

# Hidden paradise

## French River inspires nature enthusiasts

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**WEBSTER**— The surprise was that when Dudley Boy Scout Troop 273 wanted a wilderness kayaking and canoeing experience, they found it here on the French River.

“It’s just amazing how beautiful it is. And it’s amazing that it’s in our backyard,” Scoutmaster Diane Anderson said. “We had no idea it was there.”

Members of the French River Connection say few people are aware that the river that runs hidden from view is a gem still undiscovered by the public.

“It’s a place of great natural beauty,” said naturalist Thomas C. Ryzewski, a retired Bartlett High School biology teacher and a member of the French River Connection.

“I grew up in this town with the idea that the river was an open sewer. It’s not. It’s full of life, the water’s clean and the fishing is amazing,” he said.

But Mr. Ryzewski, who now kayaks down the river marveling at its wildlife and plant life, said he only became aware of the revitalized river when the French River Connection was formed in March 2005.

That organization, with 25 paying members and a mailing list of 100, has a vision for the river and its shoreline to become a resource that is “used, enjoyed and treasured” by residents and visitors.

Its mission is to promote the revitalized river through work and collaborations with towns and other



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Kayaking on the French River are, from left, Alan Dabrowski, Kenneth A. Parker and Thomas C. Ryzewski.



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One of the many scenic views of the French River as it wends its way south.

organizations.

This is not the first time attention has turned to the river, which runs more than 26 miles from its headwaters in Leicester to its confluence with the Quinebaug River in Thompson.

No action was taken on a local advisory committee's recommendations in 1990 to develop the river as a tourist destination, nor on a watershed plan in 1999 that offered a similar recommendation.

But in the past nine months, the French River Connection has received grants of \$1,000 to \$5,000 to study creating public access points on the river; to start its water quality monitoring program; to conduct cleanups and shoreline study documentation; and to obtain IRS tax-exempt status.

In addition, the University of Connecticut and Green Valley Institute have prepared a report on revitalizing the riverfront in Webster and Dudley and the Massachusetts Riverways program has trained volunteers who are doing a shoreline survey.

The organization also is reviewing the revitalization study to see which projects, such as boat launches or parks, can be done, and to seek funding for them. The group also is studying a hiking trail that would connect the planned Quinebaug Rail Trail in Dudley with the Midstate Trail in Oxford.



The group says it has advocated with the state and federal government for repair and proper operation of North Village Dam, whose owner has committed to making some improvements.

“We have a lot of irons in the fire,” said Kenneth A. Parker, who, with Alan Dabrowski, co-founded the organization.

“It’s all part of getting the river to be something that people know about and appreciate so they will

use it and not abuse it,” said Mr. Dabrowski.

“I’m very impressed with the French River Connection. It’s made some great strides in a short amount of time,” said Webster Community Development Director Carol J. Cyr. “They’ve got a good bunch of volunteers.”

Mr. Parker, a little over a year after moving here to Brookside Avenue from Rhode Island, started a cleanup effort in spring 2004. That effort hauled an estimated two tons of trash from the river near the Connecticut line.

“There must be someone who loves this river,” Mr. Parker remembered wondering at the time.



One of those “someones” was Mr. Dabrowski, who grew up and still lives on Market Street, and who had been hauling trash out of the northern end of the river for years.

“We were both doing the same thing at opposite ends of the river,” Mr. Parker said.

Mr. Dabrowski said he has spent much of his life fishing and boating on the river and that it was not as bad as its reputation.

The Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972, which became known as the Clean Water Act, sharply reduced direct pollutant discharges into waterways, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, and by the mid-1970s Webster had a secondary wastewater treatment plant.

On a recent morning, Mr. Parker, Mr. Dabrowski and Mr. Ryzewski put kayaks into the French River at the base of Hodges Village Dam in Oxford and began the winding 6.5-mile journey downriver to North Village dam.

From Hodges Village to Webster, only three roads pass over the river. The first came quickly at a stone arched bridge, where the river turns away from the noise of Charlton Street traffic to a long water trail with few signs of civilization.

At first the river is a narrow, winding channel edged with lush vegetation, but it gradually widens and flows past wooded banks. As it nears Webster, it broadens, extended by marshland and containing islands, at one point more than one-quarter mile across.

“It’s really diverse and changes quite a bit,” Mr. Dabrowski says, as he provides a commentary on the river and its environs. He describes it as a “slow-moving, winding, Congo-type river” in its first few miles.

As kayakers approach, a heron rises and flies a short distance down river, where it lands and waits for the kayakers to approach before it again rises and flies.

Mr. Parker and Mr. Ryzewski separately spot young beavers, which flee at their approach.

Mr. Dabrowski speaks enthusiastically about the river and the sights it has afforded him: the great horned owls, the dozen swans gliding out of the fog, logs lined with turtles and turkeys in trees.



Overhanging branches of fallen mountain maple, walnut and willow trees lean like banners along the river.

Mr. Ryzewski says he is surprised at the solitude found here, as a mile downriver the only sound is the slap and drip of paddles.

Mr. Dabrowski flicks his wrist and sends his spinner bait expertly between Mr. Parker and Mr. Ryzewski.

Back come a small bass, a perch, and another bass, which Mr. Dabrowski quickly returns to the water as he continues to describe the river.

There are, he says, names for most sections of river: the Flats, the Straights, Hobo Camp, Sharkey’s Island.

Here and there elderberry bushes flower, and there is a hint of honeysuckle in the air.

The river is not visible from the road for most of the 6.5 miles between Hodges Village and North Village, except for the three bridges and from Old Oxford Road and Oxford Avenue as it approaches downtown.

There are no public landings, and the group pulls out by Mill Street, just before the North Village Dam.

Mr. Dabrowski and Mr. Parker said they are seeing more boaters using the river and that public access would allow for much greater use.

As they pull their boats out, they talk about getting their feet wet again, but that occasion will be yet another river cleanup. A one-day cleanup this past spring netted 22 trucks of trash.

“Cleaning the river is part of being a steward of the river, and we are providing stewardship of the river,” Mr. Parker said. “The end result is a broad result — for the river to be a valuable resource for the community so it can be used for recreation and have some economic value that it doesn’t have now.”

Ms. Anderson said the success of a Scouting event can be judged by whether the Scouts ask their parents for something when they return home.

“I’ve heard lots of rumors about boys asking their parents if they could buy a kayak,” she said.