



**RE: Comment on the East Branch of the Little Calumet River NPS Environmental Assessment**

Dear Superintendent Labovitz,

July 10, 2014

I am writing to you today as a representative for the American Canoe Association (ACA). Since our founding in 1880, the ACA has grown into the nation's largest and most active nonprofit paddlesports organization with 30,000 members and over 300 Clubs and Affiliates across the United States and abroad. The purpose of this letter is to express our support of opening of the Little Calumet River East Branch, a tributary to Lake Michigan, to paddling, and the development of a National Water Trail on the East Branch of the Little Calumet River.

Over the past several years we have been impressed with the efforts of the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association and its members who have collaborated with a diverse group of partners along the East Branch of the Little Calumet River with the goal of developing a continuous water trail from the National Parks Service's Heron Rookery to the mouth of Lake Michigan at the NPS Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk. NWIPA was recognized in 2010 with the ACA's Stroke of Achievement Award for this valuable work in the interest of increasing the quality, safety, and access to paddling in the region.

NWIPA and their partners see the East Branch of the Little Calumet River as an extremely valuable natural resource for the citizens of Northwest Indiana, next only to Lake Michigan in terms of beauty and recreational potential. This vision of a 16-mile water trail is not just their vision, but is part of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission's approved Blueways and Greenways Comprehensive Plan for creation of regional water trails. This Comprehensive Plan, which reflects the input and will of the community, connects the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore to the fragmented land holdings of other conservation organizations including the Shirley Heinze Land Trust, the Porter County Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, Coffee Creek Conservancy, as well as state and local land-owning entities such as the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Porter, Portage, Burns Harbor, and Porter County parks departments, and the Town of Chesterton. This vision cannot become a reality without the "Little Cal's" biggest landowner, the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

There are numerous clear benefits to the development of a water trail along the Little Calumet River and the enhanced management of its green corridor by the National Park Service and other riparian landowners. These benefits include, but are not limited to:

- The creation of new recreational opportunities for paddlers, anglers, birders, naturalists and others. There has been a significant increase in the number of paddling, fishing, and birding enthusiasts in Northwest Indiana and the Chicago urban area since 1997;

- New economic development opportunities including local recreational business development, tourism, and attracting new businesses wishing to locate in an area with ample recreational opportunities;
- Improved local health as a result of having recreational opportunities for people wishing to get outside and exercise on a new water trail;
- The development of new outdoor educational opportunities for youth and adults alike by organizations such as Dunes Learning Center, Shirley Heinze Land Trust, NWIPA, local schools, and many others;
- Improvement of the river quality itself. We believe that addressing the severe log jams that exist via ecologically responsible techniques such as the Palmiter method of steam restoration will improve of the health of the river eco-system and increase its value as a resource for paddlers, anglers, and other users. Until 1997, the river was navigable and is legally designated as such. Little has been done in the past 20 years in terms of maintenance to remove fallen trees in the water course, resulting in the current status of over 100 woody debris obstructions. The extensive die-off of Ash trees along the river as a result of the Emerald Ash Borer will add to the woody debris accumulations. We believe that better management of the river and its corridor by the National Park Service at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore will result in better water quality through improved directional stream flows and decreased erosion and sedimentation in areas where severe log jams are negatively impacting the resource;
- Improved piscine, riverine, & riparian habitat: By utilizing ecologically responsible methods of stream management not only will the river be better for paddling, but the natural systems of the river itself will be enhanced;
- Establishing a water trail in the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and surrounding lands will result in more public access for fishing, paddling, and other recreational pursuits - and a better quality of life for all of Northwest Indiana.

The Congressional Record shows that Senator Paul Douglas intended that the East Branch of the Little Calumet River be used for paddling when the National Lakeshore was first created nearly 50 years ago. With the State of Indiana celebrating its Bicentennial, the NPS celebrating its Centennial, and the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore celebrating its Semi-Centennial in 2016, we believe that you have a unique opportunity to celebrate these historic anniversaries by opening this new water trail by 2016.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide our comments on this public process and thank you for your stewardship of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. If there is any way in which the ACA can be of assistance in helping to improve the viability of the East Branch of the Little Calumet River as a paddling resource, please feel free to contact us at any time.

Sincerely,

Dave Burden  
ACA Policy Chief