



The Jasper Newsboy



Neches Scenic River Initiative proposes preserving waterway

By **NEWSBOY**

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The Texas Conservation (TCA) Alliance is trying to get the Neches River designated as a National Scenic River, which would offer certain federal protections to the area and also allow local groups to market it as a tourist destination.

"This is a lengthy process," said Janice Bezanson, executive director of the TCA, "but one that will be very good for East Texas.

Jasper County Judge Mark Allen feels that having a Neches Scenic River would be good for economic development: "Scenic Rivers are important tourism destinations, drawing visitors from all over the country. They're an economic engine for motels, B&B's, restaurants, outfitters, convenience stores, and other businesses that bring outside dollars to the local economy."

Recognizing that lack of familiarity with the proposal could lead to concerns, the TCA has launched its Neches Scenic River Initiative to make the facts available to everyone. Brent Kartye of Lufkin will head up the effort.

Kartye, a native East Texan, spent 12 years with Temple Inland as lodge manager and wildlife specialist at the Boggy Slough wildlife area near Lufkin, so he understands the timber industry's priorities and the need for wildlife management and conservation.

The Neches presents a quiet, natural oasis in a modern bustling world, according to the TCA press release. Its long stretches of diverse forest and exceptional wildlife habitat are the refuge of hunters, fisherman, hikers, canoeists, and urbanites escaping from the hustle of the city. Appreciation for this special 400-mile corridor has led a number of people to propose that the river be designated a National Scenic River.

Kartye says, "It's understandable that riverside landowners and folks in the timber industry would worry about how it would affect them. (They) need to understand that it protects them.

"I'm looking for opportunities to speak to civic organizations, nature groups, economic development groups, hunting and fishing clubs, businesses - any group who wants to know, wants to help, or has concerns about designating the Neches a Scenic River," Kartye said.

One of the country's most diverse wildlife habitats, the Neches River bottomlands stretch 400 miles from Tyler to the Big Thicket National Preserve near Beaumont-Port Arthur, including the western boundary of Jasper County.

The river bottoms abound with deer, squirrels, wood ducks, songbirds, wildflowers, fish, and alligators. It provides fishing, hunting, hiking, canoeing, birdwatching and other outdoor recreation. The Neches valley is the heart of the "Central Flyway," the path for migrating birds.

Dams proposed for the Neches could flood 175,000 acres of those bottomland forests, leading the national group American Rivers to name the Neches one of the Ten Most Endangered Rivers in the country in 2007. Thousands of landowners might have their land condemned under eminent domain if the reservoir were built. Habitat for deer, squirrel, and migrating waterfowl would be lost.

There has been on-again, off-again interest in damming and channelizing the Neches since the 1920s. In the 1980's, then-Congressman Charlie Wilson had Congress de-authorize Rockland Dam, which would have inundated 125,000 acres in Angelina, Tyler, Polk, and Trinity Counties. The reservoir idea is periodically resurrected and currently is listed as an alternative in the region's official water plan.

Another proposal to raise the level of Dam B, which forms B.A. Steinhagen Reservoir in Tyler and Jasper counties, is under consideration. Raising this dam would flood Martin Dies Jr. State Park, the Angelina-Neches/Dam B State Wildlife Management Area known as "the Forks," and valuable duck hunting areas.

Designating the Neches a National Scenic River would keep it in its free-flowing state, precluding the government from issuing permits for projects that would dam or channelize the river.

Before the Neches can be named a National Scenic River, the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service must conduct an extensive study of the "outstanding" features of the river and identify any impacts the designation might have.

The agency would form an advisory group consisting of landowners, hunters, representatives of the timber and tourism industries, paddlers, and others with a stake in the designation. This would ensure that the river would become a Scenic River only if local people determine it would be good for the region.

"After the study, which would take two or three years, a bill would have to be passed in Congress to name the Neches a Scenic River," said Kartye.

The popularity of the Neches is attested by turnout at events like the River Rendezvous, which draws 300 people to canoe the annual half-day river trip.

Richard Donovan's book, Paddling the Wild Neches, sold out its first printing in only five months. Response to the Neches River Exhibit at the History Center in Diboll and the traveling exhibit titled Neches Journeys: Land, River, and People by Humanities Texas has been enthusiastic, according to TCA.

TCA welcomes comments and questions about the Neches Scenic River Initiative. Brent Kartye can be reached at (936) 366-2788, Brent@TCAtexas.org.