

The Totagatic ~ Proposed for Designation as a State Wild River

“Totagatic” – however you spell or pronounce it – brings to mind canoeing, hunting or fishing on a clean and wild river for many people in Northern Wisconsin.

Will this river stay wild in the future? At the 2004 “Superior Days” event at the state capitol, Washburn County representatives presented the idea of designating all (or portions of) the river as an official state Wild River.

The River’s Path:

The Totagatic flows approximately 70 miles through portions of five counties in northwest Wisconsin. It begins in southern Bayfield County, just upstream of Totagatic Lake. From the lake, it flows westerly through Sawyer, Washburn, and a small portion of Douglas County, crossing back into Washburn and eventually emptying into the Namekagon River in Burnett County. It is impounded by four dams forming Nelson Lake in Sawyer County, and the Totagatic, Colton, and Minong Flowages in Washburn County. The shoreline is relatively wild for much of the river’s length. A substantial portion of the land along the river is in public ownership as state, county, or federal land. There are also tracts of industrial forest land.

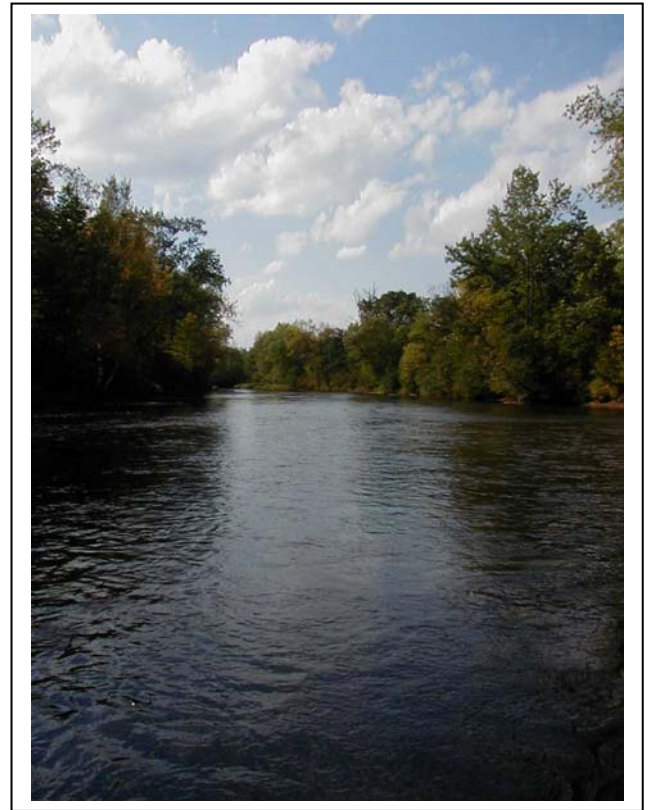
Why Seek the State “Wild River” designation?

In the 1977 edition of Canoeing the Wild Rivers of Northwest Wisconsin (published by Northwest Canoe Trails Inc.) the Totagatic was described as:

“...one of the few remaining near-wilderness streams in Wisconsin. The river and surrounding country are little changed since the last log drives in the early 1900s. Rough rock outcrops, rolling terrain, open marsh, and dense woodland provide constantly changing scenery for the canoeist. Most of the native species of wildlife can be seen on this trip...”

What’s in a name?

The name “Totagatic” comes from the Ojibwa word “Totogan” meaning “place of floating logs” or “boggy river” (according to Romance of Wisconsin Place Names, Heartland Press, 1988). Plat books, maps and tour books show a couple of spellings for the river and its namesake flowages. “Totagatic” and “Totogatic” are used interchangeably in these reference materials (sometimes both are used on the same page)! Pronunciation is varied between “Tuh-TO-ga-tic”, “To-TO-ga-tic”, “To-to-GAT-ic” and just “TO-ga-tic” according to long-time local residents. Each of these spellings and pronunciations seems to have a strongly-defended local following, and devotees of one will consider use of the others as incorrect.



The Totagatic, looking downstream at the Washburn-Burnett County line.

Because of extensive public ownership, this 28-year-old description is mostly accurate yet today. The river has a very wild character with forested banks, waterfalls, rock outcroppings, and relatively few road crossings. Fishing is good, with many cool-water game species present and several tributaries that support trout. There are stretches offering a challenge to whitewater canoeists, as well as quiet water segments through forestland and one area named the “Dismal Swamp”. There are presently no municipal, industrial, or commercial wastewater discharges to the river.

In 2000, the Department of Natural Resources’ Northern Rivers Initiative ranked the best streams in 20 northern counties for their wild nature based on habitat, wild shoreline, fisheries, and other resource and cultural values. The lower section of the Totagatic in Washburn County ranked in the top 2% (22nd out of 1494 stream and river segments), recognizing it as one of the state’s best. Some of the main threats to keeping the river in this natural and wild condition are clearing and development on either public or private land, and poor land use practices in the river’s watershed. Retaining the river’s wild character and habitat is dependent on all five counties and the state keeping their

present holdings in public ownership, and on responsible use and development of both public and private shoreline and forestland. The Wild River designation would provide further protection measures from these threats under uniform state law and guidelines.

Although the Totagatic is a major tributary of the Namekagon, it was not included in the St. Croix National Wild and Scenic Riverway. However, it was recently designated an “Outstanding Resource Water under Wisconsin Administrative Code NR 102 (through a code revision effective in December, 2006). This designation offers further protection from the effects of development and new wastewater point-source discharges. While the Washburn County zoning ordinance does include “resource conservancy” protection (requiring a 300-foot setback for building along the banks on portions of the river), variances have been granted in the past allowing construction closer to the river on a case-by-case basis.

Protection offered under a “Wild River” designation:
Chapter 30.26 of the state statutes declares the legislative intent of designating a “Wild River” as a way to “*afford the people of the state an opportunity to enjoy natural streams*”. It further states that “*it is in the interest of the state to preserve some rivers in a free flowing condition and to protect them from development*”. This statute goes on to name the Pike River in Marinette County, and the Pine and the Popple in Florence and Forest Counties as Wild Rivers.

To protect these rivers, State administrative code NR 302.04 places restrictions on certain activities and structures along Wild Rivers. Once again, the intent is to protect and preserve public rights features, including maintenance of a natural condition, scenic beauty and rights incident to navigation. Further, NR 102 lists all state Wild Rivers as Outstanding Resource Waters, providing a further level of protection.

No new Wild Rivers have been added to the State’s list since 1965, when the Pike, Pine, and Popple Rivers were the first rivers so designated. The Totagatic is a resource well deserving this level of protection so that it will stay wild in the future. This designation would provide long-term, cohesive protection along the length of the river, rather than relying on county-by-county public ownership and zoning for protection.

Local Interest in Protection Measures:

The Washburn County Forestry Committee authorized the County Administrator to promote this proposal at Superior Days for the past few years. The Rivers Committee of the Washburn County Lake and Rivers Association has also expressed interest, as has a counterpart group in Burnett County. Northern Region DNR staff has been researching the statute and rule changes that would be needed to designate any additional waterbodies beyond the ones already listed, as well as potential public and private riparian implications. In 2006, the Washburn and Burnett County Boards passed official resolutions in favor of the designation.

How much of the River should be Designated “Wild”?

Since so much of the land along the river is still wild and in public ownership, the entire length could potentially be designated. It is proposed that the flowages be exempted, because of the dams forming them, and because much of the surrounding land is privately-held and already developed.

What is Needed to Gain this Designation?

Discussion is needed with the public, local river groups and county administration in each of the five counties the river passes through. Garnering further local support through county boards, county forestry and zoning committees, lake and river organizations, outdoor groups, and quiet sports enthusiasts should lead to resolutions supporting the measure. Discussions are needed with local legislators requesting their sponsorship. To officially gain this designation, Chapter 30 of the state statutes needs to be changed (by the state legislature) to add the Totagatic to the list (either as specific segments or the entire river).

This document and more information on the Wild Rivers proposal are available at:

<http://basineducation.uwex.edu/stcroix/Links/WildRiver/Index2.htm>