

Testimony on HR 1248 York River Wild and Scenic River Act of 2019

Presented by Dr. Charles A. Ott, Chairman of the York River Study Group

Chairwoman Holland and Ranking Member Young, and honorable committee members, I am Chuck Ott from York, ME. I serve as the Chair of the York River Study Committee and I am here to provide testimony in support of House Bill 1248, the York River Wild and Scenic River Act of 2019.

Although the York River runs only 13 miles from its headwaters to the sea, it runs through four hundred years of colonial and U.S. history and, of course, for thousands of years First Nation history. For most of those years the river was the "highway" that linked our townspeople and now its history continues to bind us together. The York River contains nine sites listed on the National Register as Historic places; roughly 100 archaeological sites, including Native American sites dating as far back as 5,000 years ago and colonial settlement sites from the 1600's. At low tide one can see the remnants of one of the first tide-powered saw mills in America, dating to 1634. The oldest standing house in Maine, the McIntire Garrison, was built on the shores of the river in 1707. John Hancock's warehouse and Mark Twain's summer residence stand on the banks of York Harbor.

At the confluence of the Northern and Southern forests, the York River Watershed supports a blossoming of bio-diversity, including productive habitats for at least five Maine Species of Greatest Conservation Need: alewife, American eel, brook trout, rainbow smelt, and winter flounder.

The York River water supply system provides drinking water to Kittery, portions of York and Eliot, and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

We embarked on this effort ten years ago, when we first met with boards of selectmen, conservation commissions, planning boards, the harbor board, historical societies, land trusts, Maine State officials, the Rotary Club, and the Lobsterman's Association. We attended town fairs, sponsored guided walks, tours of the river, public lectures, and held monthly community forums at the public library. Throughout all of this our central purpose has been to build community engagement in the management of the river by identifying what we valued and what we need to protect. That purpose is the thread that runs through the York River Watershed Stewardship Plan. It can be found on line at www.YorkRiverMaine.org.

We learned a lot.

- When lobstermen convene a meeting, which is rare, no one sits down.
- The York Working Waterfront, which is a model for all of Maine, is also a model for us in forging creative solutions with positive effects for our fishing industry and our economy.
- Self-governance can play a major role in protecting natural resources. Our inspiration was Gary Stevens, who, as a York Water District worker, was given a bicycle and instructions to talk with people visiting the water district, explaining why there were restrictions on swimming and campfires. Within a year, infractions which had become quite high, fell to near zero. Gary is older now, so they gave him an ATV.
- Property owners along the river deserve a great deal of credit for protecting the river over the past four hundred years and the critical importance of continuing to protect their rights.

We had an election last November. The question of whether or not we should adopt the York River Stewardship Plan and its recommendation that we seek designation as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River

was put before the voters of York, Elliot, Kittery, and South Berwick. As New Englanders are wont to do, we had a spirited debate over this question. In that debate no one was entirely right and no one was entirely wrong. The measure passed in all four towns, in public referenda in York by 63% and in Elliot by 73%. The measure was passed by town councils in Kittery and South Berwick, in both instances unanimously.

Now it is time for us to go to work as neighbors to use this Stewardship Plan as a framework for continuing discussion. The last ten years have built cooperation among the four towns, local, state, and National Park workers. We must now be vigilant in continuing the proactive efforts that have brought us this far with a river that is in remarkably good condition. There are and will be challenges: spread of invasive species, threats of over usage, unwise development, loss of habitat, and sea level rise, to name a few.

The York River begins at York Pond, about 13 miles from where it empties into the Gulf of Maine. Two summers ago, I had the good fortune of being a volunteer with our archaeological study at York Pond. On one occasion I found a small white stone flake, held it in my palm, and showed it to the archaeologist, who informed me that it was a rhyolite flake, produced by a human being fashioning a stone tool five thousand years ago. I pray that God will give us 5,000 more years to look at that pond and river. That is more than we can ask of our congress, but I do ask that you support this bill.