

Rock River achieves national status

Waterway recognized as a national water trail

Frank Schier canoed 235 miles of the Rock River and drove along its shores to collect its stories with the intent of writing a book.

Later, he bought his Rockford, Ill., newspaper and named it The Rock River Times after the waterway of his passion. He got busy, and his book idea went on hold.

But Schier's dreams for the river kept roiling around in his head.

In late 2009, he got an idea: Seek recognition of the river as a national water trail to encourage people to explore and protect it.

The next year, he called the first meeting to bring together people from municipalities up and down the 320-mile waterway in Wisconsin and Illinois.

"I knew I had something by the response," Schier said.

People came from as far north as Horicon and as far south as the Quad Cities to talk about the current they hold in common.

Citizens representing 11 counties and 37 cities and villages along the river formed the Rock River Trail Initiative. Some are paddlers, some are elected officials, and others are just regular folks who wanted to elevate a backyard neighbor to the national stage.

More than two years later, the hard-working group achieved a new status for the waterway.

Earlier this month, the National Park Service designated the Rock as a national water trail. Supporters say that being part of a national network will mean a boost to the economy for communities along the river.

"The river can be a driver for economic development," said Sheila De Forest, a member of the Beloit City Council and one of two Rock County representatives on the trail group. "We are hoping it will bring more visitors to the area to use the river for recreation. We are hoping more people will see the river as a destination."

The new designation includes the Rock River in the National Water Trails System, making it visible to people across the country looking for new paddling experiences. The water trail's emphasis is on people who canoe and kayak, but it will provide enhanced recreational opportunities for boating, camping and viewing nature as well, supporters said.

The national status did not come easily.

“The plan we submitted was quite comprehensive,” De Forest said. “In every county, people had to do an inventory of dams and portages. We had to look at all the things along the river that make it safe and accessible to the public.”

The group met every other month and rotated locations of meetings along the river.

“We traveled to different communities and got to see what they are doing to make the river a thoughtful part of their community plans,” De Forest said.

Also serving from Rock County until February was Joleen Stinson, formerly with the Rock County Parks Department.

“The designation puts Rock County on the map,” she said.

To help river paddlers, the trail initiative has created detailed maps of river segments. Each segment includes where to put in and take out, the paddling difficulty of the river and whether the waterway runs through rural or urban areas.

“It makes planning a river trip possible,” Stinson said. “If you are a family, you will choose an easier segment. If you are an avid paddler, you will choose a more challenging segment. Every mile of the river is mapped.”

Promoters of the river trail also believe the new designation might help the river’s health. As more people paddle the Rock, De Forest hopes they will appreciate the river more and take better care of it.

“I am interested in water quality,” De Forest said. “One of the benefits of official designation is that we will be able to tap funding sources for cleaning the river that we couldn’t tap before.”

Most of the Rock River is on the federal Environmental Protection Agency list of impaired waters because of pollutants from agricultural and urban runoff.

Among other things, the trail group is looking at the feasibility of shoreline cleansing pools to filter and clean the water; the planting of prairie grasses in buffer zones on both shores of the river to absorb and filter agricultural phosphorous, ammonia and nitrate runoff as well as various toxic runoff in urban areas; and the establishment of 57 water quality monitor sites on the river or one station every five miles. Area students would maintain the sites.

The trail initiative’s work has not ended with the creation of a national water trail. Its mission is two-fold. In addition to the water trail, it wants to create a parallel system of land routes along the river for hikers, bikers and drivers.

A bill designating a scenic route for drivers has cleared both houses of the state Legislature, State Sen. Tim Cullen of the 15th Senate District said. He was lead author of Senate Bill 41, which had bipartisan support. The route parallels the river where possible, carrying tourists from the wetland and bird sanctuary at Horicon Marsh, past the glacial drumlins of Dodge County, all the way to Beloit’s Riverside Park.

No state money will be used for signs along the route. Instead, the trail initiative will raise private funds and apply for grants.

A third route eventually will be for biking and hiking.

Schier calls the Rock River a national and natural treasure.

“The eagles are coming back along the river,” he said. “We’re seeing white pelicans in flocks. We have a great concentration of effigy mounds, especially turtle mounds, near the river.”

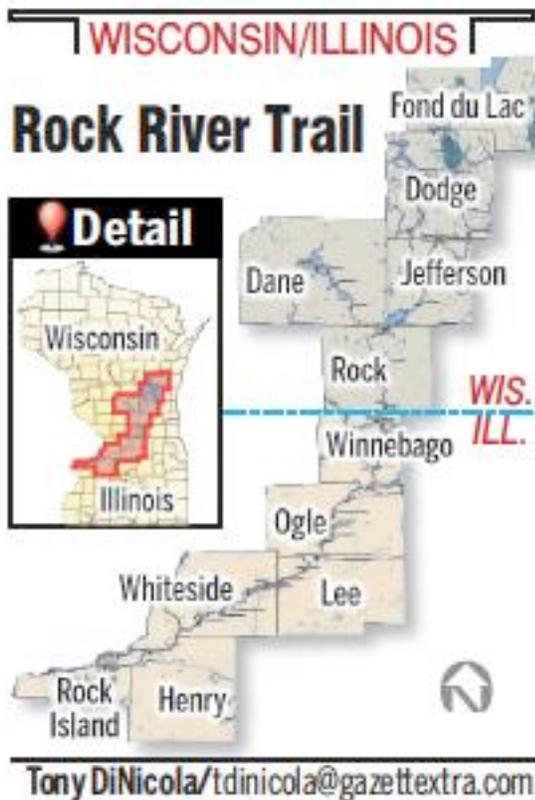
He emphasized that the water trail came about because of unprecedented cooperation between counties and communities up and down the river all the way to where the Rock empties into the Mississippi.

When the announcement came from federal officials designating the Rock River as a national water trail, Schier was breathless.

“There are very few times in our lives when really big dreams come true,” he said.

“This was a big dream.”

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MORE ONLINE

For more information and maps of the Rock River, visit rockrivertrail.com .

For information on the National Water Trails System, visit watertrails.nps.gov / watertrails.



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The Rock River is seen from the Highway 14 bridge on Janesville's north side. Earlier this month, the National Park Service designated the river as a national water trail. Supporters say that being part of a national network will be a boost to the economy for communities along the river.