



Stewardship of the Lower Raritan River

NEI Job Code: 0294-002

Project Code: S-2011-042

Final Report

Grant dates July 25, 2011 – March 31, 2013

In 2011, the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) was awarded a New York /New Jersey Harbor Estuary (NY/NJ HEP) grant of \$20,000 with a match of \$3232 to support a project to increase stewardship and access to the Lower Raritan River.

The Lower Raritan River is underappreciated because of its lack of visibility and access. This project developed information for local officials and residents about where the River flows, access points, related historical sites, recreational potential and how to care for the river.

ANJEC's project had the following goals:

- Increase awareness of the Lower Raritan River, leading to its recreational use and stewardship.
- Help environmental commissions in municipalities bordering the Lower Raritan to increase their understanding of the river's natural functions and the need for stewardship.
- Build the capacity of municipal environmental commissions to educate their local officials, green teams, other local groups and residents about the River's natural resources and how to care for them.
- Increase River access and use by incorporating river access points and riverside trails into municipal master plans, open space plans, and redevelopment plans.
- Build awareness of the historic and cultural resources along the Lower Raritan River Water Trail.

ANJEC accomplished the goals and tasks under the grant agreement. Specific actions and accomplishments of this project are described below.

Partners

ANJEC enlisted the help of project partners, including representatives from Rutgers University, Middlesex County Department of Planning, the Raritan Riverkeeper, the Middlesex County Improvement Authority and the Crossroads of the American Revolution. Throughout the project, ANJEC Assistant Director Kerry Miller kept our partners informed and involved.

The partners had a kickoff meeting on August 10, 2011 to discuss the tasks to be accomplished and the roles of each partner. The team then took two tours of Lower Raritan access points on October 4 and 17 and evaluated the sites for potential signage. Seeing the different access points with their opportunities and challenges was informative. Some obstacles include lack of visibility/signage to access points, the governing body's fear of liability, extreme tidal rise and fall on the river, and erosion and flooding damage during Hurricane Irene and spring ice floes.

Workshop

ANJEC organized the Lower Raritan Public Access Information Session, held on October 24, 2011 at Middlesex Co. Department of Planning, New Brunswick. Approximately 40 people attended, including municipal officials and environmental commission members from Edison, Franklin Twp, Highland Park, East Brunswick, Milltown, New Brunswick, North Brunswick, Perth Amboy, Piscataway and Sayreville. Also attending were project partners, and nonprofit, governmental and other organizations, including Rutgers Recreation, Middlesex County Freeholders, Middlesex Co. Water Resources Assn., East Coast Greenway, Lawrence Brook Watershed Association and National Parks Service.

Workshop attendees heard a "status report" on the Lower Raritan from Riverkeeper Bill Schultz and a talk on historic resources along the corridor; and participated in brainstorming on issues related to river access. This was followed by an overview of the Lower Raritan Access project's goals and the tasks. Handouts included a list of tasks that municipalities can do and a CD containing many Raritan-related photos, reports, articles, maps, organizations and resources.

To follow up on the session, ANJEC created a workshop summary and guidance documents on how to assess an access site and how to survey the public on river awareness, and distributed them to community representatives. ANJEC contacted the environmental commissions that attended the event, and reached out to towns that were not represented. As a result, the environmental commissions from Highland Park, New Brunswick and Edison committed to active participation in the project, helping to facilitate placement of signage at River access points, and educational programs for their residents.

Work with Environmental Commissions

Several Environmental Commissions have worked with ANJEC to develop and use access information:

Highland Park Environmental Commission reviewed the ANJEC guidance documents, and conducted a "pilot" site assessment. This helped the project partners fine-tune the guidance document for use with other towns. Highland Park also developed an extensive section on the Raritan River for its new Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), the completion of which coincided with this project. The ERI was adopted into the municipal Master Plan by the Highland Park Planning Board. ANJEC has highlighted this ERI as a model for other Lower Raritan commissions, as well as others in the NY/NJ Harbor Estuary watershed. In developing the ERI, the Commission discovered an error in Highland Park's riparian ordinance, and advocated a revision that expanded the ordinance's scope.

Highland Park has installed a permanent Lower Raritan sign, provided through this grant, near their Environmental Education Center along the river.

New Brunswick Environmental Commission successfully advocated for its governing body to adopt a resolution supporting the Lower Raritan Public Access Project.

ANJEC staff collaborated with the New Brunswick Commission and the Mayor's Office on an exhibit for the City's annual Raritan River Festival. The all-day event took place in Boyd Park, the City's riverfront park, on September 23, 2012. The Lower Raritan River exhibit included displays, handouts and two educational activities for children: a magnetic fishing game where children had to identify the species of the Lower Raritan fish they reeled in and Bird Lotto featuring 16 species of Raritan birds. Commissioners from the Highland Park and New Brunswick Environmental Commissions and ANJEC staff hosted the booth where several hundred people stopped by. At the same event, New Brunswick's officials unveiled a new, permanent Lower Raritan River interpretive sign, provided by ANJEC through this grant and installed by the City.

Raritan Borough Environmental Commission ANJEC staff also hosted a Lower Raritan booth at Raritan Borough's first annual Raritan Riverfest on Sept. 30, 2012, with exhibits, handouts and the two interactive children's activities used in New Brunswick. This was also a very successful, well-attended event.

The Raritan Borough Environmental Commission worked with the Borough Council to arrange installation of a permanent Raritan sign, provided through this grant, at the Borough's river park.

Somerville Environmental Commission had an Earth Day community cleanup on April 14, 2012 and the Lower Raritan display was featured at the gathering site. The Environmental Commission Chairman gave brief presentations to the volunteers about the Lower Raritan, and distributed Raritan Riverkeeper 2012 kayaking event flyers.

Edison and Woodbridge Townships' Environmental Commissions hosted ANJEC's Lower Raritan exhibits and activities at their Earth Days fairs in 2012 and 2013.

Franklin Township Environmental Commission also participated in the Lower Raritan Project. Although it is above the tidal portions of the river and does not directly front it (D&R Canal extends along its entire river frontage), we included Franklin on the map, and coordinated river access information with D&R access information or signage. The Commission arranged for a set of Lower Raritan mounted posters, provided through this grant, to be on public display at the Township Library.

Lower Raritan Webpage:

ANJEC developed an information-packed website for the Lower Raritan www.VisitLowerRaritan.org. The page prominently features a Google map of the Lower Raritan (see "Map" below). The site gives information on recreation opportunities, environmental and historic features, river events and organizations working in the watershed. It contains links to other documents and studies about the River, and links to the outreach materials developed under this project. The webpage was unveiled at Lower Raritan displays at 2012 Earth Day fairs in

different towns feature the webpage URL. The site had 1,355 visitors from April to June 2013. ANJEC staff continues to make updates and additions.

Map

Middlesex County Department of Planning and ANJEC collaborated on a preliminary map of the Lower Raritan River that included the existing access points, along with river-related features including walking trails, bike paths, viewing areas, historic/cultural sites, amenities, and nature centers.

With the draft map in hand, ANJEC staff attended environmental commission meetings in the Lower Raritan towns, asking for input on additional features and descriptions. Environmental commissions gave helpful feedback on the local points of interest and contributed some photos for the map.

A final map, which ANJEC created using Google Earth, is featured prominently on ANJEC's Lower Raritan website, *VisitLowerRaritan.org*. A visitor can zoom in on the map to reveal parks, access points, historic sites and other features. Most interest points have photos attached to them, and some have links to websites for additional information.

Outreach materials

ANJEC created a Lower Raritan Access display for commissions and towns to borrow and brochures to accompany the display. The displays are three 20" x 30" panels. They were used at Earth Day events in Somerville, Edison, Highland Park, Sayreville and Woodbridge, and at New Brunswick's September 23rd Raritan River Festival. In addition, Franklin Township (Somerset Co.) and East Brunswick Environmental Commissions requested poster sets and printed brochures, as did the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, and Woodbridge River Watch. We have the display at the ANJEC offices for any town to borrow.

We created a general brochure about Lower Raritan features (boating, environmental, and historic) for use with the display. We customized the brochure for Highland Park and Edison. Not all towns have as many local river resources as those two towns, so the general brochure suffices for most others. We offered printed sets to other Raritan River towns, and PDF versions of the posters and brochure are available on www.VisitLowerRaritan.org under "Outreach Materials."

Signage

ANJEC completed production and delivery of four permanent Lower Raritan signs in National Park Service Low-Profile mounts. With the help of municipal DPWs and Environmental Commissions, the signs were installed at Raritan access points in Highland Park, New Brunswick, Piscataway and Raritan Borough. One additional sign panel without a mount was purchased for Middlesex County to install in Johnson Park on an existing kiosk or other structure. The County's Parks Department will build and install the mount in August 2013.

All the signs have the same design, including the Raritan River otter logo. ANJEC developed a Lower Raritan Corridor graphic that features a simple map showing access points, parks/green spaces along the river, and historic features, as well as some narrative, the www.VisitLowerRaritan.org website address, and a QR code that takes people directly to the website. Each permanent, weatherproof 24" x 36" sign was professionally-printed.

Our partners from Middlesex County Planning and Improvement Authority were extremely helpful in getting many of the sign concerns resolved. They contacted the appropriate County people to investigate opportunities and barriers. Nick Tufaro of the County Planning Dept. attended meetings with ANJEC and the Environmental Commissions in the towns to gain local insights, get suggestions for areas in need of signage and iron out issues of concern. Middlesex County Planning Department has committed to installing wayfinding signage at significant County intersections near access points.

ANJEC requested and received an additional extension of our 2011 HEP grant through March 2013 to use remaining grant funds for expenses (materials and travel) to support the work of a Rutgers intern volunteer. The intern enhanced the Lower Raritan display materials, created a short educational unit on the Lower Raritan for use by schools, updated the Visit Lower Raritan website, and worked with river towns to incorporate Lower Raritan-themed displays and events into local Earth Day events in 2013. He created a brochure on birds of the Raritan, hosted Earth Day 'Lower Raritan River' tabling/displays in Edison (April 28) and Woodbridge (April 20), and worked with students from Woodbridge HS on a Raritan River exhibit for their Science Night, through a teacher who is a member of the Woodbridge Environmental Commission.

Other Outcomes

Article: ANJEC published an article about the Lower Raritan River Public Access Project in the summer 2012 issue of its quarterly publication, the *ANJEC Report*. The publication is mailed to approximately 2700 people, and was posted as a PDF on ANJEC's website www.anjec.org/pdfs/Summer2012ANJECReport.pdf

Citizen Bird Count on the Lower Raritan: ANJEC staff arranged for NJ Audubon to work with Highland Park Environmental Commission to conduct two three-hour training sessions at the Highland Park Environmental Center for birders to do bird counts. Approximately 40 volunteers under the direction of NJ Audubon did counts in May and June 2012. NJA compiled the data and made a summary available to the public. NJ Audubon posted information about the initiative, funded by Together Green, on their Facebook page. Audubon also provided a Raritan birding report that was posted on the VisitLowerRaritan webpage.

Other presentations:

ANJEC staff presented a project update at the January 9th meeting of the Middlesex County Water Resources Association, and received some helpful feedback from the municipal attendees.

ANJEC organized and moderated two workshops at a day-long Sustainable Raritan Conference at Duke Farms on June 8, 2012. Kerry Miller hosted a session about access to the river, and Sandy Batty hosted one on green infrastructure to protect the river. We will have the Lower Raritan display at this year's Sustainable Raritan Conference on June 11, 2013.

ANJEC hosted a Lower Raritan exhibit at ANJEC's annual statewide conference, the Environmental Congress, in October at Middlesex County College. At the event, representatives of Woodbridge River Watch, Colonia High School in Woodbridge, and Edison Township requested loans of the Raritan displays for use in 2013.

Conclusions

The project accomplished the goals set forth in the grant proposal, raising awareness of the River and informing residents on how to care for it. ANJEC developed educational materials that environmental commissions and others have used to inform residents, and these continue to be used by the commissions and Middlesex County agencies. Four signs with QR codes were placed at access points along the river. ANJEC developed display boards and accompanying brochures that commissions have used at events and placed in town halls. These educational materials continue to be used beyond the conclusion of the project. And people continue to visit the Raritan web pages on the ANJEC website, which include electronic versions of all materials developed under this project, a map showing access points on the river, and links to web pages of partner organizations.

Other accomplishments are less tangible, however they are significant. Through the project, the partners became a core group with a goal of improving the Lower Raritan River. The group increased its knowledge of the River through exchange of information and site visits to the River access points. . We learned what sites presented obstacles such as the governing body's fear of liability, extreme tidal rise and fall on the river and erosion and damage due to flooding during Hurricane Irene and normal spring ice floes. Also the visits enabled accurate evaluation for the potential signage. We noted where better signage would help promote use of access sites, and where signage needed to be off-site, to direct people to hard-to-find access points.

The relationship developed with the project partners has continued beyond the end of the grant. The partners have cooperated on new projects together, such as scheduling sails on New Jersey's tall ship, the *A.J.Meerwald*, out of Perth Amboy, and they seek each other's advice and support with other activities on the River.

In addition, through this project the environmental commissions became more aware of the River and used the brochures and displays to inform the residents of their towns. They became more effective advocates for the River, and worked to educate their municipal officials about the River and its value to the communities. The commissions worked hard to get the access signs in place, which took effort in some towns to get the needed permissions and logistics arranged.

This project will have lasting value as the educational displays, website and signs will continue to inform residents and local officials for many years to come.



Pictures (clockwise from upper left): Stakeholders attend the fall 2011 workshop in New Brunswick that introduced the project to the watershed communities and partners (Nick Tufaro, Middlesex County); visitors check out a display during Edison Earth Day 2012 (Kerry Miller, ANJEC); New Brunswick River Festival attendees stop to admire the newly-installed Lower Raritan River interpretive map signage in Boyd Park, (Kerry Miller, ANJEC).

