

The Swift River Report to the General Court 1990

Note: This document has been edited from its original form.

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I. Introduction

The Swift River begins in the town of Livermore, New Hampshire, and flows east for 26 miles along the Kancamagus Highway before joining the Saco River in the town of Conway. The mainstem of the Swift River has been nominated by the Saco River Advisory Council for designation into the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program. The Swift River has been evaluated by the Department of Environmental Services and found to qualify for designation.

The Rivers Management and Protection Program Act was passed by the General Court in 1988. The Act states in part: "It is the policy of the state to ensure the continued viability of New Hampshire rivers for the benefit of present and future generations. The state shall encourage and assist in the development of river corridor management plans and regulate the quantity and quality of in-stream flow along certain protected rivers or segments of rivers to conserve and protect outstanding characteristics including recreational, fisheries, wildlife, environmental, cultural, historical, archaeological, scientific, ecological, and community significance so that these valued characteristics shall endure as part of the river uses to be enjoyed by New Hampshire people."

The Act directs the Department of Environmental Services to receive and evaluate nominations for the designation of rivers or river segments to protect outstanding values and characteristics under the Rivers Management and Protection Program. The Commissioner must forward approved nominations to the General Court for review and approval.

In fulfillment of this statutory directive, the nomination of the Swift River is hereby forwarded to the General Court. The Department of Environmental Services recommends that the Swift River be designated into the Rivers Management and Protection Program and be classified a "Natural River" from its headwaters to the Albany-Conway town line and a "Rural River" in the town of Conway under the provisions of the protection measure amendments to RSA Ch. 483. The outstanding values and characteristics which qualify the Swift River for designation are described in this report.

II. The Swift River Nomination

A. Description

The Swift River arises on Mt. Kancamagus and flows east along the Kancamagus Highway for 26 miles through the towns of Livermore, Waterville Valley and Albany before joining the Saco River in the town of Conway (see map). Along this journey, the river drops more than 2,400 feet

in elevation. The Swift River is a free-flowing river that offers spectacular views of whitewater cascades and waterfalls in the midst of the majestic White Mountains.

The watershed of the Swift River covers approximately 114 square miles, almost all of which is located within the White Mountain National Forest. Land use along the river and throughout the watershed is predominantly forestland. Within the National Forest, a number of areas along the river have been developed for camping, picnicking, and other recreational purposes.

From its headwaters in Livermore, the river drops 1300 feet in four miles over steep, rock-strewn slopes before entering the Albany intervals, a narrow valley through which the river travels 10 miles and drops another 400 feet. The river flows for only a short distance through the very northeast corner of Waterville Valley and then enters the town of Albany, flowing past campgrounds, picnic areas, and two residential developments. At the base of the Albany intervals, Rocky Gorge is formed by the steep mountain slopes coming down close to the river. For the next nine miles, the river cascades over difficult rapids and waterfalls before entering the broad floodplains of the Saco River in Conway.

B. River Values and Characteristics

The Rivers Management and Protection Program Act (RSA Ch. 483) lists nine resource values and characteristics which may qualify a river for designation into the program. The Swift River supports many of these natural, managed, cultural, and recreational resource values and characteristics at a level of either statewide or local significance. The resources which qualify the Swift River for designation include: geologic resources; wildlife, plant, and fish resources; water quality; scenic values; historic and archaeological resources; community resources; and recreational resources.

1. Natural Resources

a. **Geologic Resources:** As it flows through the White Mountains, the Swift River cuts a valley between mountains which range from 2,000 to 4,000 feet in elevation. Starting at the Kancamagus Pass, the Swift River is bounded to the south by Mt. Kancamagus, Scaur Peak, the North Peak of Mt. Trip pyramid, the Fool Killer, Potash Mountain, and Hedgehog Ledge. The peaks to the north, from west to east, are Mt. Huntington, Greens Cliff, Birch Hill, Bear Mountain, Table Mountain, and the Moat Range. As it flows through these mountains, the river's precipitous drop forms many areas of rapids and waterfalls.

b. **Wildlife and Plant Resources:** The location of the Swift River within the White Mountain National Forest ensures the continued existence of a large, contiguous tract of forest habitat surrounding the river. One pair of the federally-endangered peregrine falcon nested along the river in 1989 and is expected to return in 1990 and subsequent years. Under the state Endangered Species Act (RSA 212-A), the Department of Fish and Game lists a number of endangered or threatened bird species, one endangered mammal, and one threatened mammal which are known to occur in the Saco River Basin, which includes the Swift River. A 1983 US Department of Agriculture Cooperative Study of the Saco River Basin listed 36 species of fish, 32 species of amphibians and reptiles, 165 species of birds, and 56 species of mammals as occurring in the various habitats of the basin. The New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory has identified the presence of the exemplary natural community, the Northern New England level bog, in two

locations near the river. There is also one record of the state endangered blue-gray gnatcatcher being present along the river.

c. Fish Resources: The Swift River is a cold water sport fishery, supporting native brook trout and introduced brown and rainbow trout. Historically, the river was one of the premier trout fishing rivers in the region. The natural reproductive capability of the native fish populations is now exceeded by angler demand, and the Fish and Game Department stocks the river with hatchery-reared brook and rainbow trout. The Swift River also supports good spawning habitat for anadromous fish (fish that live in saltwater, but return to freshwater to spawn), however seven dams in Maine prevent the salmon's return to New Hampshire. An effort is underway to require fish passage facilities on the dams in Maine, thereby restoring anadromous fish runs to the Swift River.

d. Water Quality: The water quality of the Swift River is generally good to excellent. The General Court has designated the Swift River a Class B water and the river is supporting the standards of this water quality goal. The upper portions of two of the river's tributaries are designated Class A waters. The Saco River Basin is the only river basin in New Hampshire which is currently meeting all of the surface water quality standards of the federal Clean Water Act.

e. Scenic Values: The Swift River exhibits outstanding visual characteristics. The headwaters of the river lie high within the White Mountains and offer outstanding views of the surrounding mountain ranges and the valley below. Along its length, the Swift River possesses a variety of scenic values, including waterfalls, large clear pools, and rapids with rock-strewn bottoms and banks. Surrounding these river features is the beauty of the White Mountain National Forest. The Swift River is highly visible from the Kancamagus Highway, recently declared a National Forest Scenic Byway by the US Forest Service. Two of the most distinctive scenic resources on the river, Rocky Gorge and Lower Falls, are classified and managed by the Forest Service as National Scenic Areas.

2. Cultural Resources

a. Historic/Archaeologic Resources: The history of the Swift River is linked to the early settlement of the larger Saco River Basin. Early Indian peoples such as the Abenaki Nation inhabited this area. In 1672, a settlement containing 200 wigwams was reported where the Swift River joins the Saco River in Conway. The Kancamagus Indian trail ran along the Swift River and archaeological excavations have confirmed the presence of Indian activity near the Kennison Farm in Albany. In the early 1800s, small farmsteads dotted the region. Located near the Swift River in Albany, the Russell-Colbath House remains as an example of a farmhouse built in the 1830s. The house is now owned by the US Forest Service and is open to the public during summer months as a museum of early American life. In 1987, the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Swift River is crossed by two covered bridges that were built in the mid-1800s. The Albany bridge is being restored by the US Forest Service, while the Conway bridge has been closed and is in need of repair and restoration.

b. Community Resources: The Swift River is one of the outstanding natural resources that attracts visitors to the Mt. Washington Valley, providing opportunities for canoeing, kayaking, swimming, sightseeing, fishing, and camping for residents and visitors alike. As such, the Swift River is important to both the quality of life in the river communities and the health of the regional economy.

3. Recreational Resources

a. Boating: Every year, the Swift River is used by thousands of people from throughout the Northeast for canoeing, kayaking, and rafting. During spring run-off, the river provides some of the best whitewater boating in the region, with most of the river runnable from mid-April to the end of May. A six mile segment of the river below Lower Falls provides one of the most difficult, uninterrupted whitewater runs in New England. A regional boater's guide describes the Swift River this way: "if veteran boaters were to pick five of the best white water rivers in New England, the Swift would surely be on everyone's list. ... Although a medium size river bed, even by New England's standards, it boasts some of the biggest, meanest source holes and choppiest waters to be found anywhere."

b. Fishing: Recreational trout fishing is a popular activity on the Swift River during the warm weather months. On weekends, anglers congregate between Rocky Gorge and the Albany-Conway town line. The Forest Service maintains an access for handicapped fisherman next to the Albany covered bridge.

c. Other Recreation: The Swift River offers recreational opportunities all year around. Most of the recreational facilities along the river are owned by the US Forest Service, including the Sabbaday Falls picnic area and the Passaconaway, Jigger Johnson, Blackberry Crossing, and Covered Bridge camping areas. During the winter, the river corridor attracts cross-country skiers for wilderness skiing along the Nanamocomuck Ski Trail developed by the US Forest Service. Summer brings swimmers and sunbathers to Rocky Gorge and Lower Falls.

d. Public Access: Public access to the river is available for most of its length within the White Mountain National Forest.

III. Local Support

Local support for the designation of the Swift River into the Rivers Management and Protection Program is strong. At Town Meeting in March 1989, the towns of Albany and Conway voted to support the Saco River Advisory Council for the purpose of making recommendations to the towns and the Rivers Management Advisory Committee on the protection and management of the river. In June 1989, the Council prepared and distributed a questionnaire to riparian landowners along the Swift and Saco Rivers. Thirty-seven percent of the landowners responded to the survey. Respondents indicated that they value the rivers' natural beauty, high water quality, recreational opportunities, free-flowing nature, and lack of development. Ninety-seven percent indicated that the rivers contribute to the quality of life in their communities and 86 percent believe that the rivers are worthy of designation as special rivers in New Hampshire.

A public hearing was held on December 11, 1989, to receive public comments on the nomination of the Swift River. The hearing was held at the John Fuller School in North Conway and was attended by more than 50 people. An overwhelming majority of those present indicated their support for the designation of the Swift River. The White Mountain National Forest has also expressed its support for the state designation the river.

IV. Summary and Recommendations

The Swift River possesses a variety of significant state and local resources which qualify the river for designation into the Rivers Management and Protection Program. To better protect and manage these resources, the Department of Environmental Services recommends the following:

Recommendation 1: The General Court should adopt legislation which designates the mainstem of the Swift River into the Rivers Management and Protection Program and classifies the Swift River as a "Natural River" from its headwaters to the Albany-Conway town line and a "Rural River" in the town of Conway.

Under the provisions of the protection measure amendments to RSA Ch. 483, a designation will provide increased protection for the river against new dam construction, damaging channel alterations, water quality impairment, and the siting of solid and hazardous waste facilities near the river. A designation will also require the establishment of a protected instream flow to maintain the minimum amount of water in the river that is necessary to safeguard public trust resources, including fisheries, water quality, recreation, and scenic values. A Local Rivers Management Advisory Committee will be established to coordinate local issues related to the protection and management of the river and will provide local residents with a direct avenue for formal input to state decisions that affect the river. Finally, a designation will result in the development of a long-range management plan for the river that coordinates state planning and management of fisheries, water quality and quantity, and recreation.

A "Natural River" classification is recommended for the Swift River from its headwaters to the Albany-Conway town line. Under the proposed amendments to RSA Ch. 483, natural rivers are defined as "free-flowing rivers or segments characterized by the high quality of natural and scenic resources. River shorelines are in primarily natural vegetation and river corridors are generally undeveloped. Development, if any, is limited to scattered housing and forest management." The only existing exception to the definition of a natural river is the proximity of the Kancamagus Highway to the river in some locations, however, the presence of the road does not detract from the overall natural character of this segment of the Swift River.

In the town of Conway, a "Rural River" classification is recommended for the Swift River. Under the protection measure amendments to RSA Ch. 483, rural rivers are "those rivers or segments adjacent to lands which are partially or predominantly used for agriculture, forest management, and dispersed or clustered residential housing." In the town of Conway, the Swift River meets the definition of a rural river: in this segment the river flows past a more developed river corridor than that upstream, and is crossed by both a railroad and road before joining the Saco River.

The designation of the Swift River as both a "Natural" and "Rural" River under the Rivers Management and Protection Program will clearly express the intent of the General Court with regard to the protection and management of the river and will focus attention on the river as a natural resource of both statewide and local significance. This attention will help to insure greater scrutiny of plans and proposals which have the potential to significantly affect or destroy those river values and characteristics which qualify the river for designation.

Recommendation 2: The towns of Albany and Conway should continue to work toward the protection of the Swift River through the adoption of local river corridor management plans, including comprehensive shoreland protection ordinances.

While a state designation will improve the protection and management of the river itself, continuing local efforts will be needed to address the use and conservation of the river corridor. A growing recognition by local citizens of the Swift River's valuable contribution to the overall quality of life in the Mt. Washington Valley is evidenced by their desire to see it designated into the state program. Citizen concern and appreciation should be reflected in the decisions and actions of local government officials. Upon request, the Department of Environmental Services will provide technical assistance to the towns of Albany and Conway on the development of local river corridor management plans and comprehensive shoreland protection ordinances.

In summary, the establishment of a clear policy and specific instream protection measures by the General Court, and a continuing commitment on the part of local governments and residents to manage and protect the river corridor through sound land use decisions will ensure that the outstanding resources of the Swift River will "endure as part of the river uses to be enjoyed by New Hampshire people."