

Purpose

The purpose of this water trail management document is to explore and discuss key management points for the Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail, illustrate the role of partner organizations and the water trail management functions provided as part of a PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Partnership grant through Allegheny Ridge Corporation, and identify key management recommendations for the near future.

Section 1: Water Trail Description and History

The Kiski-Conemaugh River Basin encompasses 1,888 square-miles in southwestern Pennsylvania. It is the largest sub-basin to the Allegheny River watershed. The Conemaugh River is formed where the Stonycreek and Little Conemaugh Rivers merge in Johnstown. The Kiskiminetas begins in Saltsburg at the nexus of the Conemaugh and Loyalhanna Creek. The Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail covers 86 river miles along the borders of Somerset, Cambria, Westmoreland, Indiana, and Armstrong counties, from Johnstown to Freeport. The headwaters of the Conemaugh originate at around 3,000 feet above sea level and the course of the river drops to 957 feet above sea level at the mouth of the Kiskiminetas. There are 21 official access points, and ability to paddle the rivers varies throughout the year, with peak water flow between February and May. Portions of the water trail corridor are within the Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape, and the water trail is a key feature in the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway™.

Among the water trail's unique features are Conemaugh and Packsaddle Gaps in the upper section, and Kiski Valley river towns in the lower section. The 1,560-foot deep Conemaugh Gap is the third deepest gorge in Pennsylvania, cutting through the Laurel Ridge and offering a 7-mile paddle from the northernmost access in Johnstown to Seward. Packsaddle Gap is 1,380-foot deep and formed where the river cuts through the Chestnut Ridge. Packsaddle offers an 8-10 mile paddle, depending on which of Blairsville's 2 access ramps are used for take out, and features several visible Main Line Canal remnants. These are the most remote sections of the river, contrasted by Kiski Valley trips that are punctuated by river towns including Saltsburg, Avonmore, Apollo, Vandergrift, Leechburg, and Freeport. Estimated annual usage of the water trail is 10,000, based on participation in events and surveys with outfitters.

The water trail has seen a steady increase in recreational use over the past 20 years, and has become more popular as a kayaking and canoeing destination in the last 10. During that time, outfitters along the water trail grew from 1 to 5, with most activity in the lower basin along the Kiski.

The rivers are enjoying an environmental recovery, the basis of which was originally documented in the 1999 Kiski-Conemaugh River Conservation Plan, and is primarily related to Abandoned Mine Drainage. The progress of recovery is documented in Conemaugh Valley Conservancy's 2017 State of the Kiski-Conemaugh River Watershed: Community Shift, which states the 1999 plan "was heavily utilized, with 88% of its 120 recommendations implemented to some degree." Community Shift further states, "The Kiskiminetas River, the receiving waterway of all upstream restoration and conservation efforts, has drastically improved biologically and has become a recreational fishing and paddling destination. In 1980, when the PA Department of Environmental Resources (now DEP) surveyed fish at the mouth of the Kiskiminetas River, they found no fish, just one frog. The river was dead largely from uncontrolled mine and industrial discharges, sewage, and runoff. When that survey was repeated in 2015 by the PA Fish and Boat Commission, 386 individuals of 28 species were collected..."

The State of the Watershed report remains a comprehensive collection of the work of environmental partners, including watershed associations, Conservation Districts, and other stewardship organizations. The role of these partners in the related development of recreational opportunities on the river cannot be overstated.

Water trail features similarly developed and evolved during that timeframe. Conemaugh Valley Conservancy secured designation for the river system as a PA Water Trail in 2000, successfully nominated the rivers for River of the Year, and organized the first annual multi-day river sojourn. Westsylvania Heritage Corporation produced the first version of a water trail map. At that time, the map included only ## access points, with all 86 river miles displayed on one 11" x 17" map.

In 2010, Allegheny Ridge Corporation produced an update to the water trail map to showcase the progressive development of recreational amenities. The water trail is part of ARCorp's signature initiative, the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway, and 320-mile corridor of hub communities and heritage sites linked by land and water trails. To accommodate a dozen additional river access points, the map was broken into 2, 11" x 17" segments, and upper section, from Johnstown to Blairsville, and a lower section, Blairsville to Freeport. The 2010 map also incorporated nearly 40 miles of nearby biking trails, including Ghost Town, Hoodlebug, West Penn, Westmoreland Heritage, and Roaring Run trails. The corridor's river towns were also highly featured, with descriptions of each community and an inset map to connect the river access to downtown businesses and points of interest. The map and narrative side of the map was re-formatted for easy printing from an on-line version.

ARCorp secured designation for the water trail and several regional bike trails as National Recreation Trails in 2013.

A web-based interactive map was added by ARCorp in 2015, with businesses, points of interest, historic photos and environmental stewardship messages. The interactive map directs users to watershed organizations and historic societies web presence. A number of interpretive panels were also produced with QR codes linked to the interactive map or other specific web resources, and installed in Johnstown, Blairsville, and Vandergrift.

In 2017, ARCorp implemented several recommendations from its 2011 Kiski Valley Greenway Plan, the thrust of which was positioning Kiski Valley communities to capitalize on the river as a resource. The project produce 3 stone arch gateway signs (Avonmore, Apollo, Leechburg), 5 river town maps and kiosks at river access points (Saltsburg, Avonmore, Vandergrift, Leechburg, Freeport), 7 heritage and environmental stewardship interpretive signs, and 2 public art pieces (Apollo, Vandergrift).

An update to the printed water trail maps, the interactive map, and river town maps are being produced by ARCorp in 2022. An evaluation of river town signage, including an assessment of and action plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion in interpretive signage, is planned for 2023.

Section 2: Existing Management Practices and Priorities

Allegheny Ridge Corporation manages one of Pennsylvania's 12 Heritage Areas. ARCorp's signature initiative is the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway™, a 320-mile corridor of hub communities and heritage sites, linked by land and water trails. The Greenway is one of PA DCNR's "mega greenways," and works to champion the sustainable development of recreation, natural, cultural, and historical resources along the Main Line Canal Greenway corridor through the following objectives:

- Illustrate ways to experience the Greenway – by bike, by boat, by car, through technology;
- Provide destination-oriented marketing organizations with electronic, print, and other resources to direct people to Greenway resources and attractions;
- Promote the work of and celebrate successes of Greenway partners;
- Educate partners, communities, legislators about the value and importance of Greenway assets.

As a Heritage Area and coordinator of a mega-greenway, ARCorp qualifies to apply for DCNR's Partnership Grant program, which enables the organization to invest human and financial resources for partners and projects that further the Greenway goals referenced above. ARCorp includes deliverables associated with Water Trail Management in Partnership Grant Workplans, but there is no formal management structure or authority by which that management occurs. Instead, the focus has been on assisting with projects that further the sustainable recreational use of the water trail, support the work of environmental partners, and position communities to benefit from the nearby recreational resource.

Specifically, the role of the water trail manager is to:

- Assist municipalities and other partners with river access development and position communities to benefit from nearby recreation assets, following a resourced-based, river/trail town model;
- Promote and support the work of environmental and heritage partners via social media/communications/interpretive work including public art;
- Create, update, and disseminate water trail maps and other marketing materials;
- Participate in the PA Water Trails Program;
- Assist with implementation of Stony-Kisk-Conemaugh Rivers Sojourn and Packsaddle Gap Paddle and Picnic, West Penn Trail Triathlon, and other, similar events;
- Consult with water trail users for trip planning.

Recreational opportunities

Marketing materials for the water trail also reflect additional, complementary recreational opportunities with an emphasis on directing users directly to the managers of those resources. The primary focus is on bike trails, which in the Kiski-Conemaugh area have coalesced as the [Trans Allegheny Trails](#). A map and website dedicated to these trails includes 13 rail-type trails between the Allegheny Ridge and Allegheny River. Trails most closely associated with the Kiski-Conemaugh are The Path of the Flood Trail, Staple Bend Tunnel Trail, and Jim Mayer Riverswalk near Johnstown, the Hoodlebug and Blairsville Riverfront Trail, the West Penn Trail between Blairsville and Saltsburg and the Westmoreland Heritage Trail from Saltsburg to Turtle Creek, the Roaring Run Trail and Apollo's Kiski Riverfront Trail. Efforts to close the gaps between these trails are always underway.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Continue to support or facilitate closure of gaps between bike trails in the water trail corridor.

Educational Programs

Many watershed associations provide outstanding outreach and education, but much of the environmental programming in the basin is provided by County Conservation Districts. The focus of most Conservation Districts' programming is on allowing individuals to explore issues and the natural world, engage in problem-solving, and make informed choices about how their behavior impacts sustainability of natural resources. Programming includes custom and prescribed presentations, poster contests, Envirothon competitions, and more. Explore the fantastic Districts serving citizens in the Kiski-Conemaugh basin at the links below:

[Somerset Conservation District](#)
[Cambria Conservation District](#)
[Westmoreland Conservation District](#)
[Indiana County Conservation District](#)
[Armstrong Conservation District](#)

Some of the interpretive work implemented through the Greenway provides environmental education and messaging. The focus of that messaging is always on Supporting the Work of Environmental Partners, providing links to stewardship organizations' websites and/or social media platforms. (add images of stewardship signs)

Conservation and Stewardship

The seminal document on past, present, and future stewardship in the basin is Conemaugh Valley Conservancy's 2017 [State of the Kiski-Conemaugh Watershed: Community Shift](#).

Recreational enjoyment of the Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail is contingent on the ongoing restoration and stewardship of the river. For this reason, one of the themes for Greenway work on water trail management is Support the Work of Environmental Partners. Volunteer watershed associations have implemented restoration projects throughout the basin, primarily Abandoned Mine Drainage remediation systems, but also stream bank restoration, invasive plant remediation, and nutrient-management projects. It's essential that the membership and volunteer bases of these groups be refreshed and maintained – many of their long-term leaders are aging and in need of new help to continue their work. Further, many of the AMD treatment systems built 10-25 years ago will need maintenance, upgrades, and enhancements.

In 2021, after securing financing to update and maintain several 25 year old critical AMD treatment systems protecting the water quality of the Stonycreek River, the Somerset Conservation District established the Somerset Conservation District Oven Run Treatment Sites A, D, E, and F Trust Fund at the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies. Initiated by several significant contributions from groups and individuals, the legacy fund will grow through investments over the coming years, and will provide monetary support costs for the ongoing operation, maintenance and reconstruction of Oven Run AMD Passive Treatment systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Support membership and volunteer recruitment efforts for watershed associations in the basin.
- Encourage opportunities to create "legacy funds" for future AMD treatment system maintenance.

Community Support and Partnerships

The primary thrust of the Greenway Coordinator's work with communities along the water trail is helping municipalities and businesses benefit from the river as a recreational resource. This work is built around the resource-based river/trail town economic enhancement model and has included development and installation of river/trail town maps at river access points the direct water trail users into towns to use businesses and services as well as interpretive signage to reveal unique stories and images associated with each town. (add images of river town maps and interpretive signs). The 2010 update of the map included an emphasis on the towns along the trail, adding inset maps of each community along with a brief description of each town's distinctive history and characteristics.

A major weakness in these efforts has been the underrepresentation of diverse populations in both recreational activities and interpretive work. Most interpretive work has focused on industrial heritage and environmental stewardship. But these themes, intentionally or not, have been penned by white people, for white people, and have omitted the experiences and contributions of people of color. Worse yet, sometimes culturally diverse stories are told from a white perspective. That lack of representation contributes to an outdoor recreation and stewardship ethic that sometimes appears not inclusive or welcoming. Emphasis will be placed on identifying and engaging new and diverse audiences, listening and hearing their perspectives, concerns, stories, celebrations, and following recommendations for how to better address these inequities. It is important to note that we do not know that path at this point.

ARCorp will begin trying to address this iniquity through a signage plan, funded in part by a mini-grant through the PA Water Trails Program. While the primary deliverable will be a signage plan of action, a secondary goal of the endeavor is to diversify audiences and engage new voices to not only paint a more complete picture of the heritage of the river corridor and related community development, but also establish a more inviting recreation experience for all.

It should be noted that the Watersmith Guild's [First Waves](#) program is making exciting progress in this area. The program "inspires conservation in unconventional ways," introducing standup paddleboarding (SUP), the art of filmmaking, and digital media to young people who may not otherwise encounter these opportunities, and using the endeavor as a catalyst to inspire conservation of local waterways and mentorship for at-risk youth. First Waves is active in the basin in partnership with Benscreek Canoe Club in Johnstown and the Indiana County Conservation District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Celebrate partner success in promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion.
- Complete signage plan and implement new, inclusive interpretive works.

Public Information

The water trail map conveys important safety and stewardship information on an entire page reviewed and edited by the PA Fish and Boat Commission. Also conveyed on the map are legal public canoe and kayak accesses, outfitters for boat rentals and shuttling, inset maps to direct water trail users to community points of interest, business and services. Due to developing and changing access points as well as environmental considerations, ARCorp is committed to printing small batches of printed water trail maps, however, [printer-friendly versions](#) available on the Main Line Canal Greenway water trail page.

Trail Maintenance

The Kiski-Conemaugh water course is fairly wide and does not create many opportunities for obstructions like strainers. The biggest challenge to routine paddling of some sections of the river is water level, and there are large sections of the water trail that are not fed by a dam, so this is not really a maintenance issue.

All access points are owned by either municipalities or conservation organizations, so the maintenance and upkeep of those sites is the responsibility of those owners. Only a few of the accesses are “primitive” in nature. Most are concrete pads and ramps, and generally require little maintenance. The Greenway Coordinator, however, provides technical assistance for access development and maintenance, as requested.

Section: 3 Contact Information

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Section 4: Appendices

Photos

Links to Maps

Allegheny Ridge Corporation – Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway™
Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail Management Plan – August 2022

Recommendations Table

Recommendation	Activities	Responsible Party	Priority
Continue to support or facilitate closure of gaps between bike trails in the water trail corridor.	-Implement Johnstown Urban Connectivity Plan	-CCCRA, CVC	Ongoing
	-West Penn Trail Blairsville – Roundabout with bike ped accommodation from Route 217 Road Safety Audit	-GW coordinator	Ongoing
	-West Penn Trail to Roaring Run Trail – acquisition of WPT to Avonmore; NS acquisition at Avonmore; private property/landscape to Salina	-GW coordinator, CVC, Avonmore boro	Moderate
	-Rt. 66 STR North Apollo to Leechburg -Leechburg to Kiski Junction RR – ATI access	-GW coordinator -GW coordinator, Armstrong Trails, LACDC	Moderate High
Support membership and volunteer recruitment efforts for watershed associations in the basin.	-Track hits to environmental partners' sites from interactive water trail map and social media -Celebrate volunteer recruitment successes (ex. WPT 4 new, younger volunteers in 2021)	-GW coordinator	High
Encourage opportunities to create "legacy funds" for future AMD treatment system maintenance.	-Share Oven Run treatment system maintenance fund example with other watershed associations in basin -Connect watershed associations with appropriate community foundations	-CVC's Stream Team? -GW coordinator	Moderate
Celebrate partner success in promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion.	-		Ongoing
Complete signage plan and implement new, inclusive interpretive works.	-Key person interviews to identify appropriate historic stories and resources -	-GW coordinator, via PA WT mini-grant	High