

Big Changes Coming to Rhode Island's Rivers

Good News for Fish (and Paddlers Too!)

Meg Kerr

Rhode Island's rivers are full of dams — some large, some small — but all are obstacles to paddling. They also alter the river's hydrology and block migratory fish from moving freely up the rivers to spawn. After decades of planning, projects to restore fish passage are underway on rivers throughout the state. Although most of these projects were not designed with paddling in mind, some will dramatically change (and improve) the paddling experience!

Upper Pawcatuck River

The Pawcatuck River provides prime paddling opportunities — and like all our rivers, the Pawcatuck is blocked by many dams. Jim Cole's "Paddling Connecticut and Rhode Island: Southern New England's Best Paddling" especially recommends the trip in the Upper Pawcatuck from Biscuit City Road to Richmond Dam. This 5.5 mile trip includes some rapids, great fishing and (of course!) three dams. If a paddler puts in at Biscuit City and paddles downstream towards Richmond Dam, they must portage around dams at Kenyon Mills, Horseshoe Falls and Lower Shannock Dam. But

big changes are coming to this stretch of river. All three of these dams are included in a restoration plan recently completed by the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association (WPWA). The plan recommends removal of two dams (Kenyon Mills and Lower Shannock) and construction of a fish ladder at Horseshoe Falls. The project was recently awarded funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which will allow WPWA and its partners to remove Lower Shannock Dam this summer.

WPWA created a new portage that is more respectful of the river's power.

Completion of the project will allow migratory fish to move into spawning and nursery habitat and will dramatically change the paddling experience on this popular river segment!

Pawcatuck River — Bradford Portage and Fish Ladder

Downstream from the Shannock dams, a paddler must portage around Richmond Landing Dam and Burdickville Dam. The next obstruction, Bradford Dam, has been the focus of over six years of work by WPWA and its partners. WPWA combined a fish ladder repair project with creation of a portage path so paddlers can safely move around the dam. The first portage path was washed out by a flood, so WPWA went back to the drawing board and created a new path that is more respectful of the river's power. Funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the US Fish & Wildlife Service was used to construct the path. The final path is now bordered with large boulders and crushed stone; grating now covers the entire ladder to prevent anyone from accidentally falling. Paddlers can now portage around Bradford Dam while fish migrate upstream through the fish ladder.



Students paddle along the Wood-Pawkatuck River during National Rivers Day event.

Photo: NBJ.

Woonasquatucket River

The Woonasquatucket River, a small river that flows 19 miles from North Smithfield to Providence, once powered some of the state's major

manufacturing facilities. At the end of the nineteenth century, the river was lined by industrial giants such as Brown and Sharpe, the country's largest manufacturer of machine tools; Nicholson File, the country's largest manufacturers of files; and textile mills such as Atlantic DeLaine Mills, Riverside Mills and others. Other factories produced a wide range of goods sold around the world, including printed cloth, looms and textile machinery, rubber goods, jewelry, steam engines and locomotives. These mills were slowly phased out, and by the late twentieth century, the river was dirty and neglected. It certainly wasn't considered a prime place to paddle.

But today, under the leadership of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC) and its partners, the Woonasquatucket River is being restored. Water quality has improved and WRWC is working on restoring fish passage to the river. In 2007, a fish ladder was completed at the most downstream dam at Rising Sun Mills. This year, the next upstream dam, Paragon, will be removed. Continuing upstream, there is a new fish ladder at Atlantic Mills Dam at Riverside Park; Dyerville Dam was recently removed and a fish ladder is planned for Manton Dam. WRWC regularly leads paddling trips along sections of the river. One trip through downtown Providence begins at the landing on South Water Street, continues through Waterplace Park to Atwells Avenue, and then returns to the starting point — about three miles.

Elsewhere in Rhode Island, major river restoration projects are underway on the Ten Mile, Blackstone and Pawtuxet Rivers. The Ten Mile River project will construct three large fish ladders

in East Providence, at Omega Pond, Hunts Mill and Turner Reservoir, providing migratory passage for river herring, American shad and eels. Along the Blackstone, the lower four dams — Main Street, Slater Mill, Central Falls (Elizabeth Webbing) and Valley Falls (Broad Street) — are being readied for fish passage. And on the Pawtuxet, plans are under way to remove most of Pawtuxet Falls Dam in Pawtuxet Village. None of these projects will significantly change paddling, but all will result in fish run restoration, providing broad ecosystem benefits to the river and Narragansett Bay.

~Meg Kerr is the Watershed Program Manager at NBEP

Go Deeper!

The R.I. Blueways Alliance has organized a series of paddling trips in June and July throughout the Narragansett Bay Region. Register online at www.exploreri.org!



Chris Fox inspects the canoe portage and fish ladder on Bradford Dam after flooding event. Photo: WPWA.