A Vision for South Skunk River and Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

Booklet 7 of 8
Greater Des Moines
Water Trails and Greenways
2016

Photo: Jim Pease
Chichaqua Bottoms
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Booklet 1 provides an overview of the broader Water Trails and Greenways Plan including vision, goals, strategies, policies, and implementation considerations. Please read through Booklet 1 to understand the larger framework that will directly impact each individual river and creek.

Booklet 2: Beaver Creek

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Booklet 4: Fourmile and Mud Creeks

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One Vision, Many Communities

The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan establishes a regional vision for our rivers, creeks, and greenways. Through extensive community engagement, and with the help of a strong steering committee, a clear regional vision emerged.

Regional Vision
The water trails and greenways of Greater Des Moines will be a natural haven, healthy ecosystem, signature recreational destination, economic driver, and community focal point that welcome people of all ages, abilities, interests, incomes, and cultures to connect with their rivers, creeks, and greenways.

This Booklet
The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan looks at more than 150 miles of waterways. This booklet provides an overview of South Skunk River and the Chichaqua Greenbelt, including recommendations to improve its environmental, recreational, and economic potential for the entire community. There are companion booklets for each waterway, as well as an overall Plan booklet covering common strategies and practices.
Existing Conditions

Miles in study area: 18  
Floodplain in public ownership: 28%  
Jurisdictions within study area: Polk County  
Current number of access points: 3  
Primary Water Quality Impairment: Category 5, Bacteria

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt is a rare, wild gem near the metro, the largest preserve of its kind in the region. It is 9,100 acres of a mostly continuous public land primarily owned by the Polk County Conservation Board. Chichaqua offers paddlers unparalleled wildlife viewing. The Skunk River is mostly a non-meandering stream, straightened to support its agricultural neighbors. Because of its straight nature and high levees, the South Skunk River does not offer a very interesting float and therefore is not frequently used for recreation despite the existence of boat access points and easy paddling experience.  

Since the 1960s, Polk County Conservation has been working to restore old oxbows of the original South Skunk River. More than 2000 acres of low-lying wetland are now managed by the county. This significant natural area makes this a birdwatcher and animal lover paradise. Currently the oxbows can be accessed from within the park and the county offers craft rental and programs. Full implementation of the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan will make this a rare wild gem for our region. For more information about the existing conditions, please refer to the State of the Rivers report published in February of 2016.  

Recommendations

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt  
This area provides a unique paddling experience unlike anything else in the state. The wilderness along the oxbows in the greenbelt provides high quality wildlife viewing. During average water levels, about two miles of out-and-back paddling are available in the old Skunk River oxbows located north of the current park headquarters. The lack of water current and relatively shallow depth mean that this is family-friendly and appropriate for novice paddlers. The current carry-down boat put-in and take-out are at the same place, so the paddle can be shortened or lengthened as the water level allows and paddler desires vary. This also makes car shuttling unnecessary. The park offers many existing amenities that can be capitalized upon for expanded programming and use of the park, including electric camp sites, flush bathrooms, a shower house, foot trails, shelters for events and programs, and a small livery.
It is recommended that the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan be implemented. Additionally, proposed improvements could include:
- Install wayfinding signage within the oxbows
- Add platform or adventure camping within a “wild” feeling area of the greenbelt
- Expansion of foot and bike trails
- Expansion of environmental education facilities.

**Skunk River**
The Skunk River is a channelized ditch that offers an easy, yet uninteresting, paddle. The banks tend to be steep (usually about a 45 degree incline) and 4-5 feet high. Excluding Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt, the land is privately owned. Without negatively impacting upstream landowners, it is recommended to seek opportunities to restore the flow of water through historic Skunk River meanders and oxbows.
The *Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan* was developed by Polk County Conservation as a clear vision for this area. The document is intended for use as an ecology/management plan that will underpin all decision-making. As such, the master plan is one of the key resources for the future of Chichaqua Bottoms and the South Skunk River. The document outlines significant improvements in the area for water quality and quantity initiatives, interpretive and educational amenities, wayfinding and signage, facilities, and ongoing land protection.

**Conservation Improves Recreation**

Watershed improvements will lead to more stable shorelines, improved water quality, enhanced habitat and decreased flooding. Therefore a more stable watershed improves the recreational value of the waterway and decreases maintenance through less tree fall, less sedimentation of access points, and a greater sense of safety by users.

See recommendations mentioned in the *Water Trails and Greenways Plan: Booklet 1* for watershed improvements and shoreline restoration.
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*Additional initiatives can be found in the Water Trails and Greenways Plan: Booklet 1"
South Skunk River & Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

South Skunk River
Potential Water Trail Designation: Recreational
Potential Experience Level: Beginner

South Skunk River is channelized with steep banks. Accesses are well-maintained, though markings from the river need to be improved. Few hazards and the straightened nature of the river creates simple paddling conditions for beginners, despite the potential for sandbars and snags at low-level water conditions.

*See appendix regarding more detailed considerations and implications of these designations.
Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

Potential Water Trail Designation: Wilderness

Potential Experience Level: Beginner

Given its degree of solitude, quiet and excellent views of wildlife, the oxbows within the greenbelt have the potential to be designated as a Wilderness Level water trail. To support a beginner paddler, it is recommended that in-stream wayfinding signage be installed.

*See appendix regarding more detailed considerations and implications of these designations.
Symbology Explained

**Carry-down Access**

Carry-down accesses are for non-motorized paddling such as kayaking, tubing, or canoeing. Site design involves many factors, and should first look at the Iowa DNR’s *Developing Water Trails in Iowa* guidelines. Lesser accesses are denoted by the portage symbol, and may not require the same level of infrastructure or amenities.

- Lighting and trash cans
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Launch types
- Watercraft and bicycle lockers
- Interpretive and wayfinding signage

**Wading Access**

Wading spaces are where we can get our feet wet. They can be designed for mucking among natural vegetation and sandbars or as play spaces with steps and stones. No matter the design, wading areas allow us the opportunity to physically connect to the water and nature.

- All ages access
- Restrooms/showers
- Benches and resting points in view of access

**Fishing**

Fishing is a popular activity all along the creeks and rivers. Creating access points can provide safe and comfortable areas that support anglers. Rock outcroppings, docks, and other designs offer different experiences. Universal design is critical since fishing is often a multi-generational activity.

- Restrooms
- Lights and trash cans
- Spaces for relaxing
- All-ages/abilities design
- Parking and bicycle parking

**Respite**

Areas to relax, take in the view, and enjoy the river allow people to find a moment of respite in the metro. These areas can be natural greenspaces or more urban like the Principal Riverwalk depending on the context of the area and desire of the community.

- Benches with a view
- Picnic areas and tables
- Paths and trails along water
Economic Hub

Water trails can play a role in developing economic hubs. These hubs typically represent the convergence of multiple assets, such as a river, trails, residential and economic clustering, and other factors. These are destinations that draw in visitors for multiple reasons. The scale changes for smaller or rural communities, but the economic impacts remain. These hubs are opportunities for supportive development along the rivers.

- Event spaces
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Launch types
- Bicycle parking
- Public art
- Restaurants and shops
- Liveries/outfitters
- Shuttle service

Activity Hub

Activity hubs leverage existing attractions into destinations where multiple activities converge. These hubs take advantage of nearby parks and trails to create spaces for longer visits and multiple activities. Often multi-generational and family-friendly spaces, these hubs should be planned with a diverse audience in mind and combine several different reasons to visit.

- Play spaces
- Educational opportunities
- Areas to eat, relax and play
- Programming
- Restrooms and trash cans
- Lights
- Bicycle parking
- Wayfinding

Conservation Area

A key component to fully enjoying the rivers and creeks is ensuring their natural quality and sustainability over time. Creating connected spaces for habitats, restoring wetlands and reducing flooding, and educating the next generation of river stewards are central pieces to the long-term health of the waterways.

- Educational programming
- Interpretive signage
- Habitat connectivity
- Wetlands restoration
- Floodplain management

Soft Trails

Unpaved walking, hiking, and birding trails give people access to nature and offer a much different experience than paved trails. They also do not disrupt wildlife connections and can provide the opportunity for education programming.

- Educational programming
- Interpretive signage for history or birding
- Maintenance and conservation
Imagine finding yourself among the nearly 10 miles of quiet backwaters of the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenway. Only a short drive away from the metro, the greenbelt preserves the old oxbows of the Skunk River, offering paddlers a rich natural diversity. You paddle along the quiet waters, seeing kingfishers dive for fish, soft-shelled turtles basking on mud bars, and beavers harvest giant ragweed. You paddle for hours without sign of civilization, and you know you would have almost gotten lost but for the wayfinding signage keeping you on course.