all of southern New England. The Taunton River is the only major coastal river in the region that is without a dam or obstruction over its entire length. The river is formed at the confluence of the Matfield and Town Rivers in Bridgewater and along with its extensive network of tributaries, drains an area of 562 square miles. It also is the largest freshwater contributor to the Narragansett Bay estuary in Rhode Island, part of the National Estuary Program.

The Taunton River travels through ten communities and over 40 miles to Mount Hope Bay. It is tidal for 18 miles from the bay, with saltwater intrusion ending at about the Dighton-Taunton line, 12 miles from the mouth. The landscape of the Taunton River watershed is the result of glacial deposition as shown in flat outwash plains, numerous wetlands and kettle ponds. Glacial Lake Taunton was created by the retreating glacier and eventually drained as the Taunton River. Clay deposits from this glacial lake have been used in modern times by the brick and clay industry. Numerous bogs and wetlands have also provided bog iron, important to early development and industry.

The width of undisturbed river corridor from the headwaters to the City of Taunton and the primary tributaries of the upper watershed ranges from approximately 2,000 feet to over one mile for approximately twenty-two meandering miles - an extraordinarily wild river in eastern Massachusetts. The river corridor's mix of large woodland areas (largely devoid of non-native species), vast tidal and non-tidal wetlands, and edge habitats, related to nearly 2,000 acres of prime agricultural land provides rich habitat diversity for a wide range of species.



Fox Cub, Lakeville *Tim Watts*

The remarkably intact quality of the river corridor results not only in outstanding wildlife habitat, but great scenic beauty and wonderful recreational opportunities such as hiking, canoeing and hunting. The fact that the Taunton River drops only 20 feet in elevation over its entire course makes it particularly appealing to paddlers. The Taunton also contributes greatly to what remains of the rural character of the communities through which it flows. Large stretches of pasture, woodland and meadow help to preserve rich historical and archaeological resources along the river. The Taunton River is directly tied to early contact between English settlers and Native People and with its major tributaries, shows many examples of early colonial industrial innovation including millworks and transportation.

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 People's 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.

Wild and Scenic River Study

The Wild and Scenic River Study and the Taunton River Stewardship Plan represent the culmination of over seventeen years of local planning, stewardship and advocacy efforts on the Taunton River. The current study has its roots in the 1988 Upper Taunton River Conservation and Management Plan. The 1988 plan was undertaken by a coalition of local citizens, in conjunction with the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD), in an effort to preserve and protect the natural



Right of Way Trail, Somerset *MariJoan Bull*

resources in a 14.5 mile stretch of the Upper Taunton River from the Bridgewater-Middleborough-Raynham line to the Weir Village in Taunton. The group facilitating the 1988 plan and related public planning process evolved into the Taunton River Watershed Alliance (TRWA). One of the principal regional recommendations of the plan was to seek Wild and Scenic River status for the Taunton River.

In the mid-1990's, as a result of ongoing efforts to preserve riverfront lands along the Taunton River and its tributaries, the Taunton River Stewardship

Program (TRSP) was formally organized after months of meetings. An alliance of conservation agents and planners from the Bridgewater, Middleborough, Raynham and Halifax, TRSP worked with partners from the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, the National Park Service (NPS) Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program, SRPEDD, the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, the Natural Resources Trust of Bridgewater and the TRWA. TRSP works to serve as a bridge for riverfront landowners and communities seeking workable, appropriate land conservation options for riverfront properties, and helps to raise public awareness and funding.

Concurrently, in the fall of 1997, a local group spearheaded by the Taunton Conservation Agent and SRPEDD, working with Congressman Joseph Moakley's office, prepared a nomination application for the Taunton River to President Clinton's new American Heritage Rivers Program. This program was created to recognize and designate ten (10) American Heritage Rivers for their importance to American culture and history. While the Taunton failed to gain American Heritage River status, the application did foster a sense of unity among the riverfront communities (who had all signed a "Declaration of Interdependence" on the Taunton River as a preamble to the American Heritage Rivers application). The application also created a great deal of public awareness and brought to light a wealth of environmental and historical information about the Taunton.



Historic Stone Bridge, Assonet Village, Freetown
Karen Porter

Following the American Heritage River effort, working with TRSP and the NPS, SRPEDD developed legislation to undertake a study of the Taunton River to determine whether or not the Upper Taunton River, from its headwaters in Bridgewater, to the Forge River in Raynham, met the criteria for federal Wild and Scenic River designation. Legislation was submitted and presented to Congress by the Massachusetts delegation of

Representatives Moakley, Frank and McGovern, and Senators Kerry and Kennedy. In October of 1999, Congressional hearings were held and testimony given on behalf of the Taunton River Study Bill. In October of 2000, President

Clinton signed the bill into law, authorizing funding to undertake the Taunton River Wild and Scenic River Study. In September, 2002, Congressional Representatives Frank, McGovern and Lynch in response to written petitions from all lower Taunton communities, wrote the National Park Service to formally request an extension of the study to include all of the Lower Taunton River, from the Taunton –Raynham line to the Mount Hope Bay at Fall River and Somerset, as part of the Wild and Scenic Study area. The Congressional request was accepted by the National Park Service, and following passage of the Federal FY03 budget, the study area was formally extended.

How This Plan Was Developed

This plan was developed through a public process facilitated by the Taunton River Wild and Scenic River Study Committee. The Committee consists of volunteers appointed by their respective Boards of Selectmen or Mayors and representatives from the National Park Service, the Massachusetts Riverways Program – Department of Fish and Game, the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, The Nature Conservancy, Save the Bay, the Taunton River Watershed Alliance, SRPEDD, and the Natural Resources Trust of Bridgewater.

The Committee has held open meetings on a monthly basis since August of 2001. Special Topics meetings have been held periodically, employing outside experts/speakers, covering such topics as rare and endangered species habitats and natural resources of the Taunton River Corridor; cultural, historical and archaeological resources; agricultural resources; fisheries resources; recreational opportunities, and the resources of the Lower Taunton estuary. All of these special topic meetings were also open to the public. In February of 2004, the Committee also sponsored a regional river planning meeting (a charette) at the Bristol County Agricultural High School in Dighton. Citizens from all ten of the riverfront communities participating in the Wild and Scenic River Study attended the charette. The Committee solicited public comments on the resources of the river, threats to those resources, and potential remedies to problems on the river, which were recorded by members of the Committee during the charette.

Several Stream Teams were also started in conjunction with the Massachusetts Riverways Adopt-A-Stream Program to conduct Shoreline Surveys on major tributaries to the Taunton River. These surveys were designed to identify the same outstanding characteristics noted on the Taunton River and to come up with management recommendations and actions for the protection of these systems. Surveys were completed on eight tributary systems including the Matfield and Town Rivers, the Winnetuxet, Nemasket, Forge, Three Mile,

Segregansett and Assonet Rivers. A survey of the Taunton River from Cherry Street to Weir Park in Taunton was conducted during the annual TRWA paddle, and a survey was done in 2003 of the Taunton River shoreline in Somerset along with Labor in Vain Brook. See section eight for a discussion of the tributary systems.



Battleship Massachusetts, Fall River *Greg Guimond*

Knowledge of the river and tributaries was also enhanced by studies funded through the Wild & Scenic committee. As of spring 2004, the committee had appropriated over \$60,000 for a number of different studies and programs, including: a synthesis of water quality data for the Taunton River undertaken by the Watershed Access Lab at Bridgewater State College; a small tributary macro-invertebrate study undertaken

by Fred SaintOurs of Umass Boston, completion of the Heritage Landscape Inventory for the Wild & Scenic River corridor communities, facilitated through Jessica Rowcroft, Preservation Planner with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, a stream monitoring project conducted in conjunction with the state's Riverways Program and Bridgewater State College, and a Stream Team implementation grants program for local advocacy and restoration projects. The committee has also partnered with SMAST, out of Umass Dartmouth, to set up stream gauges and monitoring sites along the Taunton River and its major tributaries under the auspices of a grant from the Department of Environmental Protection.

The Committee has used the information obtained at all of its public meetings, special topics meetings and the charette, in conjunction with study, research and interviews, to form the basis of the content and recommendations of the Taunton River Stewardship Plan.