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Reporter's Notebook: River access will soon improve

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It was a gorgeous day in early June as I paddled my kayak from Oneonta to the Wells Bridge fishing access site downstream from Otego.

Even though the sound of traffic passing on Interstate 88 was occasionally heard through the trees, the 10-mile float on the Susquehanna River resembled a wilderness trip. There were ducks galore, a few turtles, a muskrat or two and many, many birds.

I saw large bass in shallow, slackwater pools and a 21/2-foot carp passed directly under me. A trout _ I think _ leaped out of the water for a hatching mayfly.

The highlight of the trip was when a mature bald eagle swooped into the river and snatched a fish with its talons. As the raptor flew away with its catch, two crows harassed it before all three vanished behind trees.

But there was something missing.

I saw no one along the river for about seven miles. There were no children splashing into the water from rope swings; no anglers fishing for bass and walleye; no families picnicking along the shady riverbank. Even along areas where there is public access, such as Susquehanna River Park in Oneonta, I saw no one. It was only when I neared Otego that I encountered a couple of people fishing _ strange for a sunny, 75-degree Saturday afternoon.

An initiative supported by the Otsego County Conservation Association, the Susquehanna Greenway Committee and now the Oneonta Common Council is designed to help change this.

City aldermen voted Tuesday to enter into an agreement with the state Department of Transportation to allow official public access on 15 acres of DOT property along the river at Exit 15. A few people have been accessing this area unofficially, mostly to reach a network of mountain-bike trails that extend out to New Island.

Third Ward Alderman Erik Miller, who is also the president of OCCA, said he has also noticed, aside from the General Clinton Canoe Regatta weekend, the Susquehanna does not see much recreational use.

Providing more public access could encourage more people to enjoy the river, he said.