WISCONSIN WILD RIVERS – A PUBLIC TREASURE FOR 50 YEARS

Saturday, June 13th, 2015 in Florence, WI, more than 60 people came together to celebrate the unique 1965 legislation that passed unanimously in both houses creating the Wisconsin Wild Rivers Act. The statute reads: “In order to afford the people of this state an opportunity to enjoy natural streams, to attract out-of-state visitors and assure the well-being of our tourism industry, it is of state interest to preserve some rivers in a free flowing condition and protect them from development....” Two of the three original rivers, the Pine and the Popple, are located in Florence County; treasures to enjoy for another 50 years.

Jeanette Bomberg, Florence County Board Chair, gave the welcoming address at the visitor center.

We were fortunate to have the honor of Keynote speaker Dave Martin attending the event. He was the hardworking assemblyman from Neenah who initiated the Wild Rivers Act legislation in 1965 with help from Robert Hasse of Marinette and Paul Alfonsi from Minocqua. Their idea was to preserve the rivers by proposing that the tourism increase would improve the business climate in Northeast Wisconsin. Martin was proud of the fact that their bill did not receive one opposition vote in either the Assembly or the Senate. Governor Knowles signed the bill into law in November of 1965 leading the way for similar federal legislation that created the Wild & Scenic Rivers in 1968.

Martin also referenced a letter he received from former Governor Tommy Thompson who was not able to attend which read:

“The Wild River Act meets the definition of being both ambitious and simple at the same time. Created to meet the demands of those that admire as well as aspire those with interest, for over 50 years the Wild River Act has preserved state-designated natural streams as they were intended to be enjoyed, unharmed and uninhibited and open for public exploration. The Wild River Act has served as a gift with an immeasurable return-on-investment, or perhaps better said, return-on-preservation. Today I am reminded of the great words of former Governor and Senator of Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson, whose efforts to protect the environment and raise awareness remains unparalleled: The ultimate test of man’s conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard. — (Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin)”
Sarah Klavas, Deputy Secretary of Tourism, summarized the county/state collaborative project that created WI-DOT signs for a new Wild Rivers Tour in Florence County. This 100 mile loop has 15 signed locations off Hwy 101, 70 and USFS roads for the public to paddle and fish the rivers and explore the shores for a variety of recreational activities. Visit www.ExploreFlorenceCounty.com to learn more about the Wild Rivers Tour or request a recreation map with the tour.

Paul Strong, Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Supervisor, explained that the Wisconsin Wild Rivers Act created the framework of what later became the federal Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. Wisconsin set the example for the entire nation.
Senator Tom Tiffany stressed the importance of balancing tourism and preservation, they are not mutually exclusive. A robust tourism economy is what allows the state to preserve areas like the Wild Rivers. Senator Tiffany also read a proclamation from Governor Scott Walker that began “These state designated wild rivers have indeed remained wild and undeveloped and are available for the public to explore the majestic terrain, quiet and fast water stretches, unique geology, varied habitats and beautiful waterfalls while connecting with the peaceful wildness of natural surroundings.” It went on to say he commended “those who had foresight and vision to preserve these waterways as well as the current stewards of this state treasure.” The plaque will be displayed at the Wild Rivers Interpretive and Visitor Center.

Steve Miller, Director of the Facilities and Lands Bureau for the WI-Department of Natural Resources shared his appreciation for the outdoor recreation and careers that the Wild Rivers and other state owned lands provide. The state owns lands along the lower 12 miles of the Popple River and the lower 33 miles of the Pine River with the goal of minimizing traces of human intervention. These rivers provide a true wilderness experience.
A crowd of 64 people enjoyed the event speakers followed by a free luncheon served by volunteers from the Florence County Lakes and Rivers Association. Pat’s Foods of Florence generously donated the brats and hot dots for the event.

Senator Tom Tiffany and Keynote speaker former Representative Dave Martin hold the Wild Rivers Proclamation plaque from Governor Scott Walker. Lori Moore, director of the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center and Steve Miller, Director of Facilities and Lands for the Wisconsin DNR join them.
Florence County Economic Development Director and event organizer, provided details about the hike into Big Bull Falls after the luncheon. A bus was available for the 20 minute ride and two additional speakers are planned.

About 20 people rode the bus down Hwy 101 to Big Bull Falls on the Popple River, stop #3 on the Wild Rivers Tour. Here the group is gathering at the trailhead for the ¼ mile hike into Big Bull Falls.
Larry Zibell, with the Wisconsin Sierra Club and a long time member of the Pine & Popple River Advisory Committee informs attendees about river paddling do’s and don’t as well as sharing several trip ideas on the Pine and Popple. Larry has been canoeing for 44 years and a whitewater paddler for 41 of those years. He leads several paddling trips on the Wild Rivers each year. He has been a tireless advocate for safe river portages, signage, trails and information.

John Roberts, Florence County resident and member fo the River Alliance of Wisconsin and Pine and Popple Wild Rivers Advisory Committee gave a passionate talk about the unique geology of the Pine and Popple Wild Rivers area. These rocky outcroppings in this area are over 2 billion years old and contain types of granite and shale depending on the location. John has been leading paddling groups on the Pine, Popple and Pike for nearly 40 years. Be sure to follow his bold goal to do “50 Canoe Trips for the 50th” by searching “Pine, Popple and Pike” on facebook. He is over halfway done.
A shot of Big Bull Falls looking downstream. Water levels are high this year due to abundant rainfall. The rocky outcropping above this falls is a great place to relax and enjoy the sounds of the waterfall or have a picnic lunch. The rapids below the falls is a stretch that trout fishermen are known to explore.

The Popple River splits in 2 around an island. The north side of the island is the main waterfall (front part of this picture). The south side (far side in this picture) is the safer route experienced paddlers can take. There is also a well signed portage around this stretch of river that is highly recommended for beginning paddlers.

Below is an article summarizing the June 12th Paddle on the Pine event from an area Silent Sports group:
June 12, 2015 PINE RIVER PADDLE

Celebrating 50 Years of Wild Rivers

The Silent Sporters and a bunch of other people celebrated the 50 anniversary of the Wild Rivers Act by paddling down the Pine River last Friday. We met at the Chipmunk Rapids campground off Highway 70 west of Florence, and we ended our trip at the Goodman Grade. It was great to be with people from the River Alliance of Wisconsin, the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy and other paddlers from the great state of Wisconsin, and it was thrilling to go down class 2 rapids!

John Roberts had sent us some information about the paddle. "The trip is mostly (92%) flowing flatwater with swifts and some class 1 rapids if the flow is high. The total trip is 9.5 miles. Normally a trip of this length might be floated in 4-5 hours but there are 2 portages that take time but do allow for some lower body stretching and exercise. At mile 3.7 there is a 1,100 foot portage around Snaketail Rapids (potentially runnable for paddlers that have the skills for a long class 2+ rapids). At mile 4.0 are a 1/4 mile long set of class 2 rapids without an option to portage. At mile 8.4 is the 790 foot portage around Meyers Falls."

http://www.riverfacts.com/maps/14305.html

The portage around Snaketail Rapids was 1,100 feet long, and we ate lunch after moving our boats through the woods. We even had picnic tables that Jack Kriegl and his sons moved there several years ago. After we ate, John Roberts gave an eloquent talk about the meaning of wild rivers. I kept thinking about the class 2 rapids that were coming up.

Water, water, beautiful water: John and Larry paddling Snaketail Rapids. Photograph by Charlie Jackson
Thrills and chills on the Pine River: The Snaketails - class 3 rapids. Photograph by Charlie Jackson

One of the best pictures of my life. All the Silent Sporters made it through the class 2 rapids. Thanks for the photo, Charlie.
As Sharon from the River Alliance of Wisconsin said, “Everyone made it to the end.”
Photograph by Sharon of River Alliance of Wisconsin

Thanks to the River Alliance of Wisconsin for their sponsorship of this wonderful experience.

I leave you with some words from John Robert’s Facebook page. "I am thankful for the wisdom and foresight of those activists and legislators who, 50 years ago, enabled the preservation of some of the corridor of land along the Pine (and Popple and Pike) River so that in my lifetime and my children's lifetime, there remains, in Wisconsin, a place to canoe along a wild river."

Here is one of the 2 portages we traversed today.