Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

The RIVER Advocate

HEALTHY RIVERS FOR PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE

FALL 2015

Featuring Massachusetts rivers

Over the summer, Mass Rivers began shooting a video to showcase the importance of the work we do as an alliance of river stewards. Our video will feature several locations chosen to represent the diversity of rivers in our state. In the pages of this newsletter we visit six of our beautiful and sometimes struggling rivers to give you a small taste of the "action on the set." We look forward to sharing the finished video with you soon!

The Westfield River

We visited Chesterfield Gorge on a hot summer day with Kurt Heidinger, who runs the Biocitizen School in Westhampton. This hidden gem on the Westfield's East Branch has steep rocky cliffs overlooking the river, a dramatic waterfall upstream, and a gentle current downstream. Kurt and his students were cooling off in the river, hunting for insects and interesting rocks, and doing a kind of floating Kurt called "tubeless tubing" (which looked like fun).

The Westfield River boasts outstanding coldwater fisheries, a healthy, diverse ecosystem; and one of the longest whitewater canoe and kayak runs in New England. A tributary to the Connecticut River, it was the first designated federal Wild and Scenic River in our state. Kurt has made it his mission to connect young people to rivers, in hopes that they will love them as much as he does, and become good river stewards. As Kurt said, "If the place is really beautiful, they're likely to fall in love with it. And then once you fall in love with something, you care for it."

Camper cooling off in the Westfield River. Photo by Bill Parker.

EK and Julia enjoying the Mystic River. Photo by Bill Parker.

OCTOBER, 2015

From the Director

River Road Trip

For a small state, Massachusetts' rivers are surprisingly diverse. This was brought home to Elissa and me when we hit the road recently with a small film crew, seeking rivers and "their people" to feature in our first video. We saw rivers suffering from several kinds of pollution, rivers without enough water, and one river confined for several miles in a concrete chute. We also saw healthy rivers bordered by native plants, containing "the right kind" of fish and insects.

All the rivers were wonderful – or had the potential to be. But they can't speak for themselves, so it is fortunate that many of them have eloquent spokespeople.

We generally use this newsletter to provide you with news about the work we are doing – policies we are shaping, legislation we've supported (or opposed), or our latest workshops. But for this issue, we're focusing on the people and rivers who benefit from the work we do – and who inspire us to keep doing it.

On these pages you will see a small sampling of the diversity of Massachusetts rivers and an introduction to some of their talented, passionate advocates. Each person we spoke to shared with us a vision for bringing back a damaged river to health, or a strategy for keeping a healthy river from harm. We've highlighted some of the work the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance does to help each river.

River people don't generally seek out this kind of attention (after all, we'd all rather be on the water…), so I want to thank Judy Grinnell, Kurt Heidinger, Paul Beaulieu, Alison Field-Juma, Julia Khorana, Wayne Castonguay, and EkOngKar Singh Khalsa for taking the time to show us your rivers and thoughtfully answer our questions on camera. Thanks, as well, to *all* our member organizations, for all you do to protect and restore our rivers. And finally, a big thank you to our generous supporting members, for making this work possible.

Julia

Organizational members of the Alliance:

AMC Berkshire Chapter
Belmont Citizens Forum
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
Berkshire Natural Resources Council
Blackstone River Coalition
Boxborough Conservation Trust
Charles River Conservancy
Charles River Watershed Association
Charlestown Waterfront Coalition
Clean Water Action
Connecticut River Watershed Council
Conservation Law Foundation
Eel River Watershed Association
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Essex County Greenbelt Association
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of the Assabet River NWR
Greater Northfield Watershed Association
Green Berkshires
Green Decade Newton
Groundwork Lawrence
Hoosic River Revival
Hoosic River Watershed Association
Hop Brook Protection Association
Housatonic Valley Association
Ipswich River Watershed Association
Jones River Watershed Association
Kestrel Land Trust
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Mass Audubon
Massachusetts Assoc. of Conservation Comm.
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition
Merrimack River Watershed Council
Millers River Watershed Council
Mystic River Watershed Association
Nashua River Watershed Association
Neponset River Watershed Association
North and South Rivers Watershed Association
OARS, for the Assabet, Sudbury, & Concord Rivers
Parker River Clean Water Association
Shawsheen River Watershed Association
Sudbury Valley Trustees
Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Wild & Scenic River Stewardship Council
Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Taunton River Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
The Trustees of Reservations
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter
Walden Woods Project
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee
Watershed Action Alliance of Southeastern MA
Weir River Watershed Association
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

The Swift River

Paul Beaulieu fly fishing in the Swift River. Photo by Bill Parker.

It was late afternoon on a hot and humid day. We were shaded by a canopy of trees, bordered with cattails and arum, with a few bright red cardinal flowers scattered along the banks. Paul Beaulieu, an avid trout fly fisherman took us to his "secret place" on the west branch of the Swift River in Shutesbury. As we watched, Paul expertly cast his fly, and in quick succession, removed two small fish which he then threw back. For Paul, who grew up nearby, the Swift holds memories of family vacations, and was where his father and his uncle taught him to fly fish. It was his love for the Swift River that led him to his degree as an aquatic biologist and his career as an environmental consultant. "This is probably my favorite river," Paul told us. "It's very near and dear to me. And I think there's an argument to be made that this is probably the most important river in Massachusetts. At least it is if you get your drinking water from the MWRA, because this is the stream that forms the Quabbin Reservoir, which is about another mile downriver from where we are right now. So we're in the Boston water supply." We could see why Paul loves the Swift. It is a beautiful, peaceful river. Just steps from busy Route 202, we felt miles from people and their roads, buildings, and noise.

The Assabet River

"On a really nice summer day like this, the river can be about 75 percent effluent [treated sewage discharged from a wastewater treatment plant]," Alison Field-Juma, OARS' Executive Director said, as we peered at the Assabet River river from a particularly scenic spot in Hudson. We could see a little bit of algae in the river, a sign of slow-moving, warm water suffering from nutrient pollution. But according to Alison, investments watershed towns have recently made in cleaning up the river have begun to make it an asset for the region. For example, "this town of Hudson has really started to reorient itself to face the river and to make the most of being a river community." The river is cleaner, and people are discovering it as a place to paddle or walk. "Instead of traveling far to go away on a vacation -- this area has become a hub for visitors to come to and local people to just get out and enjoy and share with their families and their friends."

Julia Khorana of OARS paddles in the Assabet. Photo by Bill Parker.

The Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord, collectively designated as federal Wild and Scenic Rivers, are the closest such rivers to a metropolitan area in the whole country. OARS, Sudbury Valley Trustees, the National Park Service, and local towns throw the river a party each June. "People from Boston come to RiverFest every year," Alison said. "They come, they come out on the trains, they rent a boat and they come and participate. And that is an amazing resource for the whole of metropolitan Boston."

The Ipswich River

"I think I can safely say that rivers are largely responsible for making me who I am. I grew up here along the Ipswich River," explained Ipswich River Watershed Association's Executive Director Wayne Castonguay, standing in front of an estuary where the river meets the ocean. Wayne spent his childhood "catching fish and exploring and hunting and dabbling along the river." It was an overcast day, and we were treated to an expansive, panoramic view of water, sky, and land across the bay. Developed early as a public water supply, when the region was settled, back in the 1600's, today the watershed provides about 350,000 people with 32 million gallons of water a day. In Wayne's view, it's a "double-edged sword…too much water comes out of the river and it's really our biggest environmental issue. But on the other hand, a lot of people care about their water supply and have made the Ipswich River one of the most conserved watersheds, so it's incredibly clean." The Ipswich also supports a thriving shell fishing industry, with over $1 million worth of clams harvested annually. In addition to restoring the river's missing water, Wayne is working to prevent the development of land along the river, oppose the siting of a major gas pipeline through his watershed, and protect the bay from erosion caused by recent powerful storms.

Wayne in front of an Ipswich estuary. Photo by Bill Parker.

The Mystic River

"The Mystic River has been forever a very important part of the Boston region," began EkOngKar Singh Khalsa, the executive director of the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA). "As we know, Paul Revere rode up the banks of the Mystic River to warn the patriots in Lexington and Concord. Early industry developed here. In fact, the first wooden boats built in North America were built right around the corner from where we are standing at Blessing of the Bay." The Mystic was the most urban river we visited, with industrial buildings lining its shores, and the sounds of cars and trucks occasionally drowning out EK's words. Yet our expansive view of its bay also included trees, ducks, and a great blue heron quietly fishing about 50 yards from where we stood. Like the other advocates, EK was knowledgeable about his river's history, and optimistic about the river's ability to come back from past mistreatment.

Orange Line crossing over the Mystic River while a great blue heron takes flight nearby. Photos by Bill Parker.

The Mystic, EK said, has "the challenges of prosperity. We've built great communities on the banks of the river as part of the Boston region, and we have served as an important regional transportation and energy center. And of course, the river keeps having to accommodate all of those human communities and all of that economic and industrial growth," he explained. EK thinks the river is now entering a new phase after surviving more than 300 years of very heavy industrial use. "I think the good news is that the river has survived. It's a very much a living system. What's interesting about working with a river and working with the river's watershed is that it covers and breaks through all of the artificial boundaries that we create," EK concluded. "So municipal boundaries, boundaries between state and federal agencies, boundaries between neighborhoods -- really become inconsequential when you look at the impact that we have on the river, and the impact the river has on us… this river belongs to everyone. And everybody has to pull together to make a difference."

The Hoosic River

"I want to bring North Adams back to life," Judy Grinnell told us. The Hoosic River travels through our state's northwesternmost city in concrete chutes, devised by the Army Corps 60 years ago to control flooding. As a result, much of the river has lost its ecological, recreational, and even scenic value – and barely resembles a river at all. Mass Rivers members Hoosic River Revival (HRR) and the Hoosic River Watershed Association are working to make the river more natural, and to reconnect the community to its river. HRR seeks to restore some of the river's meanders, its vegetation, its gravel bottom, improve access to the river and create a greenway studded with parks, restaurants, walking trails and an amphitheater, without compromising flood control. HRR succeeded in getting some planning funding in last year's environmental bond, but the expenditure wasn't included in the administration's capital budget for this year. North Adams, nestled next to Mount Greylock, the state's highest peak, boasts cultural attractions, such as MassMOCA with its exhibits and concerts, proximity to the Clark Museum in neighboring Williamstown, good hiking, and spectacular views of the mountains. But it's tough to attract tourists, the economy is struggling, and the realization of Judy's vision for its river could go a long way toward bringing her town "back to life."

Judy showing HRR's plans to bring the Hoosic back to life. Photo by Bill Parker.

The Hoosic River in its concrete chute. Photo by Bill Parker.

How the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance champions our rivers

We are the only statewide alliance in Massachusetts whose mission is to protect rivers. The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is a forceful advocate for improvements to all laws and regulations that affect rivers, adequate funding for river protection programs, and vigorous enforcement of river conservation rules. We leverage the strength of our large organizational membership to make a real difference for rivers across the state.

We create change through:

- **Advocacy**: We advocate and organize to strengthen laws, regulations, and programs that protect stream flow and water quality in rivers across the state;
- **Funding for rivers**: We help secure continued federal Wild and Scenic River program funding and state funding for environmental agencies and programs that improve rivers, including river restoration activities like dam removal, culvert replacements and invasive species control;
- **Education**: We hold workshops to train municipal and state employees on best practices for protecting local rivers on topics such as improved stream crossings and stormwater management financing;
- **Making connections**: We serve as a technical resource for our member groups on state programs, policies, and legislation; and
- **Collaborations**: We foster collaboration among the state's watershed organizations, land trusts and other environmental groups to provide a unified, powerful voice for rivers.

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Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to protect and restore rivers across the Commonwealth.

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Elissa Grad, *Development and Operations Manager*

Save the date for our Annual Meeting on December 2nd! Honoring Russ Cohen, presentation by Clean Water Action

Please join us for the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance's 2015 Annual Meeting. We will be gathering at Mass Audubon's Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary at 10 Juniper Road in Belmont on **Wednesday, December 2, 5-8pm**.

This year we are honoring long-time river advocate Russ Cohen with our River Hero award, and our featured speaker is Becky Smith of Clean Water Action, whose talk will focus on the work her organization is doing to help citizens and watershed groups stop polluters (and fund river protection).

Our annual meeting includes dinner ($20 registration).

You can register online at massriversAM2015.eventbrite.com. Questions? call Elissa Grad at (857) 445-0208.