

'Education not regulation' of York River

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Residents of York, Eliot, Kittery and South Berwick attending the York River Study Committee last week had much to say about the evolving plan to designate the York River as a National Park Service Partnership Wild and Scenic River.

The committee was formed after the U.S. Congress passed legislation in December 2014 and appropriated funds for the study that is needed to see if the river qualifies for designation in the federal system. Out of their work will come a management study that will be used to guide ecological, historical and cultural work in the future. A separate study report will go to Congress, which will decide whether to include the river in the Wild and Scenic program.

Study group members were adamant that the federal government had a limited role in the system. "No national park here; no federal ownership or federal management," said Jim MacCartney with the National Park Service, responding to a questioner.

With 30 people in attendance, study members were excited about the amount of interest shown at the meeting which is part of an ongoing effort to solicit community input about the river's designation and to gain valuable local knowledge about the river.

A major theme of the study brought up repeatedly by study group members was "education not regulation."

"The river will be conserved through community engagement," said Study Coordinator Jennifer Hunter. "One of our goals is to see if a watershed approach was best way to preserve the river, which brings us together in a way that transcends political boundaries."

A watershed approach involves looking at the watershed or whole drainage area of the river not just the narrow corridor along the river.

Study Group Chair Chuck Ott described the deep historical and cultural roots of the river. “This nation was formed along the river,” he said. “It’s a very unique, formative part of this country.”

The watershed area that drains the York River has many outstanding remarkable values, especially history and habitat, study members said.

It forms the meeting point of two major types of forests, the Northern and Southern, and this creates some of the greatest biodiversity in the world, said Paul Dest, vice chair of the study committee, who works at the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Comments by residents supported the watershed approach.

York resident, Jack Holbrook, expressed concerns about the huge communal septic systems associated with a number of new housing subdivisions within the watershed, some near the river. “I know nobody is watching them to see what is coming out (of these systems),” he said.

Another York, resident, Priscilla Cookson, expressed concerns about major water diversions that especially troubling during times of severe drought such as the current one. There has been 1.5 million gallons of water used by the Bog Road Recreational area near Cider Creek last summer, she said. “What is sustainable?”

Others expressed concerns about the impacts of the warming climate on river species, especially the impacts on migratory fish.

Several participants wanted to know whether the study group would be doing more definitive water quality studies. Joan LeBlanc, study group member from York said that water quality studies would be recommended for the future with funding made available with the designation.

Closing the meeting, the study group outlined the next steps: a fish monitoring study in 2017; a watershed buildout study; a look at the historical, archaeological and architectural resources; mapping the wetlands and marshland areas; and a study of the impacts of sea level rise on historical and natural resources.

A buildout study looks at the impacts on the continued development, especially housing and roads on the natural resources.

“It is remarkable that after 350 years of European settlement, it is in as good condition as it is,” said Ott. “A buildout study will be helpful in determining what we need to do to preserve the river and its values.”