

## TYLER MORNING TELEGRAPH

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### The Wild Neches



Courtesy Photo/Adrian Van Dellen

The Neches River is considered an East Texas treasure. Members of the Tyler Audubon Society and Native Plant Society of Texas, Tyler Chapter, plan to meet Tuesday and discuss ways to protect it.

By JACQUE HILBURN  
Feature Writer

Richard LeTourneau of Longview spent his career working in the metal fabricating business.

Now retired, the former tradesman focuses on protecting the environment, most particularly the Neches River where he spent his childhood exploring the wonders of nature.

"We have a state and national treasure here in East Texas, and we need to realize it before it's gone," said LeTourneau, who serves as vice chair of the Texas Conservation Alliance.

LeTourneau is expected this week to share his take on this pristine treasure with members of the Tyler Audubon Society and Native Plant Society of Texas, Tyler Chapter.



Talks on "Protecting the Wild Neches" are scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday at Pollard United Methodist Church, 3030 New Copeland Road, Tyler.

Aside from its natural beauty, the 416-mile Neches River, which flows through East Texas, is home to a seemingly endless variety of plants and animals, group members said.

Because of its diversity, portions of the river have been declared as a national wildlife refuge, but nature experts say more work is necessary to preserve it further.

"In the race to build reservoirs, I've seen the destruction of river bottoms, all in the need for water," LeTourneau said, referencing changes noted within the past few years.



Two major reservoirs, Lake Palestine and B.A. Steinhagen, are located along the riverway.

He works also to protect areas in the Old Sabine Bottoms Wild Management Area and Little Sandy National Wildlife Refuge located north of Tyler, and believes the region has enough water in reserve to serve the needs of citizens for many years, if used responsibly.

Building reservoirs can be profitable, LeTourneau said.

That means more reservoirs are likely to be built, often at the expense of the native environment, according to some plant and nature experts.

Many bird species are distributed along the river, drinking the water and eating vegetation that thrives in flood-prone areas, said Audubon member Cheryle Beck.

"There's a whole eco-system down a river," she said. "One of the problems with dams is that they limit the flow of water - you lose a lot of animals and plants."

Most people tend to consider the needs of larger animals. It's often the smaller ones, such as tadpoles and small fish, and some species of water-loving plants that are most negatively impacted, said Ms. Beck.

Both small animals and plants are important links to the food chain.

"It's a critical issue," said Ms. Beck. "When you mess with an eco-system, it's almost impossible to fix it."

For more information about Tuesday's meeting, call 903-586-7769 or e-mail [tyleraudubon@yahoo.com](mailto:tyleraudubon@yahoo.com).