



The Allegheny County River Dialogue:

WATERTRAILS



ALLEGHENY COUNTY RIVER DIALOGUE: WATERTRAILS

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ALLEGHENY
MONONGAHELA

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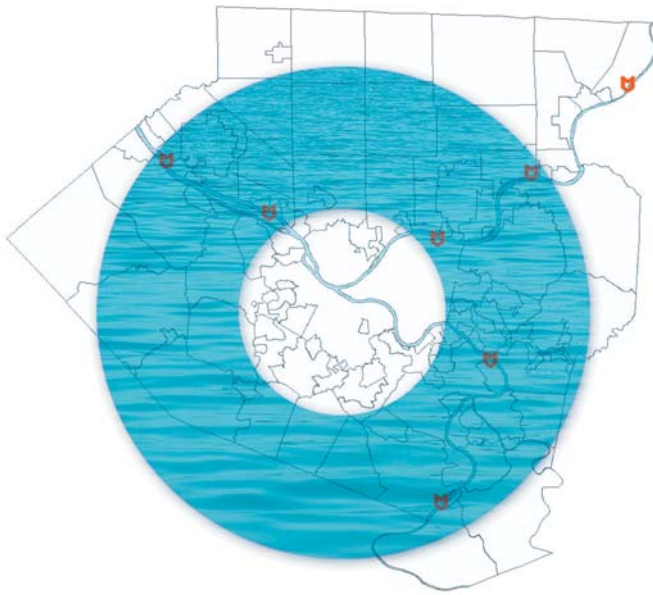
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Water Trails

On the following pages you will see some practical and some fanciful ideas about our rivers. This report provides documentation of “River Dialogue” events; the ideas and concepts that emerged in discussions between citizens, experts, planners, and public officials. These first steps might provide the seeds that mature into a regional water trail. The next step will be for citizens to work (criticizing, clarifying, and developing these concepts) with local environmental organizations, communities, and decision makers who have taken an interest in this process. Then, if funding is available, design teams can be assembled to create plans that help establish recreational use as a major element of our regional rivers.

What is a Water Trail?

Water trails are similar to bike trails; they provide access to places of interest, communities, and natural places. They are also open to all types of users. Water trails are used by boat owners, nature enthusiasts, weekend recreationalists, as well as tourists. A typical water trail might include small-boat launches, shore access, overnight campsites, boat storage, and interpretive signage highlighting significant historical, geological, and environmental information. Additional amenities often featured on and which benefit from a water trail include parks, restaurants, and shops located within adjacent communities.

OUR Rivers!

Historically, rivers were the highways of our early explorers, connecting important sites by clear, unobstructed routes. In our recent history, the rivers were chiefly valued as avenues for commerce and industry and sinks for industrial and municipal wastes. Today, overcrowded roads and renewed interest in recreation are compelling people to rediscover their rivers and streams. Water quality is improving. Recreational use and its attendant economy are showing signs of vitality. Despite all of this, industrial river use still has powerful advocacy through institutions like the Port of Pittsburgh Commission. Under its current director, James McCarville, the Port of Pittsburgh still focuses upon raw material transport and industrial development. One of their major projects was to help instigate the redesign and construction of the dams on the Monongahela river, creating a 32 mile open water pool from Braddock PA to North Charleroi PA. While the primary goal was to stabilize industry and retain existing levels of port activity, the recreational value of the largest open water pool in Allegheny, Washington, Westmoreland, and Fayette Counties is incredibly significant. The future will tell us if this bold and

expensive (\$750 Million) project stabilizes the industrial economy, simultaneously creating the most significant river recreational opportunity in Western Pennsylvania. River transport is significantly cheaper than railroad or truck transportation, but, to date, the goods transported are primarily minerals, petroleum, and chemicals, all in bulk form. Of course, river recreation and its range of economic interests do not (as of yet) have the advocacy or attention of the Port of Pittsburgh Commission. So, it's up to you, the user, to speak your mind about your rivers! Maybe one day the Port of Pittsburgh Commission will have a “River Recreation” link on their website alongside the existing links to Transportation, Industrial Development, and Smart Barges.



Smarter, cleaner, and greener river use is in our future!

Your Rivers? YES! The rivers and their underlying land is held in a “public trust.” Rivers cannot be bought, sold, or developed unless it promotes a public purpose. We have a right to use the surface of our waterways; we also have a right to access those waterways (and oh, by the way, we have a right to clean water but that is yet another story). What will the future hold? What will our rivers look like in thirty years? How will we be using them? In a democratic society, the future evolves out of our collective desires and the forces of the market economy. Kayaking, motor boating, fishing and other water sports are on the rise. Water quality is improving. Fish species, wildlife, and forest growth that were once believed lost from the area for good are returning. Man acts



and nature reacts, and always resilient, nature recovers over time. We have some decisions to make about land and water as their use-value changes. The question is, how do you see the future of the region, its waterfront, your neighborhood? What river-future do you have in mind for your children?

Planning TOGETHER!

The “River Dialogue” programs have been developed over the last three years with funding from local foundations. This report is a result of a series of river dialogues with area leaders, citizens, experts, municipal officials, and recreational advocates. We have been able to assemble a dedicated team of non-profit partners to engage these diverse groupings in a dialogue about rivers as public space with clearly defined river trails. While we try to involve everyone we can in our programs, we fully recognize that we don't involve everyone we could or ultimately should. The teams are diverse in their make-up – artists, scientists, and planners from 3 Rivers 2nd Nature in the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University work with activists and planners at Friends of the Riverfront and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. We plan the work effort together, inviting a mix of decision makers, regional recreational activists, and citizens in the process.

To start off each event, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council first explains what a river trail is and how trails are being developed state-wide. Then, Friends of the Riverfront discusses local river trail development and the programs underway in the specifically chosen area of the river being studied. Then, the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature team provides an overview of water quality in the river and its streams, as well as the natural conditions along the river banks. Everyone then boards two or three of our regional river taxis for a tour and discussion of the pool. Each boat is staffed with teams



of experts, planners, and community facilitators who engage the participants in a dialogue about that stretch of the river and its value, both recreational and industrial, to users. After this river tour, everyone returns for a two hour open design session. Facilitators help clarify and record the range of impressions, ideas, and images that have emerged in the participant's mind during the course of the day. This material is then taken back to the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, where it is organized and reviewed with the project partners for inclusion in this report.



Planning and PLACES!

Between 2002 and 2004, we organized three “River Dialogues” in the outlying pools of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers. These “pool two” communities are within 5-10 miles of the city of Pittsburgh, centering on the towns of: McKeesport on the Monongahela; Oakmont on the Allegheny; and Neville Island on the Ohio.

On the Allegheny, four islands (three of which are undeveloped and one owned by the State of Pennsylvania) are a result of the gravel substrate that is typical of glaciated stream beds. The larger stone size tends to drop out and gather, forming islands all along this river. This length of the Allegheny River also has some spectacular stretches of Silver Maple Floodplain forest, which is more typical of the Allegheny than the Ohio or Monongahela. Historically, this



section of river has deep roots in recreational uses; there are boat houses over a century old still dotting the waterfront. Alternatively, new housing is already appearing on the banks of this stretch of river and, in at least one location, has resulted in significant changes to the adjacent floodplain wetlands. The vacant Edgewater Steel Works dominates the center of this pool and the floodplain that abuts it. If we were to attempt to characterize this stretch of river, it is primarily exurban, post-industrial with remnant cultural and ecological opportunities that are easily lost. Aesthetically it is a wonderful mix of human services, natural history, and natural phenomenon.

On the Monongahela River, we find a confluence with the Youghiougheny River at McKeesport. This pool has the most significant mix of post-industrial brownfield areas in the region, the largest functioning Coke-works, and an amazing strip of recovering forest tagged by architect Rob Pfaffman as the “Emerald Arc.” There is a robust swath of vegetation that dominates the right descending bank of the Monongahela. As described earlier, this pool is seeing serious hydraulic redesign with a planned increase in pool height of up to five feet by 2008.

The area surrounding this pool has an incredibly significant history – ship building, steel making, glassmaking, coal and coke production have dominated this waterfront for over a century. Today, pool 2 of the Monongahela is a study in contrasts. While the U.S. Army Corps and the Port of Pittsburgh Commission plan to stabilize river-transport and the industries it serves, nature is recovering and a new modern recreational use marina has opened in McKeesport.

On adjacent land, the Regional Industrial Development Corporation controls waterfront properties that dominate McKeesport (Duquesne as well) with an institutional focus upon new-industrial development. Adjacent communities and their leaders are starting to see the rivers as a source of



aesthetic and economic redevelopment. At the same time, they have a strong interest in retaining existing industrial employment. The future of this area will result in a mix of industrial and recreational uses—a condition that is typical and increasingly desirable in most major port cities throughout the United States and Europe.



The River Dialogue program revealed deep cultural histories, industrial pride, stories of environmental inequity, and rising interest in recreational usage of the rivers and the recovering riparian forests. Aesthetically, this section of the river provides an exciting mix of important natural areas that are rapidly recovering and stable industrial culture. If a balance can be struck, (and we assume it can) recreation peacefully co-existing with industrial uses along a 32 mile pool has incredible potential to revitalize the region and its economy. Time will tell.

If we were to attempt to characterize this stretch of river, it is primarily exurban and neo-industrial with remnant and relatively stable industrial characteristics. While the Silver Maple floodplain forest dominates the Allegheny, the Sycamore Floodplain forest dominates the Monongahela.

On the Ohio River, we find the largest collection of regional chemical industries and another coke plant on an island (which island) that was once known for the finest farm produce in the County. There is a drinking water plant on the upstream end of the island. A new sports facility, built upon an industrial landfill and managed by Robert Morris University, lies at the downstream end. This was the site of our River Dialogue.

The image most people carry of Neville Island reflects the highly industrialized main channel portion. On the back channel, deep forests rise from the river up steep hills to forested plateaus. Two major streams, Montour Run and Kilbuck Run, drain into the back channel where, on most days, you can find 5-15 fisherman in waders fishing the mouth of these streams. There are at least three separate private marinas on the back channel. In the main channel, there is a PA Fish & Boat Commission ramp and two or three additional marinas.

Area schools now row in singles, fours, and eights on the back channel. The new Robert Morris sports facility plans to take better advantage of this recreational opportunity. The rest of this pool is a mix of smaller industrial concerns,

waterfront homes, and recovering forests vegetated from floodplain to plateau with the typical array of highways and railroads paralleling the rivers (a condition common to our region). In terms of forests, the Ohio River seems to have a slight edge on Black Willow Floodplain forest. With the large size and industrial presence of Neville Island Industries, it is hard not to define this pool by its industrial realities, which include the sights, sounds, and smells of an active industrial economy – one that has been a frequent focus of vigilance by regional environmental activists. This is offset by sites of verdant green edges and some wonderful spots where Sycamores have begun to grow and thrive throughout the remnants of an old industrial ship ramp.

Aesthetically this area is a study in contrasts; it has less of an overall industrial feel than the Monongahela because of the intense concentration of industrial concerns on the island. Alternatively, it has some amazing forest edges, significant streams, and emergent recreational culture that is being nurtured by local municipalities, non-profits, and regional universities alike. Like the Mon, a balance between industry



and recreation is slowly evolving.

ORGANIZATIONAL support for river trail planning.

Friends of the Riverfront

Friends of the Riverfront (FOR) is the local developer and long-term steward of the growing Three Rivers Water Trail. A membership organization, FOR takes design concepts and visions from idea to reality through fundraising, professional management staff, and numerous volunteer hours by members and other concerned parties. The vision for a completed Three Rivers Water Trail includes over 130 river miles on three of the greatest rivers in Pennsylvania and the United States: the Allegheny River, the Monongahela River, and the mighty Ohio River. Friends of the Riverfront is continuing to improve public mapping resources for the water trails and will be developing a comprehensive trail guide in the future.

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Pennsylvania Environmental Council

The Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) is a statewide, non-profit, education and advocacy organization devoted to promoting the protection of watersheds, sustainable uses of land, and implementation of environmental innovations. Since its founding in 1970, PEC has worked toward sensible and sustainable answers to the Commonwealth’s difficult environmental issues. PEC began working on water trail projects as it recognized the major restoration, conservation, and recreational benefits of water trails. Water trails are a great way to bring people in touch with Pennsylvania’s water resources! PEC’s goal is to promote water trail development by working with local groups and state agencies through planning, implementation, and outreach assistance.

PEC is working with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) and the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) on the Pennsylvania Water Trails Program. This statewide program will accomplish three major tasks:

1. Develop guidelines for water trails development in Pennsylvania.
2. Provide technical assistance to local groups wanting to develop a water trail.
3. Provide information on water trails in Pennsylvania through the Paddle Pennsylvania publication that is also available on the Internet.

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