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Lawsuit Threatens Future Of Neches



(Staff Photo by Mark Roberts)

Rodney Newman, left, and Hoyte Davis, of Maydelle, relax on the porch of a log cabin Wednesday August 15, 2007 outside Maydelle, TX. The cabin and 250 acres of Rodney's property will be underwater if a dam is built along the Neches River.

By STEPHANIE JETER
Staff Writer

Eight miles west of Jacksonville, a wall of pines that plays peek-a-boo with the sun finally breaks for the flow of a great river.

At the gap, a van slows and pulls off the blacktop onto a pebble strewn side road spotted grey with oil.

Apparently, the driver was looking for a landmark, and found it.

So the van stopped.

With no sign or crowd to point the way, the driver, environmentalist Gina Donovan, must have known which path to take to get to the river.

She introduced it by name.



(Staff Photo By Mark Roberts)

A young boy walks in front of the Blackburn Crossing Dam on Tuesday outside Frankston. The dam marks the beginning of the Neches River.

"This is the Neches."

The Neches: one of the last wild rivers in Texas, stretching 400 miles from Van Zandt County down to the Gulf of Mexico, brings millions of dollars to the area, and gives shelter to hundreds of trees and species of endangered birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish.

It's a treasure, she said, and it's in danger.

She's spent the last several years telling the story. She goes to Kiwanis and Lions clubs. She visits churches and environmental groups. She wears a suit and talks to lawmakers.

She talks a lot, she said. But the best way to introduce her passion is on the water.

Kayaking the Neches gives it new significance, she said.

In 2005, Ms. Donovan learned the city of Dallas was working to turn the area into a water source.

The river would be dammed, its current tamed and pumped to Dallas to flow from the neighborhood tap.

She was confused, angry and ready to react, she said. She joined hands with Texas Conservation Alliance and became its voice.



(Staff Photo By Mark Roberts)

UNTAMED: The Neches River peacefully flows on Tuesday.

THE TRIP

The plan, Ms. Donovan said, is to put the kayaks in the Neches off a bridge on County Road 3212. She said those up for a trip will kayak against the current for a couple miles and use the water flow to get back to the van.

Two kayaks sat perched in the bed of a truck for the job. From the look of the plastic shells, the kayaks seemed gutless and far too fragile to handle the river.

A few yards away, you could hear the river's strength. Downstream, water rushed over rocks and sped past dirt banks. It sang like a swarm of bees.

"Grab the other end," shouted Matthew Hamm, another kayaker.

He climbed in the truck bed and positioned the kayak for someone to take the far end.

At first heave, the kayak proved its strength. They are not lightweights.

But, they float.

The shore was calm; once placed in the water, the kayak barely bobbed.

Hamm climbed in his boat and stirred the murky water with his paddle.

He's become an expert planner, packer and paddler, just little tricks he picked up competing in kayak races and long trips.

His tips mix with stories of the Neches in the old days.



(Staff Photo By Mark Roberts)

Bird tracks can be seen along the banks of the river. Wildlife is abundant along the waterway. The Neches used to be full of logs. Back around the early 1900s, loggers cut timber from the dense forests and floated their product downstream. Sawmills were constructed along the bank. "Keep a good rhythm with your strokes," he reminded.

And in the mid 1800s, riverboats took control of the corridor floating agricultural goods for sale. Steamboats also had their place. "Push off with your toes," he advised.

The kayak is long and narrow. And, there's a science to maneuvering the plastic form. He said when paddling to the left, you should put pressure on your right foot. It helps put more power in the stroke, he said.

"But if I'd stop talking you might be able to hear what it sounds like out here."

The twitter of birds filled his silence. Their impromptu songs mixed easily with the whisper of the wind.

Ms. Donovan could beat that nature story. Once she saw a herd of deer swim the river. She said their hoofs sent the water churning. Another time, a blue herring took flight mere feet from her kayak. The bird didn't see her, and she didn't announce her presence.

Hamm said he'd seen river otters, wild hogs, exotic fish, great horned owls, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, panthers, bobcats, varied horticulture and migratory birds call the river home too.

Within the darkness of an unkempt tree line is life, Ms. Donovan said, and it's wild.

CURRENT'S CURRENCY

It's also big money for the East Texas area.

The action starts upstream, said Joy Nicholopoulos, Texas administrator for Ecological Services with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

As the Neches travels south from Van Zandt County, the water picks up nutrient-packed sediment.

The sediment tumbles along with the water, dropping nutrients down the river's path like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs.

"By interrupting, stopping or slowing the flow of sediment... you really interrupt the natural biological process," she said, because growing from the ambling nutrients are pockets of life.

The Big Thicket — a national preserve with wildlife and forest acreage — included.

"It deposits nutrients into the landscape. That's why it's a treasure, period. That's what makes the Big Thicket so special," she said.

Without the fresh water, the Big Thicket would crash.

River nutrients also sustain one of the few remaining bottomland hardwood systems in Texas, Ms. Donovan said.

Ms. Nicholopoulos agreed.

"It's very important all the way down the food chain, from invertebrates to birds," she said.

The value continues downstream, said Quinn McKew, director of American Rivers' river heritage program. The Neches brings freshwater to the Sabine Lake Estuary, positioned right before the Gulf of Mexico. Without the Neches' continuous flow, McKew said the region's multi-million dollar fishing and shellfish industry would suffer. The success of the fishery is balanced on the delicate

mixture of fresh river water and the Sabine's salt water.

Ecotourism expert Ted Eubanks of the Austin-based Fermata Inc. nature tourism company has worked in East Texas – “all over the country, really” – to promote nature, culture and history as a tourist stop. He said there's a real industry for the specialty sightseeing.

As a professional, he has a unique take on the two pending choices for the Neches: to keep its U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national refuge title, or for its current to be dammed and the refuge flooded to make a lake.

“There are two sides to that argument, and I can probably make both,” he said. But while a lake would create water-based recreation and a higher tax base, “here's where I make the choice.”

It lies in individuality, he said. While Texas has millions of reservoirs, he said, it “only has one Neches River.”

And it only has one Texas State Railroad, Eubanks said.

If the reservoir was built, its headwaters would flood out part of the railroad's track. Though a private operator will control operations come September, the train wouldn't be able to make its rounds, cutting out much of the surrounding small towns' tourism income.

Then there's the new numbers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Eubanks said. According to a recent report, Eubanks said wildlife viewing showed a sharp increase this year, swelling 13 percent that already brings \$45 billion annually to the United States.

“Why would you give that up?” he asked. “Plus, since water is an incredible asset – as it happens to be in East Texas – why in the world would we want to build another reservoir to provide Dallas with water?”

“It's just a business decision,” he said.

It's a just an environmental decision, ecologists said.

It's just an East Texan decision, Ms. Donovan said.

Yet the decision still hasn't been made.

There is a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior filed by the city of Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board. The latter two allege the wildlife service did not respect North Texas and its water needs when it declared the Neches a national wildlife refuge.

A judge has yet to hear the case.

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