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Get Off My Lawn

Wild Time: Steps Begin to Protect the Neches River Before Dam-Thirsty North Texas Kills It

By Jim Schutze Mon., Sep. 26 2011 at 2:07 PM

Categories: **Get Off My Lawn**

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How would you like to have a federally designated wild and scenic river within a 90-minute drive from Dallas? That could be kind of a life-changer for a lot of us. We wouldn't have to be satisfied with donning a Hazmat suit and a motorcycle helmet, signing a new will and medical power of attorney and taking our chances on the city's "standing wave" meat-grinder on the Trinity River.

The current issue of the magazine of the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife has an article about efforts by the Texas Conservation Alliance (TCA) to get a **wild and scenic designation** for 311 miles of the Neches River between Lake Palestine and Interstate 10.

I **wrote about the Neches** two years ago when Dallas still hoped to dam it up for a new water supply. My son, Will, and I canoed it. It's absolutely gorgeous and truly wild in parts. I got us lost, and Will got us found. I have no idea what that says about anything.

Dallas lost its court case, and the Neches River reservoir project is now dead. But TCA director Janice Bezanson told me this morning there are several dam projects "on the books" -- meaning they have been planned but not authorized -- which, if built, would have the effect of killing off the river's best wild free-flowing stretches.

Bezanson, who was driving through Oklahoma when I reached her, said the designation process, years long and numbingly complex, is in **its first baby steps**. The main thing now is to convince property-owners along the Neches that they're not about to be Sovietized.

I asked her about the Buffalo River in Arkansas, because it's a river I know a little bit, and it's a great example of how a

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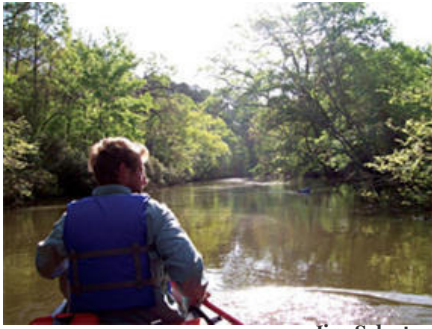
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Jim Schutze

In April 2009, Schutze and his son Will (shown here) took a float down the wilder parts of the Neches River. Both made it back.

river can become a huge draw for a region in this era of green tourism. She said the Buffalo is not actually a "wild and scenic" river, legally -- just wild, I guess.

She also said the Buffalo is unlike the Neches in that a lot of the Buffalo flows through federal land. A closer parallel is the Niobrara in Nebraska, she said, which rises in Wyoming and flows 400 miles to the Missouri River. Much of the Niobrara flows through private land.

The same Texas Parks and Wildlife article talks about the Devils River in West Texas where there have been conflicts between

paddlers and property owners. The article quotes Scott McWilliams, head of the Del Rio office of Texas Nature Conservancy: "What I wish the public could get clear about is that the river they enjoy so much and find in such pristine condition would not be that way without the landowners protecting it."

I found the same thing in my reporting on the Neches. The wild Neches is still there and worth preserving because of a century of private ownership by both timber companies and hunt clubs. The main thing government wants to do with places like that now is dam them up, flood them and turn them into water companies.

The best coalition against that sort of thing, in terms of being able to stand up to the water hustlers politically, is an alliance of recreational users and landowners. But first, you know, they all have to agree on some stuff. Like, we agree not to camp on your lawn, if you agree not to shoot us. Things like that. It can be done.

That's about where the TCA is with the Neches now. It takes a law in Congress just to authorize a study to see if it's worth thinking about another law to make it happen. We're talking three years just for the study. But remember that the Neches is one of the last opportunities we'll have in the entire state of Texas to keep any river wild. Seems like it's worth the work.

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