

West Branch Susquehanna River *Water Trail*

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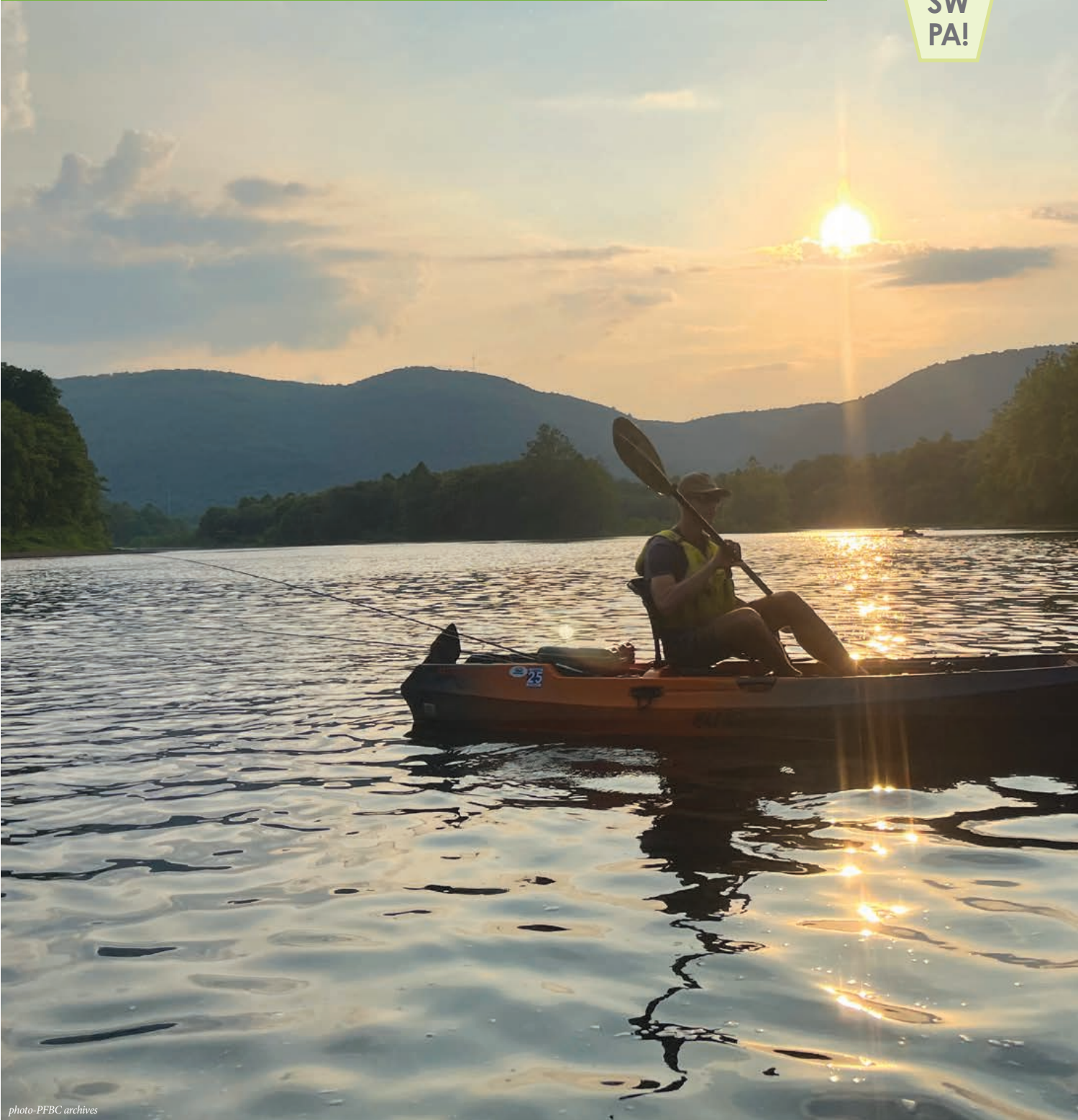


photo-PFBC archives



A kayak angler at sunset on the West Branch Susquehanna River.

by Bob Frye

BobbyJo Tallon once didn't know the West Branch Susquehanna River existed. She'll never forget it now. The Binghamton, NY, native frequently paddles the North Branch Susquehanna River, twice having floated the full 444 miles of the Susquehanna River from Cooperstown, NY, to Havre de Grace, MD. In between, though, she and her daughter, Devyn Dellapenta, canoed the entire 228 miles of the West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail, from Cherry Tree, Indiana County, to Sunbury, Northumberland County.

It was, she came to learn, "a totally different animal."

"It was really amazing to me the difference in scenery," said Tallon. "You're working with a lot more mountains, just a lot more hills. Devyn and I were lucky enough to see a lot of wildlife on the main branch. But, the West Branch, just being in the middle of nowhere and seeing more animals than people, was really unique."

They saw black bears, white-tailed deer, ducks, great blue herons and even elk.

"The West Branch is a hidden gem. I couldn't believe how absolutely beautiful it was when we were on there," said Tallon.

That anyone would say such a thing today is a testament to its recovery and revival.

"Once, in the early 20th century, the river was more an industrial highway than anything," said Alana Jajko, Director of Communications & Outreach for the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership, the river trail's sponsor. The surrounding forests were stripped bare, their logs floated downstream to Williamsport, Lycoming County. Early on, they were tied together as super-sized rafts. Later, they were free-floated until corralled in "booms," or pools, between manmade islands connected by chains of floating logs. Men— sometimes boys as young as 12 years old— known as "lumber hicks" would sort them by the brands burnt into their ends and move them along to be turned into everything from ship masts to furniture.

"The largest boom was the Susquehanna Boom in Williamsport," said Jajko. "You can still see remnants of it on the river in the form of little grassy chains of islands."

That made fortunes for some—Williamsport was home to "Millionaire's Row," a section of downtown with more millionaires per capita than any other American city—but also left behind a scarred landscape.

On top of that, acid mine drainage from deep mines in the same hills left much of the river dead, too polluted to support fish life.

But, how things have changed. The surrounding hillsides are once again heavily forested, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of acres of state forests, state parks and state game lands.

The 34 miles or so of river between Karthaus, Clearfield County, and Renovo, Clinton County, is, in fact, the wildest, remotest float a paddler can experience in Pennsylvania.

“If you get in at Karthaus, you get out at Renovo,” said Jajko. “You kind of don’t have any other choice. It’s quite a stretch, definitely winding and wild.”

“But, we’ve gotten feedback that it’s people’s favorite section for that very reason, that it’s so off the grid. People have compared it to being in Colorado. You kind of forget that you’re in Pennsylvania.”

At the same time, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC), watershed organizations and sportsmen’s groups have worked hard to clean up the river. The result is a diverse and improving fishery.

“The river’s lower reaches, from Williamsport down to the mouth, a little over 35 miles, have always been pretty good,” said Jason Detar, PFBC’s area fisheries manager. “It’s always supported a pretty good warmwater fishery, particularly for Smallmouth Bass.”

But, these days, the river upstream is undergoing “a remarkable recovery.”

“The uppermost reaches of the West Branch, in Cambria and Clearfield counties, support wild Brown Trout, with the occasional Brook Trout mixed in,” said Detar.

“Work remains to be done, especially toward the river’s middle. The Karthaus to Renovo section, for example, remains in recovery phase,” said Detar. So, while it’s an iconic float and has Smallmouth Bass and other fish, it’s not yet necessarily a destination fishing water.

It’s getting better, though, and “I do think we’ll continue to see improvements in decades to come,” said Detar.

“The West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail is considered beginner-friendly, a Class I water with tame rapids under normal conditions that draws people. And certainly, when the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership hosts organized group floats, for 50 to 100 people at a time, all fill up,” said Jajko.

But, there’s really no way to monitor traffic on the river.

Tallon and Devyn saw no other paddlers upriver of Renovo. That was probably at least partly due to the time of year, though. Because Tallon is a school teacher, they couldn’t start their trip until July. That meant lots of skinny—ankle deep—water that can make kayaking and canoeing difficult.

Even if some sections of the river are best floated in the spring and fall, others are doable all year.



photo-Bob Frye

Stopping along the West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail to enjoy the quiet.

“From day trips to multi-day sojourns, there are a lot of different ways you can mix and match on-the-water adventure, which is really cool,” said Jajko.

The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership has information on recommended paddling itineraries and other information on its website. “Those kinds of details, available in one place, are the very thing that make ‘official’ water trails different from other waterways,” said Tali MacArthur, Program Manager for the Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers.

“The benefit of a water trail is that there’s information you can rely on about that waterway,” said MacArthur. “There’s a map that shows you where you can put your boat in the water, where you can take your boat out of the water, points of interest along the way and possible connections to land trails nearby. These are resources that you can count on.”

Susquehanna Greenway Partnership:





The West Branch Susquehanna River as seen from the overlook at Hyner View State Park, Clinton County.



Photos: Bob Frye

Accessing the West Branch Susquehanna in Hyner, Clinton County.



A view of the West Branch Susquehanna River from the overlook at Hyner View State Park.

“The idea is that there’s an entity you can call, talk to, visit their website, or go on their Facebook page to find out about the waterway, so you’re not going in cold.”

There’s a network of water trails across the state at pecpa.org/water/pa-water-trails—that MacArthur hopes to grow.

In the meantime, existing trail sponsors, like the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership, are always looking to improve conditions for paddlers. On the West Branch Susquehanna River, for example, the focus right now is on studying two kinds of access: opportunities to add new launches and opportunities to make more launches Americans with Disabilities Act compliant. The idea is to get even more paddlers and more anglers on the West Branch Susquehanna River and into its various river towns going forward.

Tallon hopes to be one of them. Visiting the river she never knew existed once is not enough.

“Oh my gosh, it’s stunning,” said Tallon. “When you’re on it and you’re going through the mountains, and you come around the bend and there’s just more mountains, it’s gorgeous.” ☐

More Information:

At 228 miles long, the West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail can seem daunting. But, the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership breaks it into manageable pieces. Paddlers who visit susquehannagreenway.org/branches/west-branch will find suggested floats ranging in size with difficulty level, paddle time, potential hazards and recommended water levels.

Visitors can also buy a waterproof river trail map for \$25 or download a free digital version.

There’s a West Branch Paddle Club, too. Members get merchandise discounts, notice of group floats and more. Dues support projects benefitting the river, like the installation of fishing line recycling collection bins.

Paddlers who complete the entire river or any of four segments—detailed online, too—can earn pins and other recognition.

For additional information on paddling safety, launch permits, registration and the other branches of the Susquehanna River, go to susquehannagreenway.org/water-trails.