

## Housatonic River Walk A Case Study in How River Reclamations May Impact Community Traditions

The Housatonic River watershed defines the Massachusetts region of Berkshire County, informing its natural ecology and shaping its industrial, agricultural and social landscape. A substantial Native American history is associated with the river, beginning with its naming by Mahicans who regarded its waters as a primary source of life. Subsequently, the river endured a darker industrial history, developing as a "working river" abused by years of industrial waste and neglect.

In the last century, illegal dumping of solid waste and discharges of raw sewage, paper wastes and PCB pollutants led towns along the river to turn their backs on the waterway and its vast problems. Today, the river is barely perceived as part of the landscape and the community, although it remains a resource of extraordinary natural beauty with a profound cultural legacy.

For the last decade, the local community of Great Barrington has worked to reclaim its abandoned riverfront and restore the river's place within the community. River Walk is the first public river greenway on the Housatonic in Berkshire County and has become a model for numerous towns along Massachusetts rivers. Beyond transforming a blighted riverbank into a town park and greenway trail, this hands-on stewardship program in practical ecology has engaged 1200 school children and adult volunteers led by qualified professionals in clean-up, restoration, landscaping and trail making activities. As citizen volunteers engage in reclaiming the river, the community is reinventing itself.

River Walk has propelled the town to turn its front once again to the river and its rich historical and natural heritage. In the process, Great Barrington's perception of its local and rural landscape has expanded to include the river running through it. While the project has drawn attention as an important tourist destination, its greatest impact has been on the local community. Beyond its commercial potential, Main Street is now considered in light of history, culture and ecology. There is a new regard for wildlife habitat, native flora, vistas and views, alternative avenues of transport, geological formation, wetland and floodplain ecology, historic and prehistoric patterns of human settlement and local legend. Where once such concerns were restricted to the river, they now define one's total sense of town and of place.

River Walk raises the issue of redesigning the "leftover" riverfront spaces abandoned by industry, a challenge as relevant to our major cities as to local rural towns like Great Barrington.

In earlier times, riverfronts were the central focus of both Native and new American settlements. They continue to convey profound historic and existential meaning today.

How does one approach these discarded places, once the heart and soul of our cities and towns? Rivers provide opportunities to confront nature and history at the source. They invite us to address the abuses of American industry and to renew lost ties to traditional cultures through a new ecological ethic.

River Walk's hands-on stewardship approach invites total community participation, as local residents, rather than outside planners, determine the river's fate and reclaim it as their own. The impact is felt beyond the river in the form of new criteria for town planning with a nod to history, ecology and healthy social relations. Beyond its immediate impact on the town, River Walk's efforts are felt river wide, with greenways appearing all along the river. Great Barrington's River Walk is taking place against the background of widespread PCB contamination resulting from manufacturing practices by General Electric Company. Anticipating an eventual natural resource damages settlement, the project's grassroots techniques for building community participation and consensus have been adopted in a county-wide effort to develop of a full restoration plan for the river.

Rivers are places of confluence, where culture and nature meet. This case study will explore how river restorations may impact community traditions in ways beyond the river's physical reclamation.

Rachel Fletcher, 1998