MASSACHUSETTS
Rivers Alliance

The RIVER Advocate

HEALTHY RIVERS FOR PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE

SPRING 2019

An Interview with Beth Lambert

Beth Lambert is the Director of the Division of Ecological Restoration (DER), part of the state's Department of Fish and Game. Increasing funding for DER's programs has been a high priority for Mass Rivers, as their services are in high demand, and their work directly benefits rivers all over the state.

How did you get interested in restoring rivers and what did you do before you worked at the Division of Ecological Restoration?

I've always loved rivers and streams. In graduate school I studied fluvial geomorphology, which is the study of river processes. I learned about how rivers are shaped by not only the underlying geology but also the vegetation, climate, and land use. At that time I was living in Oregon, where water use, river management, and endangered salmon regularly make front page news. I saw that there was an important niche for someone who understood river science and could also work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders to restore river health. I've spent most of my career filling that niche in various ways. I worked as a stream ecologist for a non-profit in Alaska, a watershed management extension agent for Oregon State University Cooperative Extension, and eventually the Riverways Program. Riverways became the Division of Ecological Restoration in 2009.

What does the Division of Ecological Restoration do? How many people work there?

Our mission is to restore rivers, wetlands, and watersheds for the benefit of people and the environment. DER staff work in partnership with municipalities, non-profits, and other landowners to plan and carry out projects that restore watershed health. Our projects include dam removals, culvert replacements, urban river revitalization, salt marsh restoration, freshwater wetland restoration, water quality improvement, and streamflow restoration. Each project restores healthy habitat while also helping communities prevent storm damage, address aging infrastructure, and improve outdoor recreation. We have 15 people right now and are about to add four more. By the time you are reading this, we will have 19 full time people dedicated to this important work! We are extremely excited and appreciate the support from our friends and colleagues that makes this possible.
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Right to know bill gains momentum

Yes, there's sewage in (some of) our rivers.

Did you know that a big storm can send tens of millions of gallons raw sewage into Massachusetts' rivers? If this comes as a surprise to you, you're not alone. Wastewater treatment plant permits generally lack requirements to notify the public when there is a sewage spill, so many people mistakenly think raw sewage in water is no longer a problem here. Unfortunately, these sewage discharges to rivers still occur in older cities and towns where wastewater and stormwater collection systems both go to the sewage treatment plant. A big storm can overwhelm the sewage treatment facility, sending excess stormwater and wastewater to the nearest river. This is called a "combined sewer overflow."

We think the public has a right to know when our rivers are unsafe for swimming and fishing, and the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is working to pass state legislation to require public notification in the event of any kind of sewage spill. The legislative sponsors of the bill are Representatives Denise Provost (Somerville) and Linda Campbell (Methuen), Senator Pat Jehlen (Somerville), and our partners include member organizations Mystic River Watershed Association, Merrimack River Watershed Council, Clean River Project, the Connecticut River Conservancy, Environment Massachusetts and the Charles River Watershed Association.

Combined sewer overflows, also called "CSO's," total an estimated three billion gallons a year in Massachusetts, and there are 18 communities with CSOs on 20 rivers and streams, including the Connecticut, Charles, Mystic and Merrimack.

Climate change is bringing more frequent and intense storms to our region, highlighting the need for this bill. We hope that building awareness of this problem will help protect our health, and – equally important – increase support for public investment in our aging water infrastructure, to permanently fix problems such as this one.

APRIL, 2019

From the Director

RIVERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

If climate change is a war on nature, our rivers are on the front lines. Here in Massachusetts, scientists tell us to expect climate change to increase the frequency and intensity of both droughts and extreme storms. Droughts harm rivers and the wildlife that depend on them by dramatically reducing their flow. In 2016, many smaller streams around the state completely disappeared, as did large portions of the Ipswich River. This affects humans, too - six towns declared water supply emergencies that summer. We make it worse when we use water in excess, and we can help by using water-efficient appliances and refraining from watering our lawns during dry weather.

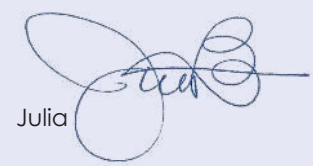
Heavy storms, on the other hand, send pollutant-carrying runoff into rivers and streams, and, in some older cities and towns, create discharges of raw sewage (see article on p. 1). These storms and floods can also lead to the failure of undersized culverts, destroying road crossings, and threatening public safety.

Much of the work we are doing this year addresses these problems. Our drought bill gives the state's environmental managers more authority to require water conservation during droughts. Our sewage notification bill requires public notification in the event of a sewage spill, and will raise awareness about this problem, and – we hope – increase support for long-overdue public investment in water infrastructure. And finally, our budget priorities include support for the Division of Ecological Restoration (DER)'s river restoration work, the Department of Conservation's scientific support for the state's drought management and flood control programs, and MassDEP's stormwater program.

You can read more about DER's river restoration work in our interview with its director, Beth Lambert, beginning on p.1 of this issue.

As always, we are working closely with our member organizations, legislators, and the Baker administration to improve the ways Massachusetts takes care of its rivers. We couldn't do this work without them – or you.

Thank you for your support – we hope to see you out on the rivers this summer!



Julia

Mass Rivers Organizational Members:

Association to Preserve Cape Cod
Belmont Citizens Forum
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
Berkshire Natural Resources Council
Biodiversity for a Livable Climate
Blackstone River Coalition
Boxborough Conservation Trust
Buzzards Bay Coalition
Center for Coastal Studies*
Charlesgate Alliance
Charles River Conservancy
Charles River Watershed Association*
Charlestown Waterfront Coalition
Chicopee 4Rivers Watershed Council
Clean River Project
Clean Water Action
Connecticut River Watershed Council
Conservation Law Foundation
Environment Massachusetts
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Essex County Greenbelt Association
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of the Ten Mile
Friends of the Assabet River NWR
Greater Northfield Watershed Association
Green 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
League of Women Voters Massachusetts
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Mass Audubon
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions*
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists (MOSES)*
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
Ocean River Institute*
Parker River Clean Water Association
River Merrimack
Save the Bay - Narragansett Bay Riverkeeper
Sea Run Brook Trout Coalition*
Shawsheen River Watershed Association
Sierra Club Massachusetts Chapter*
Sudbury Valley Trustees
Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Wild & Scenic River Stewardship Council
Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Taunton River Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council
Ten Mile River Watershed Council
The Nature Conservancy*
Trout Unlimited, Deerfield River Watershed Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Nor'east Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter
Trout Unlimited, MA RI Council
Trustees of Reservations
Walden Woods Project
Wareham Land Trust
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee (WSCAC)
Watershed Action Alliance of Southeastern MA
Weir River Watershed Association*
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

*Leadership members

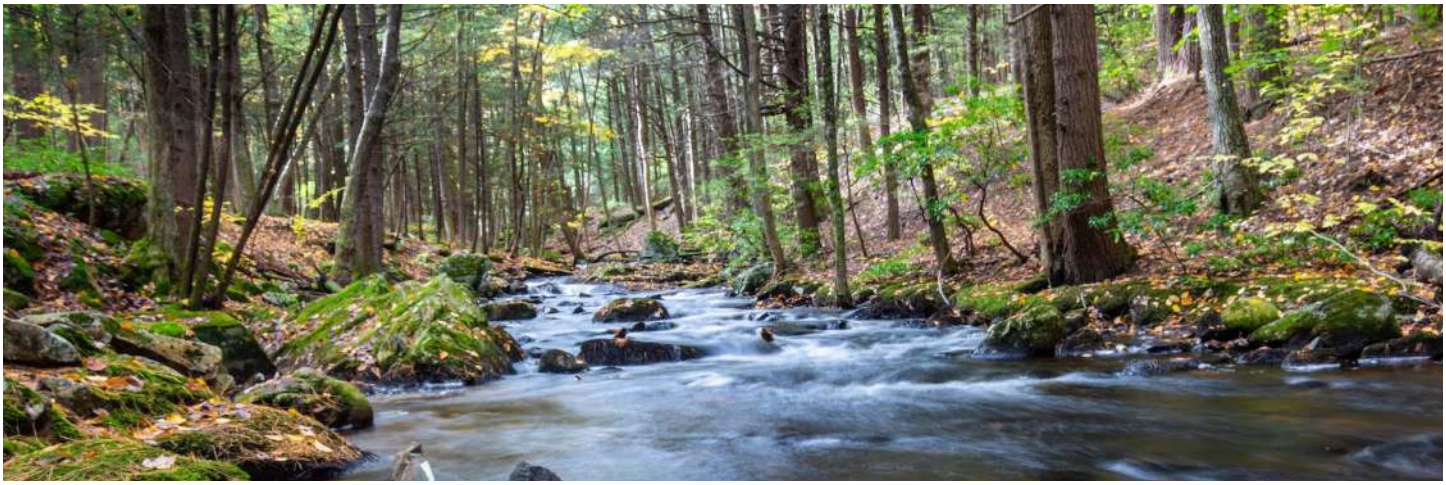


Photo credit: Mark Lindhult

Beth Lambert, continued

How does river restoration help with climate change resiliency?

River restoration improves habitat connectivity for fish and wildlife while also improving community resilience to large storms associated with climate change. Massachusetts has more than 3,000 aging dams and over 30,000 road-stream crossings, also called culverts. Dams and many culverts are barriers to fish and wildlife movement. These structures block the natural movement of water, sediment, and leaves and twigs, which are crucial for the food web and habitat formation. In many cases these structures convert free-flowing rivers to artificial ponds, with devastating impacts on native species like eastern brook trout. Aging dams and undersized culverts cause problems for people, too. During storms, aging dams and undersized culverts threaten public safety. Dams that are in disrepair may breach catastrophically. Undersized culverts cause water to back up behind them, leading to road flooding and sometimes catastrophic road blowouts. When we remove aging dams and replace undersized culverts with larger structures, we restore habitat for fish and wildlife and help communities reduce their vulnerability to extreme weather events associated with climate change.

What are your plans for the next two years?

DER is ramping up its efforts to help nature and people prepare for the changing climate. We recently designated twelve new Priority Ecological Restoration Projects and launched two new programs, all of which restore habitat and increase climate resilience. The new Priority Projects include dam removals, streamflow restoration, coastal wetland restoration, and urban river revitalization. Our new programs restore wetlands on former cranberry farm lands and help watershed groups and communities protect and restore water quality. Over the next two years, we'll expand our assistance to help communities remove dams, upgrade culverts, and advance other restoration and climate adaptation projects. State funding programs like the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program offer grants for these kinds of projects, but many towns lack the capacity to plan and design projects in order to take advantage of these funds. Our technical and project management assistance bridges the gap between community desire to do this work and getting good projects designed, permitted, funded, and constructed.

What is the hardest part of your job?

One of the biggest challenges, which is also the most rewarding, is guiding the organization towards its long term goals while also juggling the myriad of day-to-day programmatic, human resources, funding, and outreach activities. Fortunately, I have a terrific leadership team, and we work together to take advantage of our different strengths.

What is the part you like best?

One of the most motivating factors for me is the people that I work with. My DER co-workers are all passionately committed to our mission. We have a fun, informal, hard-working culture. Outside of DER, I work with many volunteers and non-profit organization staff who are working towards the same goals of clean water and healthy habitat. The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is one such group. I have enormous respect and admiration for MRA's work.

What is your proudest achievement at DER?

My proudest achievement has been working in partnership with federal, state, local, and non-profit organizations to catalyze dam removal in Massachusetts. When I started work at Riverways in 2007, we had to practically beg dam owners to allow us to remove their dams. At that time, many regulators weren't even sure that dam removal could be permitted. Now most people acknowledge that dam removal is a common-sense approach to habitat restoration and climate adaptation. Collectively, we and our partners have removed over 50 dams since 2007. There is far more interest in dam removal than our Division can accommodate.

MASSACHUSETTS
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Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

Mass Rivers' mission is to protect and restore rivers across the Commonwealth.

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Annual Meeting 2018

Mass Rivers' 2018 Annual Meeting and Dinner capped off an eventful and productive year for our organization. Tim Palmer's presentation on Wild and Scenic Rivers around the country captivated the crowd of just under 200, and former Charles River Watershed Association's Executive Director, Bob Zimmerman walked off with the raffle grand prize - a new kayak from Paddle Boston (we swear we don't rig these things).

We were delighted to honor Senator Anne Gobi, Representative Smitty Pignatelli, Kevin Cassidy, Irene Freidel, and Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell for their contributions to river protection.

Many thanks to the volunteers and businesses who helped to make this event a success. We hope to see you in December at our next one!