

Wild river: Neches Scenic River initiative aimed at increasing tourism

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The Neches River has played an important role in the history of Texas.

From the canoe traffic of several Indian nations to the early settlers whose log cabins dotted its banks, generations have used the river for their livelihood.



(ENLARGE)

The Texas Conservation Alliance has launched its Neches Scenic River Initiative to familiarize East Texans with a new scenic river proposal.

The timber barons of the 19th and early 20th centuries floated great rafts of logs down the river to sawmills in Beaumont and built railroads into the forests of the Neches valley.

The bottomland forests and abundant wildlife sustained the population of pioneers who built modern-day Texas.

Because of these reasons and many more, people have begun to recognize the value of this beautiful and wild river for its economic potential and as a historical treasure. Appreciation for the 400-mile corridor has led a number of people to propose the river be designated a National Scenic River.

"Scenic rivers are important tourism destinations, drawing visitors from far and wide. They're an economic engine for motels, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, outfitters, convenience stores and other businesses that bring outside dollars to the local economy," said state Rep. Jim McReynolds (D-Lufkin). "A study of the Neches River by the U.S. Forest Service or National Park Service would bring everyone together to examine the river. I suspect we would find that segments such as those along the National Forests and other public lands would be ideal for this proposal."

The Texas Conservation Alliance has launched its Neches Scenic River Initiative, to familiarize East Texans with the Scenic River proposal with Brent Kartye, of Lufkin, heading up the effort.

"Designating the Neches a Scenic River would be a great thing for East Texas," said Kartye. "Out of the 166 rivers in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, Texas only has one, way over in Big Bend National Park. Having the Neches on the map will bring people from all over the country."

Public interest in the Neches can be seen every June when the Lufkin/Angelina County Chamber of Commerce hosts the Neches River Rendezvous.

"Participation just keeps growing," said Jerry Huffman, president of the chamber. "This year more than 300 paddlers turned out for the half-day canoe trip."

The Texas Conservation Alliance is making materials available to community organizations to make sure the facts are available to everyone.

"The National Scenic River designation will be good for riverside landowners, the timber industry and hunting and fishing clubs along the river, as well as for tourism interests," Kartye said. "But it's understandable that people would worry about how a federal designation might affect them. We want to talk to anyone who is interested in the Neches, for whatever reason."

Kartye is looking for opportunities to speak to civic organizations, nature groups, economic development groups and hunting and fishing clubs about the potential of the Neches.

One of the country's most diverse wildlife habitats, the forests in the Neches River bottom lands stretch a contiguous 400 miles from its upper reaches near Tyler, past national forests and state parks between the Jacksonville-Palestine area and Lufkin-Diboll, then through the Big Thicket National Preserve to Beaumont-Port Arthur.

The river bottoms abound with deer, squirrels, wood ducks, songbirds, wildflowers, fish, alligators and provide fishing, hunting, hiking, canoeing, bird watching and other outdoor recreation for citizens.

Dams proposed for the Neches together would 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 would have their land condemned under eminent domain if a reservoir were built on it and habitats 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.

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 the river, according to a TCA press release.

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 "outstandingly remarkable" 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.

"Right now all we're talking about is a study of the river," says Kartye. "After the study, which would take two or three years, a bill would have to be passed in Congress to actually name the Neches a Scenic River. That bill can't happen without the support of local congressmen and local congressmen won't support it if it isn't found to be good for East Texas."

For more information, contact the Texas Conservation Alliance and Brent Kartye at 936-366-2788 or e-mail at Brent@TCAatexas.org.

Staff writer Steven Alford contributed to this report.