

# **THE NYSDEC MOHAWK RIVER BASIN PROGRAM: AN ECOSYSTEM BASED APPROACH TO MANAGING THE RESOURCES OF THE MOHAWK RIVER AND ITS WATERSHED**

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The Mohawk River has long been a driving force in shaping the natural environment and the life of communities throughout the Mohawk River Valley. For centuries people have flocked to the valley to capitalize on its fertile flood plain soils, its historic fisheries, and as an accessible means of transportation. For approximately 100 years, starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the environmental quality of the river and many of its tributaries declined due to the overwhelming pressures people brought with them. Manufacturing and transportation built dams, factories, roads, and rails throughout the basin and adjacent to the river. Major centers of population grew. Before the era of environmental regulation many unknowingly contributed to reducing the quality of the river they relied so much upon for progress. Basic regulations put in place since the 1970's especially the enactment of the Clean Water Act, have helped relieve these pressures and reverse the degradation of the river. Today the river and many of its tributaries are better than they once were. However, the gains made need to be substantially protected and managed. Legacy problems that have never been resolved must be addressed such as PCB contamination, sediment build-up in streams and erosion of stream banks, and occasional sewage pollution.

As a new initiative of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation the Mohawk River Basin Program seeks to assist in the management of the environmental resources of the River and its watershed. This means working with others to help manage the

river and valley for a sustainable future, involving the voices of all stakeholders, and partnering with established programs and organizations throughout the basin. The Mohawk River Valley is an excellent area for advancing State goals for ecosystem-based management of environmental resources, smart growth, and sustainable economic development including heritage development. The Mohawk River program will strive to make management decisions based on an understanding of the whole ecosystem. It is time for a new approach. Complex issues cannot be resolved using information from only one sector of available information. Therefore, the Mohawk River program will enlist the support and assistance of stakeholder and other organizations to help inform decision making processes related to the environmental quality of the Mohawk River Valley. Management practices in the Mohawk River Valley need to be designed to be adaptive and responsive to change, to promote coordination and cooperation among sectors; to balance competing uses; and to inspire compromise (NYS 2007). We hope that all parties interested in the Mohawk River Valley will come together to assist us in these goals.

## **Key Partnerships in the Basin**

There are three significant programs already in existence within the Mohawk River watershed with which important collaborations have already begun to form. These organizations are closely oriented to the human uses of the river and its valley. They are the Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor

Commission (Heritage Corridor Commission), the National Parks Service Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor (Erie Canalway), and the Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps). A Mohawk River Program can add an important fourth leg to the stool to provide a focus on the natural environment. Fostering relationships with these organizations is vital to ensuring the completion of Mohawk River Program goals and objectives, specifically in areas where it does not have the expertise. Ultimately, a healthy environment, a rich cultural heritage and a vital economy go hand in hand. Here is what is already happening:

The Heritage Corridor Commission a non-profit 501(C)(3) organization established by the New York State Legislature in 1997; its mission is to preserve, promote, and celebrate the natural, cultural, and historic treasures of the Mohawk River Valley. Through a series of partnerships with local and state governments, civic groups, and private industry the Heritage Corridor Commission has worked diligently since 1997 to revitalize river valley communities, and develop a heritage tourism industry (MVHCC 2006). Their important work and established reputation in the community makes them a natural choice for partnership in fostering heritage development in the communities within the Mohawk River Valley.

In addition, in 2000 Congress adopted the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Act, which designated the navigable waters of the Mohawk River Valley and many other canal areas throughout NYS as Heritage Areas (NPS 2005). This designation recognizes the significant heritage of the Mohawk Valley associated with Native Americans, European settlement and other epochs of American history including the building of the Erie Canal at the State and National level. One of the major elements of the Erie Canalway is its Preservation and Management Plan for the corridor. The plan offers guidance on implementing policies that protect and preserve the historic, natural, cultural, and recreational resources in the corridor (NPS 2005).

Both the Heritage Corridor Commission and the Erie Canalway are dynamic examples of emerging area-wide programs, which recognize major themes of our heritage and advance the intersecting goals of conservation, recreation, education and sustainable developments. Under New York State law, heritage areas are defined as an amalgam of natural and cultural resources. Both state and national heritage programs are compatible with the mission of a Mohawk River Basin Program.

In June of 2006 a major flooding event occurred throughout the Mohawk River Valley. This event shifted the focus of organizations like the Heritage Corridor Commission and the Erie Canalway away from cultural and heritage programs to the condition of the natural state of the river. In response to the devastating flooding, the Federal Government requested the Army Corps conduct a study of the Mohawk River and the flood (Army Corps 2008). The study was meant to develop recommendations to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding in the watershed and determine if a feasibility study would be warranted. This project is ongoing and the Army Corps is currently seeking a partner to cooperate in carrying out the feasibility study. This creates a significant opportunity for partnership between the DEC and the Army Corps. Working with other DEC Staff, which may be involved in such a partnership, and Army Corps staff, the Mohawk River Program will have the opportunity to contribute as well. By bringing its ecosystem based management strategy to managing environmental problems, the Mohawk River Program can help to shape a new, more sustainable and environmentally sound framework for flood management.

#### **Mission of the Mohawk River Basin Program**

The mission of the Mohawk River Basin Program will be to act as coordinator of basin-wide activities related to conserving, preserving, and restoring the environmental

quality of the Mohawk River and its watershed, while helping to manage the resource for a sustainable future. Vital to the success of the program is the involvement of stakeholders and the creation of partnerships with established programs and organizations throughout the basin.

### **Action Agenda**

The following is a list of measurable goals the Mohawk River Basin Program will strive to achieve. We seek input from as many people as possible who share a passion for the conservation of the Mohawk River. This list of goals is a template by which the Mohawk River program will direct its actions. Each goal has specific actions associated with them and a time frame by which to complete them. These actions should be considered steps, which lead to the fulfillment of this list of Action Agenda Goals. The proposed actions for each goal are described on the pages that follow.

### **Goals**

1. **Understand and manage the natural systems of the Mohawk River watershed** while communicating to the public about their value to human communities and natural processes so that people can fish, hunt, bird, and enjoy the unique character of the valley and its living ecosystem.
2. **Protect and improve water quality in the Mohawk River watershed** so that communities are protected, drinking water supplies are conserved and natural processes are sustained.
3. **Reduce flood frequency and severity in the Mohawk River** so that river valley communities and their cultural heritage are protected.
4. **Preserve the historical, cultural, and recreational resources throughout the watershed that define the Mohawk River valley**, creating vital, healthy places to live, work and visit, connecting the river, the landscape and the people that live in the watershed.