To say something is special and should be protected is not enough. To accomplish anything, a head in the clouds must be matched by feet on the ground. The French Creek Project has proved in the six years of its existence that it was not just a pie-in-the-sky conservation dream. Firmly rooted in the northwest corner of the state, the project has stayed true to its vision and is benefiting the health of French Creek. It has also produced some surprising spinoffs that should spread the word even farther on the value of regional waterways and how to keep them clean.

The French Creek Project’s purpose can be stated simply enough: “We’ve got a good thing going; let’s keep it that way.”

What’s the “good thing” French Creek has? Only that its variety of aquatic life is unparalleled in the state. This biodiversity has been called “extraordinary.” French Creek is considered by many to be one of a handful of streams in the northeastern United States that has such an array of species. Some of its inhabitants are on both the state and federal threatened and endangered species lists. French Creek’s many types of fish (88 species) and freshwater mussels (27 species) have been traced to the river’s geographic position. It is on the corner of the ranges of species whose main populations are found either north, east, south or west of the watershed.

Geologic and climatic changes, brought about by the great glaciers that moved into northern Pennsylvania tens of thousands of years ago, blocked the established direction of flow of French Creek (and the Allegheny River) northward to the St. Lawrence River system. The ice advance redirected the drainage southward, where it joined the Ohio River system. Different species inhabit both basins. French Creek kept some of the old and added many of the new. Later, when scientists, fishermen and others compared what they knew was in French Creek with what people elsewhere said was in their streams, it was discovered that French Creek was unique.

How to keep it that way? Protecting French Creek’s special mix of water life wasn’t an “easy” matter of coming up with funds to buy the stream and land around it and make a hands-off preserve. The watershed is too extensive—1,270 square miles stretching into
Chautauqua County, New York, and draining parts of Erie, Crawford, Mercer and Venango counties in Pennsylvania. The creek’s mainstem is nearly 120 miles long. People already live throughout the area and will continue to do so. Given current trends, the French Creek region will increase in human population, roads, industry and businesses, besides already hosting extensive agriculture.

Since so many streams have lost water quality and have had their variety and numbers of aquatic life eroded by man’s encroachment, interest developed in preserving French Creek’s unusual richness. In 1995, Allegheny College (Meadville), the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council initiated the French Creek Project.

The project’s original goals were to raise public awareness about the value of the stream through public education and outreach effort; to serve as a catalyst for the development of a watershed organization composed of local people; and to preserve habitat, maintain biological diversity and protect French Creek’s endangered species. Because its basic notion of “sustainability,” using but not abusing resources so we always have them, can be applied nearly everywhere, other people and entities are watching the French Creek Project closely.

Enough years have gone by since the French Creek Project’s beginnings to make or break the effort. Has the project produced results, or have its promises seeped away, like water through a sandbar?

That was the question asked of Brian Hill, the Meadville native who has been the director of the French Creek Project from the start. Hill is an important key to what the project has been able to accomplish. He is well-respected at both the state and local level. Hill links those who reside in the French Creek watershed and those “outsiders” who care about the stream but don’t happen to live nearby. You might say Hill is the “hometown boy who made good” for French Creek.

The French Creek Project operates under a common-sense approach. Conservation projects are most successful when the community considers the efforts its own. When there is pride of “ownership,” when people care about what happens to “our creek,” that does more to produce results than high-sounding pronouncements about “global ecological significance” from afar.

“The staff has grown since you were first here,” says Hill. Now there are three full-time employees: Hill; Alice Sjolander, a watershed conservationist; and Judy Acker, coordinator of the French Creek Outdoor Learning Center. A work/study student, courtesy of the Bonner Foundation, was also on hand, organizing the project’s fourth grade presentations and revamping the website. “We’ll reach 2,500 kids this year,” says Hill. In addition, there’s an advisory board of 30 who represent diverse watershed interests—farmers, businessmen, academics, conservationists and government representatives.

“We’re also bringing on a staff scientist to conduct research,” says Hill. The French Creek Project re-
recently signed a memorandum of understanding with The Nature Conservancy, which is funding this professional. The staff scientist will examine trends in the stream’s endangered mussels and rare darters. “We need more baseline data,” says Hill, “to see what effects our efforts, especially with best management practices, are having, as we’re investing hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

The French Creek Project’s motto is “Conservation through Cooperation.” Best management practices relates to educating and helping to provide financial assistance to farmers (and other riparian property owners/users) to adopt land use management techniques that are best for French Creek. This includes putting rain gutters on barns (to direct water flow to lessen uncontrolled runoff); installing septic systems for milk house waste; managing manure to avoid excessive nutrients entering streams; and fencing streambanks to bring back natural vegetation (green filter) and keep livestock from trampling the edges.

“When we got started, we had a grant from DEP [Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection] for $20,000,” says Hill. “We had to give it back because we couldn’t expend it in the allotted time.” But that’s all changed.

“We recently received a $311,000 grant through DEP’s Growing Greener program, which includes $180,000 for mini-grants to show best management practices with farms,” says Hill. “Growing Greener has a two-year period to use the money and we’ve already committed $130,000 to farmers this summer.” That was just two months after the grant was received. At the beginning of the project, landowners were a bit skeptical about an environmental initiative. “Now people want to participate,” says Hill.

The priority threat to French Creek is non-point-source pollution. “This is directly related to the behavior of people in the watershed,” says Hill, like the use of lawn-care chemicals, disposal of used motor oil, storm sewer and road runoff, stream siltation and over-enrichment by agriculture.

“People took French Creek for granted, and we wanted to raise public awareness,” he says. “We first aimed at doing aggressive, broad-based efforts to educate people.” So far, more than 12,000 people have seen the French Creek Project’s slide presentations. Their quarterly newsletter goes to 3,000; a “canvassing the creek” effort went door to door, contacting riparian landowners; and the project’s been featured on radio and TV and in newspapers and magazines.

The French Creek Project’s slide program reaches every fourth grade student in every school district in the French Creek drainage, from the headwaters near Sherman, New York, says Hill, downstream to Franklin, in Venango County, where the creek enters the Allegheny River. The presenter leaves activity and coloring books (Amazing Creeks!) for the class.

The project also developed “The French Creek: A Route to the Future,” an environmental education curriculum for grades kindergarten through 12. There’s also its Outdoor Learning Center, currently with two portable classrooms, on 177 acres in Meadville. Trails have been developed on the former Superfund site (now cleaned up and reclaimed) and three school districts in Crawford County make use of the Outdoor Learning Center for elementary through high school sessions.

“We have a lot of community support,” says Hill. The French Creek Project has also reached out to involve businesses and organizations/foundations. Prime local business supporters have been LORD Corporation, Dad’s Products, Moody & Associates and PPG. Grants have come from sources including the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Protection Program, Heinz Endowments, Kellogg Foundation and others.

Besides DEP, close governmental partners with the project have been the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, county conservation districts, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission.

“Ron Lee [Commission Area Fisheries Manager] has been a valuable resources person for us,” says Hill, “and the Commission’s officers have been involved in our education program.” Hill says the Commission has been “extraordinarily supportive of the things we do, and always helpful.”

The Commission was a participant in formulating
the project’s original vision plan, as well as in drawing up the new watershed management plan that will take French Creek conservation into the future. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy received a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ Keystone Rivers Conservation Program to develop the plan, while the French Creek Project took responsibility for public participation and outreach.

The project also organized the first annual “French Creek Sojourn” last June, in which 120 people took canoes over five days from a launch site near Waterford, in Erie County, to Franklin. Along the way they enjoyed presentations about the stream—its biodiversity, water quality, sustainable farming and development, and the human history of the area. The French Creek region is rich in Indian and American colonial-period history, including forts from the French and Indian War and a visit by George Washington.

“These are all pieces of bait,” says Hill, “to hook people into French Creek with whatever it takes, whatever interests them, darters, mussels, game fish, history.”

New this past summer is French Creek Ecotours. Located at the corner of routes 6 and 19 in Erie County, the project-run canoe rental provides not just a way to paddle down the creek, but a way to appreciate the trip more. From May through September, more than 1,200 people had already experienced the stream through French Creek Ecotours. Guided tours can be arranged, but everyone who takes out one of the canoes or kayaks gets a briefing about what makes the river special, by Ecotour coordinator Laura Heeschen.

French Creek is placid, with time for fishing, sightseeing and wildlife-watching, with easily navigated riffles (Class I-II). For those with their own canoes, pickup shuttles can be arranged. Call (814) 282-8300 for shop hours/days and canoe/kayak availability. The French Creek Project’s website (see the sidebar with this article) includes a map and description of public canoe accesses on the stream.

The French Creek Project has also spawned an offspring. The Northern Allegheny Project was begun in late 2000, to do for the upper Allegheny watershed, including tributary Oil, Brokenstraw, Tionesta and Conewango creeks, what the French Creek Project has done for that river basin. Gina Ellis is the director of the Northern Allegheny Project, says Hill, and she is following the French Creek Project’s format of combining community education and cooperation, on-the-ground conservation efforts and good science. Ellis will be working more with forestry practices than Hill, because her coverage area has more woodlands. The Northern Allegheny Project has already forged an alliance with the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville and Two Mile Run County Park in Venango County, where it has offices.

“I often think we’re going from the Precambrian to the Cambrian Period,” says Hill, referring to the epoch in geologic time when life exploded in numbers and variety in the ancient seas. “I’ve seen interest in French Creek grow phenomenally in the last five years,” says Hill.

Expansions of interest include the Conneaut Lake and French Creek Valley Conservancy; French Creek Recreational Trails (Rails-to-Trails group); and Meadville and Vernon and West Mead townships’ environmental advisory councils. This awareness that the river must be kept healthy has worked, no doubt, because the French Creek Project’s neighbors-helping-neighbors conservation approach is paying off.