

Upper Saco River

New England's largest intact floodplain

Connecting Landscapes - The Saco River begins in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and flows through fertile Mount Washington Valley farmland to the Gulf of Maine. Protecting the Saco means protecting the integrity of natural landscapes along the entire river.

Connecting Habitats - Seasonal flooding connects the river to the surrounding land. Spring floods bring nutrients to the soil of the floodplain and shape the habitat for plants and animals. Floodwaters are cleaned and purified as they filter through the glacial till of the valley. Protecting the Saco means preserving rare habitats along the river that have been shaped by flooding.

Connecting People to Nature - The Saco floodplain has been inhabited for thousands of years and farmed for hundreds. It is the most popular canoeing river in New England and is used for fishing, camping, hunting, and birding. Protecting the Saco means working with people to help them enjoy the river responsibly.

Connecting Organizations - The Nature Conservancy is collaborating with a diverse group of partners on the Saco. Local land trusts, town and county agencies, and regional and national organizations are all working together to protect the river and educate the people who use it.

Connecting You - You can make your personal connection to the Saco count by supporting the Conservancy's work on this important project.



Fall colors on the Saco River in the shadow of Mount Tom.
©Stefan Jackson/TNC

FLOODING BRINGS RENEWAL, fertilizing soil and opening habitat for new growth. But as we develop the land around rivers and control their flows, we disrupt this rejuvenation process and endanger the plants and animals it sustains. That is what makes the upper Saco River so remarkable. Here the seasonal cycle of flooding continues unhampered by dams or levees. Spring rains bring river water over the banks, where it scours the landscape, making room for rare plants and animals. The water then percolates slowly through the fine glacial soils of the floodplain and returns to streams and springs naturally filtered and purified—giving the Saco some of the cleanest water in Maine.

But New England's largest intact floodplain and the clean waters and rare species it supports are being threatened. High property values in the area are spurring unsustainable residential and commercial development. Every slab of concrete or foot of asphalt laid on the floodplain hampers the natural water-purification process and brings unfiltered runoff to the river. The heavy flow of visitors flocking to the river to paddle, raft, and swim also takes a toll. Most visitors respect the river, but some trample fragile riverbank habitat or leave behind garbage that pollutes the river and its banks.

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THE SACO WATERSHED is not wilderness: the river valley has been inhabited for thousands of years. In its bottomlands, farmers benefit from fertile floodplain soils. Its uplands include woodlots that have been managed for generations and pastures that have only recently reverted to forest. The groundwater of the floodplain provides drinking water to over 100,000 people and supplies a growing bottled-water business. Tens of thousands of visitors flock to the river each year for canoeing, camping, swimming, hunting, and fishing.

The combination of biological resources and economic and recreational uses in the Saco watershed make it a high priority for conservation. At stake are not only the rare plants and animals that call the river home but also the livelihoods, water supplies, and recreational opportunities of thousands of people.



Ebony jewelwing damselfly. ©Mike Lincoln

CONSERVING THE RIVER'S RESOURCES for people and for nature requires a holistic approach and innovative methods. The Nature Conservancy is collaborating with towns, counties, and organizations throughout the upper Saco watershed from New Hampshire to Hiram, Maine. We are also working with with regional organizations such as the Appalachian Mountain Club, Saco River Corridor Commission, Saco River Recreational Council, and Upper Saco Valley Land Trust. Our approach integrates education, research, and land preservation.



Paddling on the Saco. ©Stefan Jackson

The Conservancy's Saco River staff maintains a prominent presence on the river, educating visitors about the importance of clean water, protecting river habitats, and the "leave no trace" philosophy. We have identified fourteen key habitat types along the river and we are evaluating the impact of invasive plants and animals.

We are working with private and public landowners to protect working forests and working farmlands along the river. In collaboration with local land trusts and with businesses like Hancock Land Company, we are protecting lands that are important to the integrity of the landscape and to maintaining water quality. This involves buying or securing donations of land or easements, and helping local governments and organizations make good decisions about land use. Our agreement with Hancock will allow us to leverage our resources in the face of high property values and will allow the company to foster sustainable forestry practices in the region.

OUR APPROACH in the Upper Saco River watershed emphasizes connections: between the river and the land, between people and nature, and between the different communities along the Saco. To keep making these connections, the Conservancy is seeking public and private funding, as well as land donations.

for more information

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