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## French River packs its own quiet kind of wallop

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If a song were to be written about the French River, a good title might be "Up a Lazy Little River." About 21 miles long and with no rapids and no broad vistas, this is not a river that grabs your attention. But it's one that packs its own quiet kind of wallop. "It's just a placid little stream," said David R. Stiddem, project manager of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers recreation areas at Hodges Village Dam in Oxford and Buffumville Lake in Charlton.



[French River Basin](#)

[Public access sites](#)

From its Leicester source to the Webster line, the French River is pretty much hidden. It crosses a back road here and there, then slips back into the wild. It is a narrow, winding rural river that attracts mainly area fishermen and canoeists who know it. It is a river without an attitude. It emerges in lower downtown Webster for a short, urban distance, but even there it is inconspicuous, blending with its surroundings then ducking back into the woods and flowing on into Northeastern Connecticut.

The river does have some well-known connections, though. Mr. Stiddem notes that 60,000 to 70,000 people a year visit Hodges Village Dam recreation area. Another 150,000 visit nearby Buffumville Lake on the Little River, a major tributary. The Hodges Village area includes 1,200 acres that attract hikers, mountain bikers, cross-country skiers, wildlife lovers, fishermen and canoeists. The dam, a dry dam meant to hold back water only when needed, was built in 1959. Buffumville Dam was completed in 1958 and incorporates a 200-acre lake that provides swimming and park area. The

largest of the 67 lakes and ponds in the French River Basin -- and its best known component -- is the 1,195-acre Webster Lake in Webster. It is the state's largest natural lake and drains into the French River via Mill Brook. While Webster Lake and other lakes in the French River basin are popular for recreation, the river itself is far from public. "I think people are just learning about it," Mr. Stiddem said.



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The French is the major tributary of the 65-mile-long Quinebaug River, which is a tributary of the Thames River. The Thames empties into Long Island Sound. Although it is classified as a major river in Massachusetts, the French has the smallest drainage basin of any of the 23 major rivers in the state -- about 92 square miles. Its northern end has high slopes and clear, cold water. The river drops 300 feet over its first eight miles through woods and fields, then only 100 feet over the rest of its course -- a mix of marshes, shrub wetlands and mixed forest. The most significant thing about the French might simply be how hard it is to reach. The river has no beaches and few public accesses. "Few people know about it or how to access it," said John Coccia, owner of Northeast Live Bait and Tackle on Sutton Avenue. "Mostly, it's a local thing.

Most fishermen are headed for the bigger places, like Webster Lake, Wallum Lake, Buffumville Lake." The most popular part of the river is an eight-mile section from Greenbriar Park on Route 12 in Oxford to North Village in Webster. But the only public boat ramps are on the Army Corps of Engineers property, one above and one below Hodges Village Dam. Those who know the river say there is a stirring of interest about it among boaters, hunters and nature lovers. "The public is making more use of it than at any time in my 40-something years," said Glenn E. Krevosky, an environmentalist and Oxford native who has made the cleanup of the river a personal goal. "But we do need better public access. People will appreciate it

more if we can get them out there.” Last year, Gary Kettle began renting canoes from his French River Farms stand on Charlton Street. It is the only place on the river to rent boats and Mr. Kettle said rentals of his 10 canoes are up as word about them -- and about the river -- reaches more people. “It’s a nice leisurely ride down the river. It’s not intimidating at all. It’s just winding, secluded, peaceful. Families go down and fish, swim along the way,” he said. Mr. Kettle said high spring rains have allowed canoeists to stay on the river longer this year, but he added that many people don’t consider this the best time to be on the river. “You should see it in the fall,” he said. Fishing is also a growing attraction as word of the good fishing in the French River spreads, Mr. Coccia said. “It’s got some big northern pike, and every year someone pulls out a trophy -- 46, 47 inches -- from the pond below Hodges Village Dam,” he said. “If a river supports trout, it’s good,” he added, “and the French River is a pretty good fishery. It holds just about every fish that we have in this state, except wall-eye.” The river is fished along its entire length, but both the Little River and Lowes Brook are considered prime fishing spots, as are the bridges all along its length. The river is most public in Thompson, where a 12-acre riverside park and walkway was built nine years ago. The town is now planning a mile-long expansion of the park. The completed project will keep a total two-mile length -- and more than 80 surrounding acres -- undeveloped and accessible to the public. The river is rated Class B, which means its waters are clean enough for swimming, boating and fishing. However, Therese Mounce, Worcester area watershed coordinator for the DEP, said the state has not tested the river since 1989, before upgrades were done at the Oxford-Rochdale and Webster sewage treatment plants. “There have been significant improvements and I expect that (tests) will show a significant increase in water quality,” she said. Those who know the river say no one individual has worked harder to clean it up than Mr. Krevosky. He made it his personal goal in 1979 to help clean up the river in his lifetime. “I love the French River,” Mr. Krevosky said. “I remember the stink, the fish kills, the suds three feet high at waterfalls that would float above the river when I was growing up.” Over the past 20 years Mr. Krevosky has monitored the river, fought to close sewer connections, organized cleanups and started groups dedicated to the river. Among those who have benefited is Todd P. Girard, 31, of Dudley. He has canoed and kayaked the river from Leicester to Thompson, even though much of the river is not easily navigated. Except for the section from Greenbriar Park to the Webster line, much of it is shallow or impeded by old mill dams. “It’s a good community river,” Mr. Girard said. “I’ve seen it cleaned up quite a bit. There used to be raw sewage, industrial pollutants, refrigerators, old tires. “I never would have seen a beaver there,” he added. “I see beaver now, and deer crossing, as I canoe. I appreciate the biodiversity of it, the diverse plant and wildlife community.” That biodiversity includes several rare and endangered species, among them spotted, wood and eastern box turtles; marbled salamanders; grasshopper sparrows; and spreading tick-trefoil, a plant. The future of the French River as a recreation source as well as an important piece of the Central Massachusetts and Northeastern Connecticut environment looks promising as the river gains more attention from both area residents and state and federal officials. While no action was ever taken on recommendations by a local advisory committee 10 years ago to develop the river as a tourist destination, the French-Quinebaug Watershed Plan, completed last November, offered the same conclusions. There is also hope that the expansion of the Quinebaug-Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor will bring more attention to the French River. John Desmond of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, one of the watershed plan’s authors, said he expects the French River Basin to get more attention because it is part of the heritage corridor, which includes the last, large undeveloped tract of land between Boston and Washington, D.C. Mr. Desmond said the state Department of Environmental Affairs will begin studies this summer of the 300 dams in the French and Quinebaug basins and will also study which lands in the basin merit protection from development. Mr. Krevosky, who said the river was “85 percent” improved over 20 years ago, expects people to continue discovering and rediscovering the French River. “And as long as people at the regulatory level continue to be diligent -- especially the towns -- it will keep getting better,” Mr. Krevosky said.