Sustainable Raritan River Initiative  
November 2009  
Public Access and Recreation

Introduction

One effective way to increase awareness, knowledge and a sense of commitment of regional stakeholders to restoring the condition of the Raritan is to increase public access and recreational use of the River. If more people are enjoying outdoor experiences that include boating or fishing on the river, or walking or biking on trails alongside the river, it will increase public support for keeping the river as clean and healthy as possible and retaining scenic values. Users feel a sense of ownership of the river. The economic potential of day-users of the River to surrounding towns and counties is not insignificant. People coming to recreate on or along the river will spend money to buy food and supplies and will stop in local shops and restaurants. Further, a region that can celebrate and promote the historical, cultural, economic and ecological value of its river is a region that can become more attractive to not only commercial investment but people choosing to live in an area with a good quality of life.

One of the key facets is to making more people aware of the many potential recreational uses of the River is to find more ways to improve access to the river itself for water-oriented recreation and to the banks of the river or areas with river views for pedestrian and bicycle-oriented recreation. To achieve this overall goal, the three priority needs are to:

1. Increase awareness and use of current access points and river-oriented trails.
2. Upgrade existing access points and trails.
3. Develop coordinated plan for development of additional river access and recreational areas.

1. Increase awareness and use of current access points and river-oriented trails.

The 30-mile stem of the Lower Raritan River (after the confluence of North and South branches) currently offers opportunities for both boating access and for riverfront walking/biking. However, it is widely noted and observable that a very small percentage of people are recreating on or along the River, particularly outside of the Bay area. The reasons for this are a general lack of coordinated promotion of the recreation potential of the river to people both inside and outside the immediate region, limited access points, and the obscurity of the river from roadways, except for bridge crossings, which makes it an underappreciated if not practically unknown resource to many. There are very few private residences and no commercial entities such as restaurants to draw people to the waterfront in adjacent communities.
Current Recreation Opportunities along River

In the Lower portion, there are three county parks (Duke Island in Bridgewater Twp., Somerset County – 340 acres, Johnson in Piscataway Twp., Middlesex County – 473 acres, Donaldson in Highland Park, Middlesex County – 90 acres), four municipal parks (Bakelite in Piscataway, Buccleuch and Boyd in New Brunswick and Buchanan in Sayreville), and several other protected or preserved areas that attract people for day use. The Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park provides a path suitable for hiking, jogging, bicycling and horseback riding along 9 miles of the main river corridor from Manville to New Brunswick, but the trail follows along the canal with no direct viewing of the River. There are areas for picnicking, and fishing is allowed along the length of the canal. There is some opportunity to walk or bike along the river in the City of New Brunswick, but the area is currently underutilized and in need of some improvements. The only other waterside trail is still under development but will consist of a boardwalk trail through wetlands bordering the river at Edison, NJ.

In Somerset County’s approximately 10-mile portion of the Lower Raritan (Branchburg through Bound Brook), a Raritan River Greenway project will ultimately provide a connected path along the length of the River. A three-mile portion of the greenway is completed from Duke Island Park in Bridgewater to Raritan borough, following the path of the Raritan Water Power Canal. It is worth mentioning that other greenway projects are underway in upper portions of the watershed, such as the Holland Brook greenway project in the South Branch sub-watershed running from Readington to Branchburg that could eventually connect to Somerset County’s greenway project and the Black River Greenway project in the North Branch sub-watershed. (See maps of Middlesex and Somerset County indicating preserved areas).
Parks and Raritan River Greenway in Somerset County

Current Access Points

There are currently ten access points for canoes and kayaks (and some usable by motorized boats also) after the confluence of the North and South branches. (See draft Access Map below). The River is too shallow for motorized boats in the 18.5 miles of non-tidal portion upstream from New Brunswick. Paddlers can access the river, but several dams present obstacles and could require portage. New Brunswick’s new boat docks and boat ramp at the redeveloped Boyd Park offer a place for both paddlers and motorboats to get on the river. The Edison boat ramp provides the only other adequate public access spot before the river widens into the vicinity of the Bay. A private boat club near Edison is home to a number of moored boats.
**Action Steps:**

1. Produce a Raritan River Trail Guide with map and information for boating, hiking and biking (Examples include the Passaic River trail map and Lehigh River trail map.)
   - Builds on or expands current access point guide in development by Raritan Riverkeeper.
   - Possibly first focus on a current river stretch that is good for paddling (between Bound Brook and Edison).
   - Develop “tours” to educate potential users on where to go, such as natural history and industrial history.
   - Include interesting sites along river, history and information about sites.
   - Create interactive webpage showing access points and trails, including contact information and information about canoe and kayak rentals.

2. Plan and implement river-oriented events.
   - Raritan River Fall Float
   - Other Paddling events
   - Flotillas: **Combine Flotilla with Raritan Festival in New Brunswick**
   - Other Festivals and Contests

**Existing Data and Data Gaps:**

The Raritan Riverkeeper has data about access points and has produced a draft map and guide, and counties and municipalities have data about riverside trails that currently exist.

There is a need to collect and verify all information about current points and waterfront trails together and organize into an easy-to-use and informative trail guide that is distributed and promoted to the boating, paddling and hiking community. To do this, all access points and trails need to be mapped, photographed and researched. An asset inventory could be developed.

Likewise, for the events, there is a need to collect all information from Rutgers, from surrounding towns and from the two counties about known events and happenings that celebrate or use the river. These events can be promoted through blueraritan.org and expanded or complemented by other new activities.

**Constraints/Obstacles:**

There is a constraint on access to the river from the Bay that affects the convenience and ability of larger boats to enter and use the river. A very low railroad bridge crosses the river at its mouth, so that the only way for boats to access the river is to wait for the turnstile to open. There are very few, if any options available to address this obstacle.
As far as producing and distributing a guide and holding more events, there are few obstacles other than finding organizations willing to sponsor, host and promote them. The guide can be loaded onto blueraritan.org and linked to many organizations, including towns and counties.

Key Stakeholders and Engagement:

- Boating, fishing, hiking and kayaking/canoeing clubs
- Environmental nonprofits
- Watershed groups (South Branch watershed has guide in development)
- D and R Canal State Park
- Rotary clubs (economic interest)
- Somerset County Prosecutors office (Dive team, Dave Tackelson)
- Somerset County Ridewise program
- New Jersey Conservation Foundation (promotion, cooperation)
- National Park Service community assistance program
- NJ Green Acres
- Riverfront towns and counties (planning, parks, recreation)

Strategies to engage these stakeholders include meeting with towns about their waterfront access points and/or recreation areas to find out about current amenities (food, restrooms) and resources available there. It is possible to find partner organizations that will help to produce, promote and distribute the trail guide and the events. Towns and counties can put links on their websites and newsletters to the guide and to the calendar of events. Some businesses might be interested in doing this too, such as outdoor and canoe supply stores.

Role for Rutgers:

Given its proximity to the river, Rutgers is in an ideal position to increase student awareness and use of the river. This can be through promoting current waterfront recreational opportunities for picnicking, walking and biking and by participating in planning of river-oriented events. The University could consider bringing in a vendor to rent canoes and kayaks to students and faculty. A water ferry could be instituted to take students and faculty across the river. Student courses or service projects could work on promotion of river recreation and events. Rutgers Recreation can expand students’ and kids’ summer camps devoted to river topics and activities. Finally, an upgrade to the Rutgers boathouse could provide a hub for various Raritan River recreation opportunities, tours, canoe rentals, etc., as well as a scenic location for hosting many types of meetings.

Funding Resources:

- Towns and counties may be able to provide some limited funding or in-time support.
- D and R Canal State Park – funds to sponsor canoes, tie-in’s for events
- Cheesequake State Park – kayaks, possible tie-ins for events and promotion and trailer?
- REI (sporting group) - $5,000 grants for greenways/guides (contact: Anne Mallady)
• DEP Recreational Trails Grant Funding
• National Park Service Community Initiatives Division for assistance with promotion and trail guides.
• US EPA Environmental Education grants

**Timeframe:**

Short-term:
• Fall Float: Oct. 11, 2009
• Spring 2010 event in conjunction with Raritan Festival
• Development of River Trail Guide in 2010

Longer-term:
• Ongoing annual events
• Updating guide and building into system with other sub-watersheds
• Tie-in with state recreation and leisure industry planning

**Synergies:**

Habitat/Stewardship – Some of the current access points and recreational areas are also areas that are important to biota. Guides or tours could include information about habitat values.

Balance – Better awareness of the recreational potential of the river can add to the attractiveness of the region, and events and increased use of the river will add tax revenues and possibly stimulate complementary commercial services along the river.

**2. Upgrade Current Access Points and Riverfront Trails**

Most of the current access points are not well-marked, with little or no signage to bring people to the access points from nearby roads. Many of the locations are in need of more parking, better maintenance or improved access paths to the river (steep grade, rough terrain, etc.), restrooms or picnic tables to improve the amenity value of the site for paddlers.

On the water, signs are also needed to alert floaters about dams (safety issue). Better information should be available to paddlers interested in putting in kayaks and canoes about the dams and about other obstructions, ice and silt problems.

**Action Steps:**

1. Improve signage to/from access points and trails, and at access points.
2. Consider developing a logo for the Raritan River Trail.
3. Improve/upgrade accessibility to launch sites and walking trails
4. Add other amenities to current access points (parking, restrooms, tables, etc.).
5. Encourage other commercial interests to promote entertainment and enjoyment along River, such as riverfront restaurants.

6. Install safety signage on or near water regarding obstructions, fishing, swimming advisories

**Existing Data and Data Gaps:**

There is a need to do a full inventory of the existence or condition of amenities and signage at or around current areas. Then, it will be necessary to do an assessment of the needs and potential for additions and upgrades to improve sites according to intended uses. Boat or kayak groups might be good sources for information on needed upgrades.

**Constraints/Obstacles:**

There are numerous physical or manmade impediments that inhibit the use of riverside trails, such as steps at Buccleuch Park that interfere with the progress of a bike trail along the River. This, and other such natural or manmade obstacles will be documented in the data gathering phase.

An obstacle will be obtaining permission from local governments to install signage or to perform other upgrades. For a consistent sign campaign (for instance a logo for the River Trail with consistent signage at all points), all local governments would need to support and concept and allow new signs on public properties. If signs and upgrades need to occur on private property, property owners present a possible hurdle.

If a list of needed upgrades is generated and prioritized, all of the landowners, towns and counties can gather in the same room, a “green room” to discuss the overall strategy, approvals needed, and placement and design of improvements.

**Key Stakeholders and Engagement:**

- Counties and riverfront towns (planning, parks, public works, development, safety)
- Somerset County: Raritan River Greenway Initiative
- East Coast Greenways

As long as a lead entity can develop the upgrade plan and advocate for it, it should be possible to work with local governments and landowners on the zoning and design issues. Also, as much as possible, any plans to construct or add improvements and signage should be coordinated with other similar initiatives. Signs should be in English and Spanish.
Role for Rutgers:
- Could play lead role in coordinating a priority list, contacting towns to develop strategy for making improvements and identifying grants and funds
- Assist with creation of logo
- Better lighting and upgrades to University access points and waterfront areas

Funding Resources:
- DEP Green Acres – funds for upgrades and signs
- North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (contact: Lois Silverman)
- NJDOT
- J and J Foundation – RWJ
- AT & T - safety phones
- “Adopt-a-River” or “friends of river” programs with service organizations or businesses sponsoring improvements or maintenance.

Timeline:
Short-term:
- Raritan River Trail logo could be developed.
- Address some high priority upgrades.

Longer term:
- Dam removal
- Amenities placed at access points, and larger-scale construction or grading projects

Synergies:
Habitat - Methods to enhance access points that are ecologically sensitive.
Balance - Encouraging commercial uses, like restaurants, to compliment access points along river.

3. **Develop coordinated plan for development of additional river access and recreational areas**

Although we have no data on how many people use the Raritan for recreation each year, it is clear to any observer and by talking with interested and knowledgeable stakeholders that its recreational potential is largely unrealized. Therefore a plan to develop more access points and more opportunities to recreate along the river is the third priority item.

While individual towns and counties have some preserved lands and some plans for additional river access or land preservation along the Raritan River, the approach is not coordinated along the length of the River. There will be development along river, and river-oriented activities and eco-tourism can be a part of the development that brings aesthetic, social and economic
benefits. The River itself is already a “greenway” (or “blueway”) and much of the land along its banks is undeveloped. Focusing on the asset of the River itself and the undeveloped portions that provide opportunities to improve public access and recreation is a strategy that could go hand-in-hand with other regional planning or development efforts. As the River is emphasized for its potential to improve the quality of life in adjacent towns and as it becomes even a “selling feature” of living and investing in these towns, the towns and counties will reap the benefits of eco-friendly development that enhances public enjoyment.

A “blueway” or greenway development plan could serve to coordinate a regional approach that makes linkages and logical connections between individual access points, parks, preserved areas and trails to create a network that allows and encourages tourists, paddlers, hikers, bird-watchers, bikers to enjoy the entire river and all that is has to offer.

**Action Steps:**

1. Accumulate all current planning documents, including local open space plans and proposals for expanded greenways or trails. (See Somerset and East Coast Greenways proposed trails below)
2. Identify logical and needed sites for new boat launches and canoe/kayak access. (Consider improving access from D and R Canal towpath.)
3. Identify areas for trail development.
4. Investigate acquisition or easement needs and alternatives.
5. Work with each town along River and with counties to facilitate development/preservation of new recreational and preserved areas.
6. Develop educational materials on benefits of greenways and river trails

**Existing Data and Data Gaps:**

There are already a number of sources of information to build the baseline picture of the River corridor, including land use, status, ownership, zoning and other site factors. These include:

- NJ Conservation Foundation Greenways map
- East Coast Greenway
- County and local open space plans
- County and local parks maps
- Redevelopment plans for individual sites or zones
- Transportation plans
- NJ Green Acres

There is a data gap in parcel-based data for all riverfront property.

**Constraints/Obstacles:**

One of the primary constraints is the need to facilitate communication, sharing or information and coordination among the 18 riverfront municipalities and two counties. Having a third-party
entity take the lead to bring all of the local planners and plans together is a way to begin to address this constraint. Another obstacle is that the development of this plan may raise fears of the taking of property to create more trails and access. However, the argument that is more politically palatable is that the river itself IS the greenway/blueway and already exists, and a major emphasis of the plan is simply to provide more ways for people to enjoy the asset that is already there. Where there are opportunities to connect existing parks and preserved areas and trails, that is the first priority, with easements or acquisitions of areas that are not suitable for other development could become additional parts of the trail system.

Additional concerns are that more trails require more maintenance. NIMBYism can also impact access points (fear of more people, hangouts, homeless, etc.). Physical or natural obstacles include dealing with flooding, which can create a continual need to re-build. Putting any structures or walkways along natural edges or elevated can alleviate this problem. Physical obstacles such as railroad tracks, private industrial facilities or lack of public roads impede the progress of connected trails in some parts of the corridor.

After it is developed, it will be important to incorporate the greenway plan into municipal master plans. In Somerset county, individual waterfront plan approvals are coordinated with the county open space master plan. Both of the counties can enter into MOUs with the municipalities that stipulate that the counties will assist in maintaining sites if the municipalities agree to the trail/access development. Towns also get the ability to develop ratables. An incentive for some communities is that working cooperatively on this plan can be fulfill the Land Use pledge that is required to be a Sustainable NJ community.

**Key Stakeholders and Engagement:**

- Private property owners
- Municipalities and counties (parks, planning, Improvement Authorities)
- NJ Conservation Foundation
- East Coast Greenways
- NJ Green Acres
- Kean University Urban Systems Initiative

To work with riverfront communities, a series of visioning sessions could be used to engage and involve local residents and town officials. It could be important to conduct a survey on river attitudes and usage, surveying users, towns, nonprofits and water suppliers. Preparing information about the economic benefits of trails and recreation would be useful to inform the discussion. Rails-for-Trails has prepared much of this information.
Role for Rutgers:

- Studio projects to contribute to planning efforts
- GIS services
- Facilitate communication and sharing between towns and counties

Funding Resources:

- NJTPA
- GreenAcres
- NJ Recreational Trails Program
- County/local open space taxes (trail or open space)
- Garden State Preservation Trust
- NJDOT Transportation Enhancement Program (acquisition of scenic easements and sites)

A proposal to consider is to create a Raritan River Improvement Fund (model from the Hudson River Improvement Fund), using funds from NRD settlements that can be allocated to projects that enhance public access, increase recreational opportunities, or otherwise improve the health and visibility of the river.

Timeline:

Short-term:
- Hold meeting to get counties and towns on board.
- Collect all existing planning documents related to open space, preserved land and river access points.

Longer-term:
- Develop plan for eventual “connected” river trail.

Synergies:

Balance - Assuring greenways and river access are part of development plans along river.

Habitat - Produce one consolidated document that includes habitat and ecological priorities for protection with trails and access, addressing any trade-offs.
East Coast Greenway Route Recommendation for Northern NJ
Conceptual Greenways System

[Map image of the Somerset-Raritan Greenway System]
Public Access Meetings:
June 16, 2009
July 15, 2009
August 12, 2009

Participants in Public Access Working Groups Meetings:

Brad Van Arnum  Edison Wetlands Association
Michele Bakacs  Rutgers Coop Extension, Middlesex County
Mirah Becker  Middlesex County Planning
Tom Boccino  Somerset County Planning
Diane Bonanno  Rutgers Recreation
David Dendler  Somerset County Parks Commission
Brandy Forbes  Edison Township Planning
Steve Jandoli  DEP/Green Acres
Mike Keller  City of Perth Amboy
Mike Kruimer  East Coast Greenway Alliance
Rick Lear  Middlesex County Parks
Karen Lowrie  Rutgers University, Bloustein School
Richard Ludescher  Rutgers University, NJAES
Deb Mans  NY/NJ Baykeeper
Cindy Roberts  Trust for Public Land
Bill Schultz  Raritan Riverkeeper
Laura Szwak  NJ Conservation Foundation
Allan Williams  Highland Park Environmental Commission
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