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Water Ways: An East Texas River Worth Saving

REDTOWN - Three reddish-colored deer darted from the thick woods as the truck bounced down the dirt road east of the Davy Crockett National Forest in Houston County.

Then, as we rounded the corner approaching the Anderson Crossing landing on the Neches River, a mature bald eagle swooped from a tree and floated alongside the road for just a second before turning and drifting back into the forest. It was a perfect chamber of commerce moment that no money could buy.



It also was the perfect introduction to the Neches River and the wildlife utilizing this nine-mile section that ends at Texas Highway 7.

Texas Conservation Association's three-hour float trip was an introduction to its efforts to obtain a federal Wild and Scenic River designation that would not only protect the river that runs from Van Zandt County to the coast from further damming, but also maintain a way of life for the animals and people that use it.

Janice Bezanson, TCA's executive director, and I

launched our canoe at the landing, which is really nothing more than a sandy slope alongside a suspect-looking wooden bridge built in a time when logging ruled the area.

On the water your eyes are immediately drawn up to the towering trees on either side of the meandering river. The trees, mostly water oaks in the river bottom, much more than the coffee-stained water are the star of this show. They give the river a wild beauty you can't get from any highway crossing on the upper portion of the river.

"The Neches is what it is," Jacksonville's Dr. Michael Banks would say later in the day. "It is not blue water, but it is what we've got and it is worth protection."

Banks is president of the Friends of the Neches River, a group of volunteers from the upper portion of the river working toward its designation. A second group, Citizens to Protect the Neches River, is located in Beaumont on the southern end. In-between are a growing number of volunteers and supporters, who are writing letters pushing for a Congressional bill that would authorize the United States to conduct the study needed to place the river on the select listing.

As we eased down the slow-rolling section of the river that for the last 12 years has been home to the Neches River Rendezvous and is soon to become part of the state designated Texas Paddling Trail, we watched what appeared to be a belted kingfisher work to stay just ahead of us while trying to find its lunch back in the woods. A pileated woodpecker sang its shrill song. Long-nosed gar sat suspended just below the water's surface. Spooked by the approaching flotilla, slider and red-ear turtles joined them.

We didn't see alligators, river otters, beavers or wild pigs, but there is no doubt that they are visitors to the river.

There was a family setting up its fishing camp, one of several dotting the banks as the river neared Highway 7. Like the wild animals and birds, the Neches is their playground as well.

For a canoeist, the Neches isn't a particularly challenging river. There are some gravel shoals that create a short section of running water. The biggest difficulty is the ever-present logjams created by some trees that fell years ago and others that joined them when the river was at flood stage during the winter or early spring.

Bezanson said supporters of the river are busy talking to landowners about the designation, clearing fears the government program could cause problems. She said her group has told organizations representing landowners such as the Texas Forestry Association and Texas Farm Bureau that if the designation would impact area landowners in any way, the project would be halted.

The process is getting help from landowners who were trapped in the tug-of-war over construction of Fastrill Reservoir or creation of the Fastrill National Wildlife Refuge. Thankful that groups such as Friends of the Neches River went to bat for them to halt construction of the reservoir, that landowner group has become a vocal proponent to others explaining the river's designation would not impact their land use at all.

"There are about 60 to 80 landowners on the upper end," Bezanson said.

The bulk of the shoreline lies within portions of the Davy Crockett and Angelina national forests and some big landowners like Temple-Inland. The Big Thicket protects a large chunk south of the river's confluence with the Angelina River.

Without federal designation, the spot where the two rivers meet could be lost along with Martin Dies State Park if plans to raise the dam at B.A. Steinhagen Lake proceed. So would a large chunk of the lower river if the 120,000-acre Rockland Dam is built.

Bezanson said the next step in the process is to get one of the five congressmen whose districts cover the river to begin the legislative process that would authorize the study. She has received positive feedback from some of the congressmen and from the staff of the others. Bezanson said with time running short, it is probably something that will have to wait until the next session begins. Funding would not be required because the Park Service already has funds to support the Wild and Scenic River program.

"The study would look specifically at its eligibility and suitability as a wild and scenic river,"

Bezanson said. "Some of the river has already been deemed eligible. That is the upper part from Lake Palestine to Steinhagen."

Just like the Rio Grande is Big Bend and the Atchafalaya River is the Louisiana low country, as you float the river you realize the Neches River, like the forests that surround it, is quintessential East Texas.

"We think this is the best way to protect the river," Bezanson said.

For more information on the Neches River initiative, go to www.TCATexas.org.

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