

THE CONNECTICUT HISTORIC RIVERWAY

by Gregory G. Curtis

Preservation of the natural attributes of the Connecticut River and its valley is the central concern of Dr. Curtis in this article. The respective roles of the federal, state and local governments and the necessary legislative formula for their mutual efforts are discussed with a specific case — the Connecticut River valley as a National Recreation Area — the focal point for implementation of Congressional intent. Questions of recreational use versus preservation and conservation are a key element of Dr. Curtis's analysis and conclusions.

In 1965 a federal proposal was initiated in Congress to establish a National Recreation Area on the Connecticut River. It involved the four New England states of Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut. The purpose of the national park was twofold: to preserve the natural beauty of the Connecticut River and to provide outdoor recreation for the public of urban centers.

The stakes in river preservation are high. There are many rivers in the United States whose banks and ridge tops desperately need protection from urban sprawl. These waterways still retain enough beauty to make them worth preserving. In their natural condition such rivers continue to be popular outlets for outdoor recreation by the nation's population.

The problem is how to bring about their desired preservation without destroying by over use the very values which we seek to preserve. Many of these rivers flow through population centers — towns and cities in counties and states.

In the instance of the federal proposal for the Connecticut River, ninety-two units of town government are involved. The river has become a part of the life style of people in urban places along its banks. Preservation solutions involve land use decisions which go to the very heart of local communities. A national park would have direct bearing upon auxiliary town

Gregory G. Curtis. The author recently received his Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of Connecticut. This article is a condensation of his doctoral thesis. Curtis received his M.A. in government at Trinity College and B.S. in Agronomy at Iowa State University. He is Field Coordinator for the Middlesex County Extension Service, University of Connecticut, in Haddam.

services, such as: highway construction and maintenance, traffic control, and police and fire protection. All facets of town government would be affected from tax assessment to the consequences of people pressure on the way of life of resident population.

Considering the potential impact of a proposed national recreation area on a local urban population, participation in decision making by the indigenous governments becomes important. The question then becomes: what kind of a legislative vehicle can be assembled which will be acceptable to the federal, state, and local governments involved to pursue the task of river preservation?

There is merit in considering the Connecticut River proposal on a four-state, regional basis under the leadership of the federal government. The ecological problems associated with the preservation of a river which flows through ninety-two towns do not stop at town or even state lines. Action, or inaction, of one town or state may adversely affect the others.

Beyond this, a certain esprit de corps develops in a coordinated governmental attack on a mutual problem. Each level of government brings its own particular set of skills and resources to bear. A new sense of importance and impetus arises which may materially assist with solutions to problems. The resulting enthusiasm may also generate additional public and private resources not originally expected.

Although it may be theoretically desirable for local, state, and federal governments to work together, this article will identify factors which served as impediments to such an approach. Indeed, the hurdle to cooperation was so high that the regional riverway concept was rejected.

It is necessary for Congress to take a different approach to river preservation when dealing with urban as opposed to wilderness areas. In urban places local governments need to become an integral part of making and implementing decisions.

Setting the Scene:

The source of the Connecticut River is in the town of Pittsburg, New Hampshire, in the mountains above the Fourth Connecticut Lake along the Canadian

border. As it leaves the Fourth Connecticut Lake, it is merely a stream, small enough to leap across. It then tumbles on through the Third, Second, and First Connecticut Lakes, each in turn a larger body of water. By the time it spills over the dam of its last impoundment, the 2,000 acre Lake Francis, the Connecticut has become a river. Hence, the Connecticut River is born, nurtured, and weaned all in the town of Pittsburg.

After leaving Pittsburg, the river winds its way southward, with its west bank forming the boundary between the states of New Hampshire and Vermont. As it goes on to meander through the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut, the river creates some of the most desirable agricultural land in the nation.

Before completing its journey to Long Island Sound, the river veers south-eastward through the narrows of Middletown, Connecticut, and for the next twenty-five miles its valley becomes wild and wooded, similar to the place of its origin. Finally, it meets the waves of Long Island Sound between the historic towns of Old Saybrook and Old Lyme.

The series of towns bordering the river from its source to its mouth are involved in this analysis. They create an urban corridor of ninety-two communities; twenty-eight in New Hampshire, twenty-seven in Vermont, fourteen in Massachusetts, and twenty-three in Connecticut.

Several of the major cities in this corridor are illustrative of the growing urban nature of the Connecticut River valley. The standard metropolitan statistical area of Hartford, Connecticut, has a population of 663,900 and the standard metropolitan statistical area of Springfield - Chicopee - Holyoke, Massachusetts, consists of 529,900 people. All along the way are smaller urban centers including Middletown, Connecticut, 36,900; Hanover, New Hampshire, 8,500; Brattleboro, Vermont 12,200 people.

Within fifty miles of the Connecticut River's banks lives a population of 5 1/2 million people. Population density is important because it has a direct bearing on the attitudes of the states toward the proposed national recreation area. Urban development has been responsible for obliterating much of the beauty of the river. From highways to wharves, from oil tanks to industrial plants — the public is becoming increasingly deprived of the values of the river. This once totally beautiful natural resource has partially fallen prey to the encroachment of steel, concrete, and asphalt.

Study of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation

As a prelude to the establishment of a National Recreation Area on the Connecticut River, Congress authorized the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a two year feasibility study of the four state area. The Secretary assigned this task to the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Later, implementation of the plan was to be under the direction of the National Park Service.

It is an understatement to say that the B.O.R. study was pressed for time. From a dead start in

October, 1966, investigations were to take place, formal hearings were to be held, and detailed plans drawn for the four states by mid-1968. Many of the later difficulties which were to arise between the states and the federal government were due to this pressing time schedule.

In July of 1968 the B.O.R. published its report, "New England Heritage." The Bureau recommended the establishment of a three unit National Recreational Area to be administered by the National Park Service (see Map #1). It was to be divided into three sections: the Gateway Unit of 23,500 acres, involving parts of eight Connecticut towns; the Mount Holyoke Unit of 12,000 acres in Massachusetts comprising parts of seven towns; and a Coos Scenic River Unit between Vermont and New Hampshire, consisting of eighty-two miles of river, 21,200 acres, and including sections of sixteen towns. The total cost of land acquisition and for the establishment of the National Recreation Area was to be \$57 million.

Clearly, the emphasis of the B.O.R. report was on public recreation. Although it constantly alluded to the necessity of preserving the beauty and natural resources of the valley, the purpose of such preservation was for the enjoyment of the vacationing public.

The difference between this proposal and those for previous national parks in other parts of the country, is the urban nature of the Connecticut River corridor. Previously, national areas in this category dealt with more or less sparsely populated, non-farm acreages on the outskirts of communities. Now, along the length of the valley, entire urban centers and farms in between were involved.

Reaction of the States

That part of the Connecticut River National Recreation area proposed for northern Vermont and New Hampshire was an eighty-two mile "scenic river" strip called the Coos Scenic River Unit. It ran from Lake Francis in the north to the Moore Reservoir in the south. The unit consisted of the nine New Hampshire towns of Pittsburg, Clarksville, Stewartstown, Colebrook, Columbia, Stratford, Northumberland, Lancaster, and Dalton; and the seven Vermont towns of Canaan, Lemington, Bloomfield, Brunswick, Maidstone, Guildhall, and Luenberg (see Map #2).

The flood plain of the valley in this area contains some of the richest agricultural land in both states with dairy farming the most prevalent enterprise. The boundaries of the Coos unit encompassed 21,200 acres of land and were drawn to include most of the valley floor. The unit involved parts of the urban centers of most of the sixteen towns.

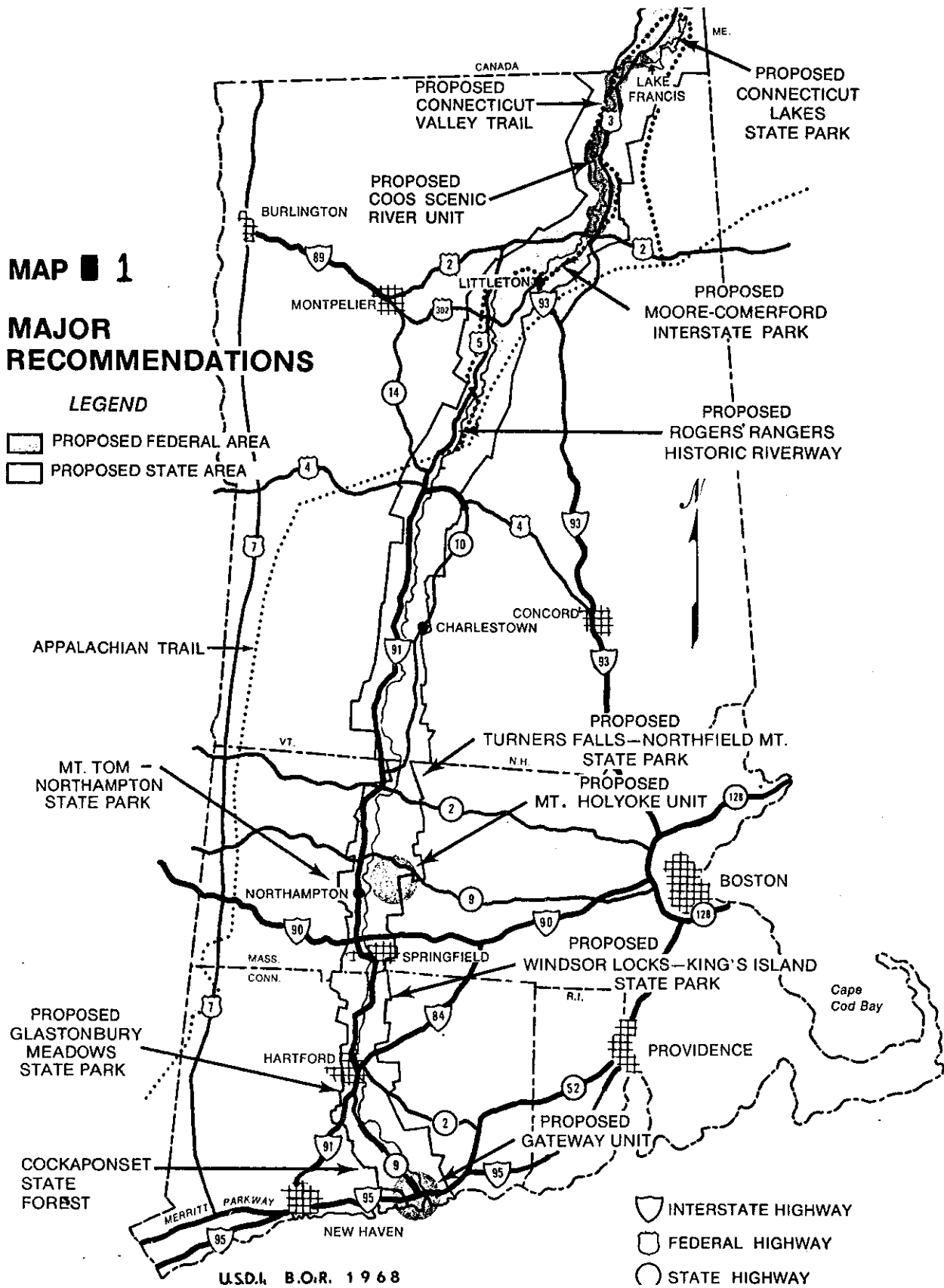
The release of the B.O.R. report brought an immediate negative response from Vermont officials. They disagreed with the plan's objective to acquire 1,000 acres in the Coos Scenic River Unit. It was felt that the use of zoning restrictions, rights of way, and easements would be sufficient to retain the natural beauty of the area and still provide necessary recreation. These less than fee techniques would lessen the necessity of taking land out of private ownership and making a major land owner out of the federal government.

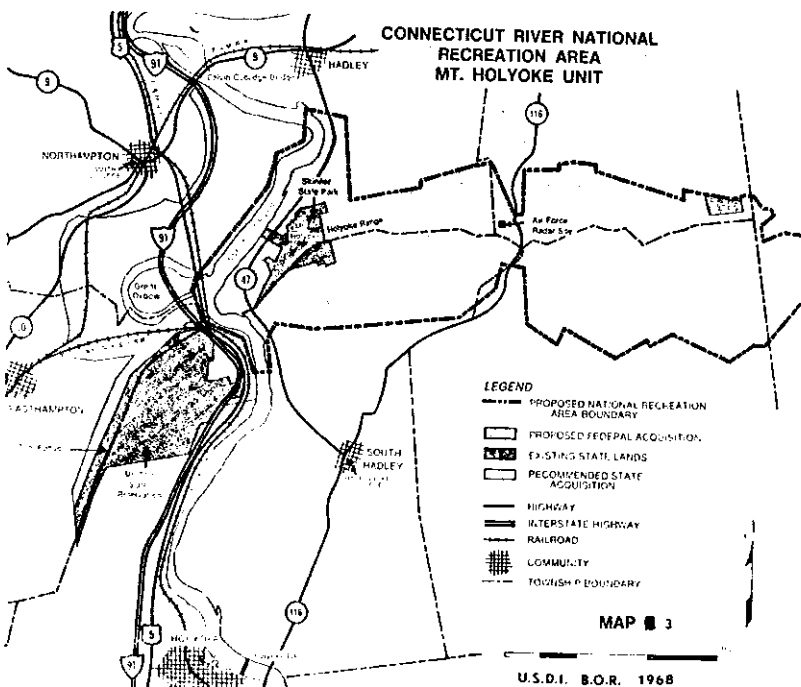
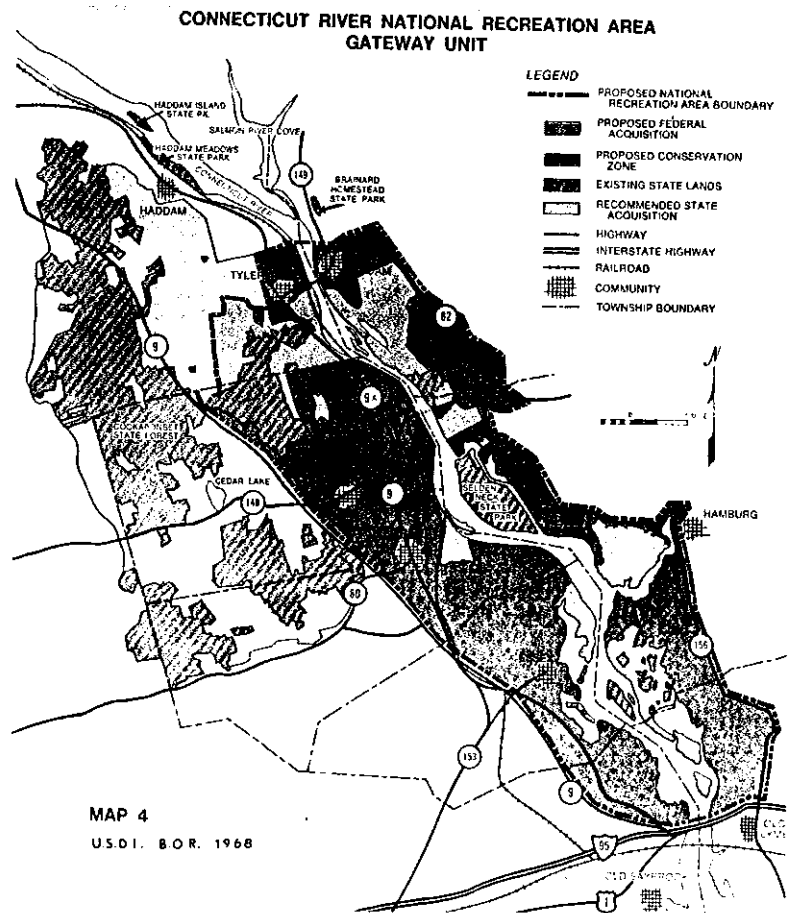
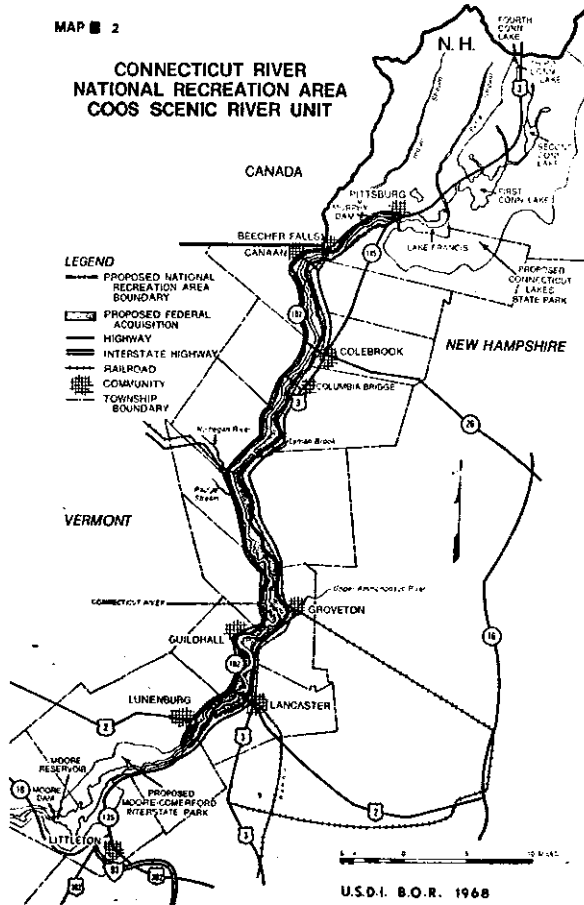
MAP 1

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

LEGEND

- PROPOSED FEDERAL AREA
- PROPOSED STATE AREA





Source of Maps: United States Department of Interior, Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, "New England Heritage", 1968.

Beyond this, Vermont was distressed because the study had not been developed cooperatively. "The B.O.R. came in, picked our brains, and took materials from our files" was said to be the extent of cooperation.

Although the state planning office agreed with the conceptual plan for the Coos Scenic Unit, answers to important governmental questions were felt to be lacking. For example, there was to be no payment in lieu of taxes to towns for land taken by the federal government. Neither was there to be financial assistance for the construction and maintenance of roads and extra police and fire services caused by the influx of people.

The net result of state opposition was that Senator George Aiken refused to co-sponsor the legislation in the U.S. Senate. This had the effect of removing Vermont from the four state riverway proposal.

New Hampshire

Initial reaction by New Hampshire's Governor, Senators, Congressman (2nd District), and the state planning office was favorable to the B.O.R. study. Senator Thomas J. McIntyre called the study imaginative and said he looked forward to the river valley becoming "one of the nation's major recreation centers."

However, this feeling was not shared by the nine towns involved in the Coos Scenic River Unit. Objections were the same as in Vermont the loss of tax revenue, prohibitions on the expansion of farm enterprises, and the financial burden to be placed on towns for roads and police and fire services. In addition, the towns objected to restrictions to be placed upon cutting timber in an area which had a long tradition of commercial lumbering.

Furthermore, a feeling of antagonism toward "outside interference" had developed in the north country over a period of years. It was primarily the result of state and federal proposals to construct dams and flood the territory for the benefit of "down country" people.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers presented their plan for pollution abatement by means of stream augmentation for the Connecticut River at the same time that the Ribicoff proposal for a national recreation area was being considered. The Corps plan called for the construction of reservoirs to increase the flow during dry periods, thus diluting the pollutants, primarily from lumbering. One of the large reservoirs for this purpose was to be built on Indian Stream in the town of Pittsburg. This impoundment would affect a stretch of 1,560 acres, pretty much inundating the area of Indian Stream.

At a hearing held in Concord more than 300 people appeared to seek protection from what was called "the tyranny of the majority." The question at issue was one of a fundamental disagreement on the need for new, large flood control reservoirs to provide recreation, control pollution, or protect downstream development in the flood plain.

Local opposition was so intense that it captured the support of New Hampshire's U.S. Congressman James

C. Cleveland. Until this point he had been a supporter of the national recreation area. On the floor of the House of Representatives he rejected both projects and issued a rebuke to the Corps of Engineers:

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation would do well to heed these articles before they waste any more time and money on planning. An area that once seceded from the United States and Canada (Pittsburg) as an ultimate expression of independence will certainly not sit idly by while large areas of its finest river, forestry, and hunting potential is laid waste, nor will those who represent them. On several occasions in the past, with the most able help of U.S. Senator Cotton, I have been successful in preventing the construction of big dams in my district, which were clearly and justifiably opposed by local residents.

Two states down, two to go

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts unit of the national recreation area primarily consisted of the Mount Holyoke Range and surrounding lands. The range bordered the east bank of the Connecticut River for four and a half miles and extended inland for nine and a half miles. The range and a strip of land on the west bank of the river were part of the eight Massachusetts towns of: Holyoke, Northampton, and East Hampton on the west bank; and Hadley, South Hadley, Amherst, Granby, and Belchertown on the east bank (see Map #3).

The conceptual plan which was developed by the National Park Service, based on the B.O.R. report, envisioned a "projected optimum daily use of 16,000 people per day or 1.6 million over a 100 day recreation season." The number of visitors proposed for the Range set the stage for a severe conflict between preservation and recreation forces.

A key hearing on the plan was held at South Hadley, Massachusetts in May of 1970. The hearing was attended by Senator Alan Bible, Chairman of the Parks and Recreation Subcommittee of the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee as well as by Senators Ted Kennedy and Abraham Ribicoff. They met a hostile overflow crowd of 400 people who denounced the B.O.R. study and the resultant National Park Service plan as not being representative of their thinking. They objected to the phasing out of homes and farmland in the proposed park by not permitting ownership in perpetuity. Their major contention was that the level of recreational activity proposed would destroy the very ecological values that the plan sought to protect. The slogan for the day carried on placards around the auditorium was "conservation not recreation."

Senator Bible termed the meeting "explosive" and commented, "I always preferred to be hanged in effigy, but never in person." Senator Kennedy then proposed that the Mount Holyoke Unit be withdrawn from Senate consideration until conflicts could be resolved.

Connecticut

The B.O.R. study and National Park Service plan (Map #4) faced the same preservation vs. recreation conflict in Connecticut as in the other three states. After prolonged negotiations between a Citizen's Advisory Committee and the National Park Service, it too moved to public hearings. The results were the same — disastrous.

As was true in New Hampshire with Pittsburg, the smallest town in the Gateway Unit population-wise led the opposition to the plan. The town of Lyme presented a petition signed by 721 of their people, out of a total population of 1,500 which read, in part:

The undersigned residents of the Town of Lyme believe that a national park open to the public for these and other uses will **destroy and not preserve** "the priceless natural beauty and historic heritage of the river valley" to which Senator Ribicoff's bill thus refers; and will impose unmanageable traffic, sanitation, and policing burdens on our town.

Although the local Gateway Advisory Committee further revised the federal plan and presented one of their own, it was to no avail. In crowded hearings in the towns of Lyme, Deep River, Old Lyme, and East Haddam almost total opposition was expressed. Townspeople just did not want to invite the public of the United States to come and enjoy their area. Repeatedly, their opposition was expressed in terms of an already existing high level of recreational activity on the river, an extension of which would destroy it.

Thus, eight years after the introduction of the concept of a national recreation area on the Connecticut River it was rejected by the four states involved.

Connecticut's Cashman Plan

After the rejection of their federal partner, the Gateway Advisory Committee developed a new plan which was presented for adoption to the public. This time it was based solely on conservation - preservation; there was to be no recreation.

The plan asserted "visibility from the river" as a guiding principle in determining how large a land mass would be included. By eliminating rear acreage the former area was slimmed down from 46,300 acres to 30,000 acres. Land would not be purchased in fee but development rights and scenic easements would be bought in 2,500 acres considered key to the beauty of the river.

The riverway would be administered by an eleven member Gateway Commission, eight of which would be chosen by the towns. To keep the Commission attentive to town desires the right of secession was provided by town referendum. Finally, the cost was slimmed from \$23 million to \$5 million.

When the Cashman plan made the circuit of town hearings it was overwhelmingly accepted. Former antagonists became supporters. The net result was that it passed the General Assembly without a murmur and is now law.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to outline an acceptable legislative formula by which local, state, and federal governments will be encouraged to cooperate in seeking solutions to the problem of river valley preservation.

In retrospect it is felt that the initial study of a national recreation area by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation should have been made with the complete involvement of local and state governments. If this had been done it is highly unlikely that their report "New England Heritage" would have placed so much emphasis upon recreation. The recreation - preservation struggle for dominance would have been immediate and intense. This would have resulted in either no plan at all, or a compromise proposal that was grudgingly acceptable to all.

It may be argued that by involving state and local governments the allocated two-year time period for the study would have been violated. However, the early contributions of local and state governments could have prevented the time consuming and destructive conflicts which developed because of the publication and use of a report about which there was basic disagreement.

It may also be charged that a compromised position on the objective of the study would have thwarted the intent of Congress. This is just the point — the intent of Congress may have been changed from recreation to preservation at an early stage if the recommendations of the study had had the input of local and state governments.

From the beginning, Congress made a unilateral decision that the study was to be based upon the need for urban recreation. Although the Secretary of the Interior was directed to "consult with other interested federal agencies", the thrust of deliberations had been predetermined. State and local governments were placed in an observing, rather than in a collaborating position, in an area of interest which lends itself to cooperation.

Congressional vacillation throughout the eight year consideration of the Connecticut Historic Riverway proposal clearly reveals the lack of an established policy in applying the concept of a national park to settled areas. This article argues that the complexities of urban riverways do not permit the use of preconceived federal or state policies. It is concluded that what is needed is the establishment of a system by which such riverway policies may be determined as the result of a process of compromise between local, state, and federal governments.

In order to bring about such a cooperative spirit the national policy should be one of deferment to other governments. Federal direction must be to offer reasoned advice, encouragement, and technical expertise in an atmosphere of negotiation. Their attitude must not be one of guarding national prerogatives.