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Hockanum River Linear Park Committee maintains trails

BY BARBARA ARMENTANO ReminderNews

There are approximately 15 miles of hiking trails alongside the Hockanum River, unnoticeably surrounded by busy streets and highways in Manchester.



Hockanum River Linear Park Committee volunteers include (l-r) John Huntoon, William MacGillvary, Doug Smith, Roger Morgan, Glenn Cornish and Brian Pillion. Photo by Barbara Armentano.

Nine marked trails are located in Manchester at Oakland, Union Pond, Pitkin, Adams Mill, Hackett, Hilliard, New State Road, Verplanck and Laurel Marsh, and range in length from 1,000 feet to 3 and a half miles.

Since March of 1970, volunteers have cleared, mowed, maintained and blazed trails for hiking and public recreation. Hockanum River preservation efforts began in the late 1960s, with combined efforts of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce Beautification Committee, the Manchester Jaycees, the Conservation Commission and Scouts' clean-up projects.

The Hockanum River Linear Park Committee originated in March 1970 by means of a resolution approved by the Town of Manchester Board of Directions , acting on a request by Dr. Fredrick W. Spaulding, chairman of the Town Conversation Commission.

The Commission had previously approved the concept of the Hockanum Park in February 1970, which outlined a plan for a linear, beautified reservation, incorporating a continuous walk-bicycle trail along the river and further recommended that the State Highway Commission make changes in the design of proposed new Interstate 86 – now I-84 – highway bridges to accommodate walkways on both sides of the river.

A Linear Park subcommittee was established by the Conservation Commission shortly thereafter, with a set of goals for acquisition of open space easements, construction of hiking trails by Boy Scouts, junk car and litter clean-up and guided public hikes. A relationship was formed with the State Bureau of Highways to insure continuity of trails and promotion of water-oriented activities.

In 1972, Union Pond was drained and dredged of paper pulp. The dam was repaired , junk cars were removed, and a park was established to facilitate skating, fishing and boat launching. Hiking trails and foot bridges were also developed.

Doug Smith, longtime chairman of the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee , has been a driving force in creating interest and motivating volunteers. When Smith recruits members, he tells them, "To be a full-fledged member, you not only have to do trail work, you have to be able to get in a kayak to explore the river."

Members share a devotion to the Hockanum River trails and strive to maintain its scenic beauty, provide recreational potentials and keep the trails clear, clean and protected from commercial development . Upon joining, members are given a teal blue shirt, a small pair of yellow clippers and a saw.

The group meets three times a week – weather-permitting – clearing paths, cutting branches, trimming brush, picking up debris, building steps, planting trees, wrapping trees to prevent beaver damage and building foot bridges over streams and marshes. Trails are marked with standard trail markings in the form of blazes. Volunteers identify trees by posting small white signs with tree names painted in green. Rustic benches are conveniently placed for resting or enjoying views of the river and historic sites.

In addition to working together, each member has a special talent. Ninety-two-year-old John Huntoon works best at blazing trails. Glenn Cornish, a long-time member, is a botanist and can name most wild flowers and trees. Vice Chairman Frank Belknap does trail mowing and sometimes continues mowing until dark. Dick Don said, "Once you get into the trail work, you can't get out."

The group's Web site can be accessed through the town's official Web site, www.ci.manchester.ct.us/.