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MAINE VOICES

Allagash Wilderness Waterway eroding

Changes in state law have lessened this vital region's protections, but we should recall the AWW's middle name.



Jym St. Pierre photo

The Allagash Wilderness Waterway is a unique site that needs better protection, two readers say.

JYM ST. PIERRE and ROLLIN THURLOW

“Once a crown jewel of the nation’s Wild and Scenic Rivers System, the unique character of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway in northern Maine is in jeopardy.” ~ America’s Most Endangered Rivers 2008 Edition

Eight months after the Allagash Wilderness Waterway (AWW) was named one of America’s Most Endangered Rivers, the future of the area still hangs in the balance.

The Allagash was the first state-managed waterway in the United States given protection within the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system by state initiative. Maine petitioned the Department of the Interior to protect this natural treasure in 1970.

Paddle the Allagash and you still encounter few signs of civilization compared to most of the eastern United States. But that is changing.

Early in this decade we saw progress to improve the wilderness character of the Allagash. However, state law was radically changed in 2006, eroding legal protections for Maine’s only nationally designated Wild River. Temporary bridges have been declared permanent, as have 30 summer and winter motor vehicle access points. By law, to be considered wild a river is supposed to represent “vestiges of primitive America.”

That's why the Allagash was named to the list of Most Endangered Rivers last spring. Since then there have been both troubling and encouraging actions.

First, a huge replacement bridge is to be erected at Henderson Brook in the middle of a 50-mile stretch of otherwise wild river. Construction is planned for 2009 even though the economic rationale has largely fallen apart since the legislature mandated that the bridge be built.

Second, a private group wants to secure ownership of the Lock Dam Lot, the most significant in-holding on the water within the AWW. The State had an opportunity to acquire this property but passed. Now, the Maine Department of Conservation, which manages the Allagash, is having second thoughts.

Third, in the 1960-70s, the Allagash was a shining example of a state-federal partnership. Both parties paid half the land acquisition costs. They agreed to let the State be primary manager while the National Park Service represented the national interest in stewardship of the Waterway. Sadly, both partners have broken the bargain. A citizen lawsuit seeking to reestablish the partnership has faltered because of imprecise language in the law. However, the courts have reaffirmed that Maine is obligated to administer the AWW "in such manner as to protect and enhance the values which caused it to be included" in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Department of Conservation alone cannot fix some of these problems. Prodded by powerful lobbyists for motorsports groups and large landowners in the region, politicians in Augusta have limited the department's authority to bring the state's Allagash management plan into compliance with federal Wild River guidelines.

So it is not surprising that last August the Maine League of Conservation Voters issued a report that gave Maine government only a C- grade on wilderness issues. Why? Because "In the face of political pressure, the administration has allowed the serious undermining of wilderness character in the Allagash Wilderness Waterway."

On the other hand, there are positive signs. A new Allagash Advisory Council is preparing a first-ever strategic plan for the Waterway, which is scheduled for completion next summer. Also, the council has drafted a mission statement that reaffirms the core goal of protecting maximum wilderness character in the AWW. And a new Waterway Superintendent and a Chief Ranger are slated to be hired.

Yet, much more can be done. For starters, the State should rethink building an unnecessary new bridge. With ownership patterns in the Maine Woods drastically changing, the Department of Conservation should bring the Lock Dam Lot into public ownership and step up efforts to acquire key private areas within the Allagash Mile Zone. The Allagash Advisory Council's strategic plan ought to restrict excessive motorized access, encourage access by foot, recommend a plan to phase out nonessential logging roads and bridges, preserve the native fishery, and designate areas for non-motorized winter recreation. And, under the Obama administration, the National Park Service should strengthen its AWW oversight responsibilities in the federal-state Allagash partnership.

It is time we dedicate ourselves to remembering the middle name of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway so it can be named one of the best protected rivers in America.

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