
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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THE COCHECO RIVER

The Cocheco River is part of the Piscataqua River drainage basin flowing near the boundary between Maine and New Hampshire. The Cocheco River watershed's 185 square miles is entirely within New Hampshire. Headwater streams arise in Strafford, Farmington, Middleton and New Durham, with the highest elevation at 730 feet above sea level. The river flows approximately 34.8 miles in a southeastern direction, through the cities of Rochester and Dover, before becoming tidal and joining with the Salmon Falls River to form the Piscataqua River.

Scenic areas can be found from the headwaters area in New Durham to the tidal waters at the Cocheco Falls Dam in Dover. In the upper watershed the river flows from the hills as a small stream, gathering waters from tributaries as it descends to the Cocheco River valley in Farmington. From Farmington to Rochester, it flows as a small river in a forested river corridor. In Rochester the river emerges from the backyards of residential neighborhoods into the urban center of downtown Rochester. The Cocheco River then completes its freshwater journey at the tidal waters in Dover.



History

The Cocheco River corridor has an extensive history starting with aboriginal populations, about 3,000 to 5,000 years ago, to European settlement beginning in 1640 with the formation of the village of "Cocheco," now known as Dover. Historically, many nomadic Native Americans set up sites by the river falls to take advantage of fishing and convenient transport by canoe while hunting large game. The Cocheco River played an important role in the American industrial revolution. The river powered early development of the great mills at the Cocheco Falls at Dover Landing. Many buildings in the area were constructed between the mid to late 1700s and early to mid-1800s.

Geology

The formation of the Cocheco River began about 18,000 years ago, as the last glacier scraped its way across New Hampshire. The region's geology has a major influence on the landscape and characteristics of the Cocheco River watershed. Larger aquifers are found in the New Durham, Farmington and Rochester areas. Nearly 20 percent of the watershed is overlain by stratified-drift aquifers, about 10 percent of these aquifers are considered to be potentially high yielding water sources.

Wildlife and Vegetation

The Cocheco River corridor contains several areas of the highest quality habitat in New Hampshire throughout the entire length of the corridor according to the NH Fish and Game Department. Over 100 bird species have been identified in the Cocheco River corridor. A variety of wildlife is dependant upon the resources of the river, including moose, otters, fishers, beavers, muskrats and deer. Overall, the Cocheco River has a diverse and healthy population of returning anadromous fish, and is one of the three most productive rivers for river herring of the monitored Great Bay tributaries. The Fish and Game Department identified 17 species using the Cocheco River fish ladder. River herring migrate up the Cocheco to spawn in fresh water via the fish ladder at Cocheco Falls in downtown Dover.

The dominant ecosystem types within the river corridor are dry coastal forest and moist coastal forest. These ecosystem types are also widespread throughout the watershed. Bogs, an uncommon ecosystem type, are also present. The NH Natural Heritage Bureau has record of six rare plants known to occur in the river corridor, including wild lupine, small spike rush, inflated sage, piled-up sedge, river bank quillwort and Engelmann's quillwort.

Recreation

There are several publicly owned recreation areas in the river corridor. These areas offer a mix of recreational opportunities, including hiking, nature study, picnicking, swimming, river access, recreational fields and urban river walks. Public access for fishing, kayaking and canoeing can be found along the Cocheco River in Dover, Rochester, Gonic and Farmington. The Cocheco River affords canoeists and kayakers with a mixture of natural and urban experiences. The river supports a warm water finfish population that includes: American eel, Lamprey white sucker, yellow perch, Eastern chain pickerel, Eastern brook trout, small-mouth bass and common shiner. The Cocheco is stocked at its upper reaches by the NH Fish and Game Department for rainbow and brook trout.



Land Use

Land use in the river corridor is a complex mix of rural development, forestland, wetlands and heavily settled urbanization. Rapid suburbanization is decreasing the area of open lands in middle and lower portions of the sub-watershed. In the lower Cocheco River reach, there is rapid growth in formerly rural areas of Dover, Somersworth and Rochester.

For further information about the NH Rivers Management and Protection Program, please visit the DES website at <http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/rivers/index.htm> or contact Steve Couture, Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive, PO Box 95, Concord, NH 03302-0095; (603) 271-8801; steven.couture@des.nh.gov.