

Outcomes of Brule River Watershed Roundtable

TO: Board of Directors, Brule River Preservation
Participants, Brule River Watershed Roundtable

FROM: Caroline Marshall, Secretary, BRP

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“When a tree falls in the river, none of us really knows what to do,” Bob Banks, President of Brule River Preservation, mused in launching the first of what he suggested would be an ongoing series of meetings. Many agencies – the DNR, USGS, and Corps of Engineers, among them – bear management responsibility for some aspect of the resource and the watershed on which it depends, as do property owners who own the land under and adjacent to it. But there is a lack of cohesion and focus in the efforts of the many who are involved, and as a result, “there is no voice for the river,” as he put it. BRP’s purpose in hosting the gathering – and perhaps subsequent ones – would be to help create that voice.

By the time the meeting concluded, the two dozen individuals who participated (listed in an appendix) had created a comprehensive map of areas where good data and other information are lacking, as well as issues of concern to all. Individually they had also spoken eloquently about the reverence and passion that propels their personal stewardship of the Brule’s cultural and natural heritage, and their commitment to preserve it as a legacy. What follows summarizes their thoughts on where opportunities might lie “to help and advocate for the river,” as Mike Gardner, who facilitated the meeting, phrased it, as well as how the group might organize itself to carry the conversation forward.

The Context for Action

A number of people noted how policies, budgets, and customs related to the Brule wax and wane in cycles much as climate cycles do in affecting the river itself (“a classic sand country aquifer with a relatively stable system,” as Dave Zentner described the Brule in comparing it to the snow melt-fed streams along Minnesota’s North Shore). Poisoning the river to eradicate lampreys in the 60’s gave way to creation of a lamprey barrier on the lower river, while approaches to sustaining the fishery have swung between a preference for stocking to instead creating habitat to support self regeneration. In other words, the context for preserving the Brule is consistently dynamic, like the tension between those who fish for steelhead and those who pursue brook trout, and riven with transitions, like that Stephanie Judge spoke of in characterizing how The Nature Conservancy’s priorities have evolved over time, shifting toward the “protecting of whole systems,” instead of individual sites, as had been its practice when the 23 Brule easement agreements were signed. (Canoe-building, as Mat Holbrook pointed out, has also evolved, moving from wood to aluminum to fiber glass and now, plastic.)

Steady progress has been made on some fronts, however. As Kevin Feindt, Brule River State Forest’s Ranger and Deputy Conservation Warden, reported, the Landing Host Program funded by BRP has

helped improve the behavior of recreational users; there are fewer “naughty” people (although that few are “naughtier.”) And as Ken Lundberg, President of the Brule River Sportsmen’s Club testified, the annual cleanup his group undertakes sees much less litter than in past decades.

But the trends are negative in other areas. Budgets are waning so “the old turnkey agencies, like the DNR, are no longer as equipped to the job as they once were,” Zentner noted. Moreover, “they aren’t left alone to do the job but are instead subject to significant political pressures.” And meanwhile, as Michael Spencer suggested, there are more people spending time on the river – but that time is much less than in the past; people come and go quickly. This lack of “residency” and burgeoning among the families who have traditionally served as river stewards is worrying in that it complicates the attempt to inspire and model good stewardship practices.

Critical Issues - River & Watershed

With such dynamism as context the group went on to enumerate current critical concerns that should be addressed. Among them:

- *Climate change and resiliency.* Anecdotally it appears that the river’s water temperature is rising; Bill Rogers reported catching a blue gill in Big Lake, for example. And trees near the lake also appear to be dying off. But anecdote is not a sufficient foundation for action, and data is sorely lacking, it was said, save for temperatures the U. S. Geological Survey documents, from “ice out to ice in,” on its gauge on the lower river, and what the DNR is able to learn videotaping fish migrating through the lower river “fish way” that Fisheries Biologist Paul Piszczek described.
- *Sedimentation and its impact on the river as a “Class I” fishery.* Deborah Holbrook spoke, as did others, of problems maintaining the fast, cold flow of water trout need when runoff collects as silt and vegetation takes root. (Only half joking, Mark Sullivan and Banks suggested they are probably unique in gaining real estate without purchasing property on the river – meaning the cattail island that has sprung up off their banks).

Michael Spencer recalled how Big Lake was dredged in the 30’s – a radical move that Piszczek acknowledged might be necessary to remove the island. “Siltng is becoming a problem,” he admitted, and “a healthy habitat is critical to a healthy fishery.” But, he cautioned, “Everything’s not going to look peachy if we have to bring in heavy equipment.”

- *Invasive species.* In addition to cattail, those present catalogued a growing number of invasives, including buckthorn, spotted knapweed, reed canary grass, Eurasian water milfoil, and emerald ash borer. It was suggested these unwelcome residents might be spread by people unwittingly carrying them from place to place on their shoes, or by the mowing of road corridors at the wrong time, or by bringing gravel from an infested pit.
- *Forest health and silva culture.* Caroline Marshall brought up the question of how forests surrounding the river are managed to its benefit or detriment – not only the BRSF and commercial plantations that are subject to periodic harvesting, but the old growth along the river corridor, where many stands are stressed or “terminal,” and fire is such a hazard. Stephanie

Judge noted that young jack pine are regenerating where fire ravaged the Barnes area – a good thing for the cerulean warbler and other endangered species. She suggested it might be prudent to introduce controlled burns. (Meanwhile, the Firewise web site, <http://www.firewise.org>, was said to be an excellent resource for suggesting how to reduce the risk of wildfires.)

Critical Issues – Organizing

- *Lower river/upper river dichotomy.* Differing priorities for the river’s fishery and unequal representation in organizations like the Sportsmen’s Club and Brule River Preservation that have traditionally shepherded efforts to maintain and/or restore the river, contribute to the general lack of cohesion and focus, it was noted. This imbalance should be addressed if an authentic “voice of the river” is to be created.
- *Proliferation of generations among landowners.* As suggested, such ongoing proliferation will require the development of a robust communications system and education program to reach, inform, and inspire the river’s future stewards.
- *Baseline information needed to proceed.* “What research has been done in the past? What is being done now? What do we know?” Bob Banks opined regarding the need for knowledge as a basis for action – and action ranging from how to handle a tree falling in the river to what the river’s “carrying capacity” might be (as he said, “we don’t want to love it to death”).

Jane Anklam pointed out that given how much state land the Brule watershed encompasses, it offers “a nice, closed system” for research, and the new conservation easement on the headwaters area amplifies the opportunity to study climate change and resiliency. Thought must be given to kinds of research that should take priority, and agencies that might support it.

- *Lack of watershed literacy and “mindset.”* The Brule’s reputation has encouraged exclusive focus on it, overlooking the larger environment that governs its health. “I’ve never heard the words “Brule” and “watershed” in the same sentence,” lamented Gardner. Bob Fitzwilliam noted that most states created soil and water conservation districts after passage of the Clean Water Act of 1972 (Wisconsin did not, according to Gardner; instead it established county or municipal oversight). But “we need to take a systems approach,” said Fitzwilliam, “instead of ‘patching.’”
- *Relations with local governments.* In keeping with such a broader, more comprehensive approach it was agreed that organizations associated with Lake Nebagamon and Lake Minnissing, as well as town councils, county boards, and other entities, should be included in organizing efforts.

Opportunities

Throughout the discussion participants alluded to the time being ripe for action. Opportunities they cited:

- *The potential for DNR and other agencies’ support.* Steve LaValley reported that the DNR’s regional management “has been looking at resources it can put toward taking a watershed approach.” And Feindt suggested BRSF’s annual fall and spring public meetings might provide useful opportunities to move a coalition agenda forward. Further, it was said the USGS’s Faith Fitzpatrick intends to visit the river this fall – an opportunity to bring that agency along, as well.

- *Collaboration attracts resources.* As Fitzwilliam pointed out, the lack of resources makes such collaboration attractive to foundations and government agencies; West Wisconsin Land Trust is currently working with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the headwaters of Pike’s Creek.
- *Research getting underway.* Gardner referred to research programs, already receiving funding, that will enlarge understanding of issues with which the roundtable participants expressed concern. They include “a wetland assessment” being undertaken by Douglas County that will “study functions and values and determine what is worth protecting or, if need be, restoring,” and a NOAA grant to the Lake Superior National Estuarine Reserve that will study natural resource management techniques in the St. Louis River’s estuary near Superior and share what is learned with children in South Shore schools.

Caveats

The need to be mindful of “unintended consequences” was noted in undertaking any activity. There are always trade-offs, as Michael Spencer pointed out, describing how DOT’s wetlands mitigation program has removed land from Cloverland Township’s tax base, infuriating area farmers. As he said, “we need to keep ‘the big picture’ in mind, whether it’s the watershed, or the economics at work in it.”

Vision

As the meeting wound up, Gardner summarized the vision for the first Brule River Watershed Roundtable’s giving rise to a new entity – *the Brule River Coalition*, whose goal would be “to provide an ongoing government-citizen forum to enhance communication, collaboration, and cooperation on environmental concerns, especially water quality issues, among the various local governments and stakeholder interest groups within the Brule River watershed.”

Getting Started

All agreed on the following as “next steps” to make that vision operational:

- Identify who else should be involved, including the, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lime Timber, Trout Unlimited, and representatives of watershed counties, among others.
- Take the coalition idea “on the road,” appearing at meetings of these entities to get peoples’ response to ideas generated by the roundtable and to ask “Will you be willing to do X or Y?”
- Draft a one-page template for a formal memorandum of understanding to be signed by participating agencies and organizations to assure their institutional commitment to doing X or Y; as Fitzwilliam pointed out, “You need to formalize partnering to get anything done.” (This MOU should articulate shared goals and guiding principles, as well as roles and responsibilities. The U. S. Forest Service was also said to have a good model.)
- Identify “shovel ready,” doable things, like getting water temperature gauges into the upper river.

As Gardner concluded, the time has come to push, strive, and convene!

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