

## **West Branch named 'River of the Year'**

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The word Susquehanna means "the long, winding river," as it was called by the Lenape Indians, but this year, the West Branch of the Susquehanna may be called something else as well - Pennsylvania's River of the Year.

"We chose the West Branch of the Susquehanna essentially for what has been, what is and what can be in terms of the prevalence of the river," Terry Brady, deputy press secretary with the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said. "The river has a historic past and an unlimited future once that water runs clean."

Tourism and conservation efforts already in place along the West Branch contributed to it being named river of the year, but with the collective efforts of the Pennsylvania Wilds initiative, the Department of Community and Economic Development and the Pennsylvania Tourism Bureau, Brady said the river is becoming a prime location for the state to promote more nature-based tourism.

The West Branch begins in Cambria County and flows over 200 miles until it joins with the North Branch in Northumberland County, forming the nation's 16th largest river and the largest draining into the Atlantic Ocean, according to the Visit PA Web site.

"The Susquehanna River is the river of the state," Brady said. "It was the link to the lumbering regions, and even when I was a kid it was a historic river." Williamsport's lumber heritage is deeply anchored in the West Branch. "Along the river you can see evidence of the great lumber industry in its heyday," Brady said. "There are even some anchors still in the river from the barges who used to carry lumber down the West Branch."

Besides the river being the subject of a June Rivers Month poster, a sojourn is being planned June 2-6 from Keating in Clinton County to Williamsport. During the event, coordinated by DCNR and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, groups will paddle the river in canoes or kayaks, stopping overnight in towns along the way.

"The sojourn draws a tremendous amount of attention to the river in terms of political groups, conservation groups and the media," Brady said. "And people get to see the river from a different perspective. Instead of driving alongside the river, you are in the river itself, seeing wildlife, fish life and the interesting people who live along the river." The county Visitors Bureau will assist with the sojourn, showcasing the river's importance as a waterway for outdoor recreation and as a backyard benefit for locals, bureau executive director Jason Fink said.

"For Lycoming County this is an opportunity to make people aware of a natural resource utilized by local residents, but one that can also be used as a tourism asset," he said. Fink said that he hopes recreation enthusiasts traveling to the river will also venture into cities and towns to discover other aspects of the county like restaurants, hiking trails and feeder streams, such as Pine Creek.

Renee Carey, executive director of the Northcentral Pennsylvania Conservancy, the organization that coordinated a river conservation plan for 75 miles of the West Branch from Farrandsville to Northumberland, said the selection as river of the year is a testament to all of the conservation projects along the West Branch. "This designation is an opportunity to showcase the good work along the river from the water quality research being done by local universities to recreational and water quality improvements," she said.

Carey cited many improvement efforts along the West Branch from Lock Haven, Bucknell and Susquehanna universities compiling a database of historic records on water quality to the Market Street bridge replacement project, which will provide a walkway on top of the dike so people can view the river from above.