

Virginia Scenic Rivers feature

*Content available for use in the promotion of the 40th Anniversary of the Scenic River Program
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A small group of people sits on the banks of the Rivanna River next to the remains of the Woolen Mills Dam in Charlottesville. The only things left of this dam are rock walls and debris on the river banks. Downstream are fishermen and a hill overlooking Monticello; upstream is a tree-shaded road. The site is near civilization at Charlottesville, but the call of the bullfrog can be heard, and pileated woodpeckers fly by.

The group is debating the scenic quality of this river. Who could deny that Virginia's rivers are beautiful? But is this river one of the best Virginia has to offer?

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2010, Virginia's Scenic Rivers Program honors the highest quality, natural waterways in the state. This means that views of development – of bridges, power lines, roads, buildings, parks, man-made fishing areas, dams, etc. – are limited along the river's main course.

Just before the group gathered on the shore of the river, the team floated a length of the river from Route 29 to the dam. Six boats carried 11 people through a quiet stretch with just a few small rapids. The team was to identify and record details about vegetation on the banks, human modifications to water flow, signs of development, parallel roads and places where a road crosses the river. The details gathered are added to previously collected information, including water quality, presence of endangered species, quality of fisheries, historic features and river access points.

Group members gave each criterion a score and came to a consensus within the group; that score is weighted against an ideal to see if the river even qualifies to be in the program. In this case, the score allowed it to be added to an adjacent downstream stretch already in the program.

But the Scenic Rivers Program is more than just a few people paddling a river and saying that it's one of Virginia's prettiest rivers. To get to the field study, each locality adjacent to the river or river segment must agree on and submit a request for the study. After it's complete, it takes an act of the Virginia General Assembly to add the river into the program.

“This program would never exist without community involvement and government support at all levels within the state,” said Lynn Crump, manager of the Scenic River Program. “But mostly, it's amazing to see all of the communities around the river come together to honor their beautiful natural features. So far, there are 24 rivers or river segments in the program, and the number grows almost every year.”

The Scenic Rivers Program also has an associated governor-appointed board to enhance and promote the program. Virginia Scenic Rivers Board members make recommendations on the stewardship of scenic rivers and advise on the addition of river segments.

Richard Gibbons, chair of the Scenic Rivers Board, stated, “It’s an honor to work for the promotion of Virginia’s finest scenic features. The team of dedicated board members comes together from across the state to give local residents a voice in river-related issues.”

Inclusion in the Scenic Rivers Program encourages protection and preservation of the river, but does not give the state control over land use decisions. Nor does the state commercially promote designated rivers or give public access to private lands. Designation is truly just a celebration of the wonder and beauty of the resource.

For more information about the Virginia Scenic Rivers Program, please visit http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/srmain.shtml.