

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

York River Wild and Scenic Study

The three-year York River Wild and Scenic Study was conducted by the locally-led York River Study Committee that included town-appointed members from the four York River watershed communities and agency representatives. The 33 square mile York River watershed in portions of York, Eliot, Kittery and South Berwick is the land area from which water drains to form the network of tributary streams that flows to the York River. The watershed area includes and sustains many critical resources and values that are important to the region's character, economy, and quality of life.

The York River Study Committee evaluated and documented the qualities of the York River watershed that make it special, gauged community support for river stewardship, and assessed whether a Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System would be beneficial for the York River and watershed communities. Development of the York River Watershed Stewardship Plan (Stewardship Plan) was an essential and culminating part of the study process.

The York River watershed is notable for its historic structures and buildings, archaeological sites, scenic qualities, intact natural habitats, large forested areas, and ecological resilience. It includes extensive salt marshes, rare plants and animals, drinking water supplies, undeveloped conservation lands, working waterfront, and clean water that supports a range of recreational activities and provides high-quality aquatic habitats. This richness of regionally-important values associated with the York River, along with communities' existing support for river protection initiatives, contribute to the river's eligibility and suitability for designation into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. While the river and many watershed resources are generally healthy, there are threats to this status such as population growth and development, invasive plant and animal species, increasing numbers of river users, sea level rise and other changing environmental conditions.

The York River Study Committee recommends pursuing a Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation for the York River and its major tributaries. Such designation could provide federal funding, technical assistance, and a local forum for the four watershed communities to collaboratively address long-term river stewardship needs. A Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation does not put land under federal control, require public access to private land, change any existing land uses, force any changes in local land use decision-making processes or objectives, create new federal permits or regulations, prevent access to or use of the river or watershed lands, or affect hunting and fishing laws.

Stewardship Plan

The Stewardship Plan is a non-regulatory, advisory document that outlines a proactive and voluntary approach to protect and maintain the community-supported values of the York River. The plan is watershed-wide in scope, meaning the interconnectedness of the watershed lands and waterways was considered in identifying resources, preservation priorities, and recommended actions. The plan characterizes the many existing valuable watershed resources and identifies wide-ranging protection strategies and opportunities. Recommendations are aimed at preserving and enhancing the historic

resources, ecology, wildlife, water quality, working waterfront, scenic qualities, and other cultural resources that collectively contribute to the region’s special character and identity. The Stewardship Plan also outlines a possible structure for a future York River Stewardship Committee if Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation occurs.

To develop the Stewardship Plan, the York River Study Committee engaged the citizens of the four watershed towns, local boards and committees, conservation and preservation groups, local experts, and state agency representatives to identify important watershed resources and develop recommendations for long-term protection. The plan integrates extensive information from sources including: state and regional plans and reports, such as the Maine Wildlife Action Plan; goals and priorities from locally developed and approved plans, such as town comprehensive plans; input solicited by the York River Study Committee on priorities and management needs from experts, river users, and community members; and data and findings from additional studies conducted during the York River Wild and Scenic Study.

The recommendations in this Stewardship Plan complement and support important work already being undertaken by the towns of York, Eliot, Kittery, and South Berwick, as well as local land trusts and conservation organizations, community groups, and public agencies. The stewardship objectives and recommendations developed for this plan are organized under broad resource areas:

Resource Area	Values and Features	Stewardship Goal
Cultural and Historic Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural landscapes • Archaeological heritage • Historic districts, buildings and structures 	Identify and preserve cultural and historic resources of the York River watershed.
Natural Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watershed lands • Wildlife, habitats, and biodiversity • Water resources • Watershed resilience 	Protect valuable natural communities, habitats, biodiversity, and water resources of the York River watershed.
Working Waterfront, Recreational Resources and Community Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • York Harbor and waterfront • Recreation • Scenic resources 	Preserve working waterfront, sustainable recreational uses and scenic qualities of the York River and watershed lands that are important to regional identity and community character.
Community Stewardship	Watershed landowners, citizen volunteers, members of towns’ boards and committees, and voters	Strengthen stewardship of watershed resources by river users, watershed landowners and citizens.

Community approvals of the locally-developed Stewardship Plan are part of the process of seeking a Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation for the York River and its tributaries. Approval or endorsement of the plan demonstrates public interest in long-term protection of the river. Such approval does not require watershed communities to subsequently undertake any recommended actions in the plan, nor does it commit them to provide funding to implement the Stewardship Plan.