

EXISTING USES AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

A. Land Use

Land use in the watershed is about equally divided between forestry-recreation and light farming. General livestock is the most common type of farming and there are some orchards on the western side of the drainage area. The forested area contains scattered cover of northern hardwood types, but much of the area is open wild land (31,400 acres) and had little vegetative cover. There is a great deal of recreational use in the watershed including the activities of hunting, fishing, swimming, boating and camping.

B. Private Recreation and Seasonal Dwellings

A private canoe livery with 12 rental watercraft is located in Elberta and another with 15 rental watercraft is located at Red Bridge below Thompsonville. The Betsie River Trout Ranch is located just downstream from M-115 and also has a few rental canoes. A large trailer camping park lies along the north side of the river downstream from the US-31 Bridge.

There are approximately 100 buildings, visible from the river, along the entire 52 miles of the Betsie. Most of these are seasonal dwellings and in several cases are clustered developments. A cluster of homes is located at Wallin and two miles below this a subdivision is developing, however, only one home is presently built in the subdivision. Another cluster of cottages (7 to 8) exists below M-115. There are a number of overnight cabins visible from the river along the south bank of the river just upstream from US-31 while below this highway on the north side of the river many camping trailers can be seen during certain times of the year. Generally, most of the buildings are fairly well set back from the river, however, a few are within 25 feet and detract from the natural setting of the river in addition to being potential polluters.

C. Public Recreation Facilities

Camping facilities along the immediate river area are limited. Grass Lake Forest Campground, near the headwaters, offers 15 camp sites. There is one other small camping area about one-half mile below Wallin. Known as the Wallin Trail Camp, it provides overnight camping for horseback riders or hikers using the shore-to-shore hiking-riding trail.

Within a short drive of the Betsie River are two state parks (Benzie and Interlochen) and two state forest campgrounds which provide 800 campsites for recreationists in the area.

There are only two developed public access sites on the river and these are both located within two miles of US-31. Other facilities or areas of interest in the area are the Grass Lake Waterfowl Flooding, Betsie River State Game Area, Platt River State Fish Hatchery, and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

D. Fishing

Lamprey control and restocking the lower Betsie with steelhead have produced anadromous runs comparable to many west Michigan streams. Steelhead runs on the Betsie, upstream to Homestead Dam, have been increasing and produce a good six-month fishery from fall through early spring. Good runs of chinook salmon, fair runs of coho and brown trout also enhance the fall fishery in the lower river. This section of the Betsie receives a good walleye run which produces a fishery from early spring to mid-summer.

Above Homestead Dam, upstream to Thompsonville Dam, a fair fishery for brown trout exists. Elimination of rough fish competition in 1965, restocking and stream improvement has gradually improved the trout fishery in this area. Above Thompsonville the fishery for browns is very marginal because of warm water temperatures. A moderate warm water fishery exists in the impoundments and on the Betsie from Grass Lake Flooding to Green Lake.

The two major tributaries, Little Betsie River and Dair Creek, have good brown trout populations in their lower reaches. The headwater areas of these streams produce a good fishery for small brook trout.

E. Wildlife Observation and Hunting

Wildlife in the Betsie River area provides many hours of recreation for the hunter, sightseer and naturalist. Whitetail deer are common the area, especially in the heavier coniferous areas along the river. Ruffed grouse and woodcock provide good hunting in the lowland brush and wooded areas along the river. Cottontail rabbits and snowshoe hares also frequent these areas. The patient observer can see beaver, muskrat, mink and other small mammals. Evidence of bank beaver is especially noticeable along the river from their skid trails up the banks and their piles of cut branches (winter food supply) near their den.

The Grass Lake Wildlife Flooding Project is a production area and a fall and spring migration stopover point for both ducks and geese, and also has a resident population of muskrats and mink. Mallards, black ducks, bluewing teal, wood ducks, coots and Canada geese are the common waterfowl species that provide hunting not only on the wildlife flooding but along the entire river. The Betsie River State Game Area along the lower reaches of the river is also a production area for ducks and Canada geese, and wetlands for beavers. A portion of the Game Area is a sanctuary and is closed to hunting. The marshes along the lower portions of the river are influenced by the level of Lake Michigan and are more productive during periods of high water. In the drier years, upland species such as deer, snowshoe hares, cottontail rabbits, snipe and rails replace some of the other wetland species.

F. Canoeing and Boating

The entire Betsie River is canoeable from Green Lake downstream, however, during low-flow periods some carries may be necessary in the upper reaches above Thompsonville. Portages are necessary at the Thompsonville and Homestead Dams. The moderate to fast current of the Betsie makes it an enjoyable stream to canoe. Although there are numerous riffle areas, none would pose a threat to the average canoeist. Some boating is done on the lower river between Betsie Lake and Homestead Dam. This section of river is large enough to handle small outboards and these craft are used mostly during the spring and steelhead season.

G. Historic and Archaeological Sites

Although Benzie and Manistee counties are rich in history, sites of historic or archaeological interest have not been authenticated.

Records in the State Archaeological Site File do not show any of these cities in the proposed Natural River District along the Betsie River. If a systematic archaeological survey were undertaken, Indian campsites along the river may be uncovered.

FUTURE USES AND POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

A. Future Uses

Outdoor recreation in a wild-scenic setting is the main attraction of the Betsie River. As more and more people migrate north to utilize their leisure time, it can be expected that the Betsie will feel the effects of increased use. More hunters, fishermen, canoeists, campers and private dwellings will eventually detract from this pleasant atmosphere.

Many areas of private land in the Natural River District are intended for land development and some are currently being developed. The potential for degrading the natural character of the river is present and will depend a great deal on how these properties are developed.

There are no water development projects presently planned by the DNR, Waterways Division. The Fish Division has funds for the removal. The Fish Division has funds for the removal of Homestead Dam, but there is no definite timetable for its removal. The Fish Division also investigated the possibility of siphoning cold water out of Green Lake, and rechanneling the river around the Grass Lake Flooding to improve water temperatures for trout; however, cost estimates indicate that this proposal is currently impractical.

B. Natural Problems

In addition to warm stream temperatures which adversely effect trout populations the most serious problem is streambank erosion. The existing 23,000 feet of serious eroding streambanks are being stabilized by a stream improvement