

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

Rachel Fletcher, 1998

Abstract

Rivers are places of confluence, where human culture and the natural world meet. Across the nation, grassroots efforts to revive abandoned American rivers are producing a new ecological ethic, as local communities address the abuses of American industry and rediscover lost ties to their history, culture and landscape. One example in the Berkshire County region of Massachusetts is the Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk, where twelve hundred citizen volunteers are transforming a blighted riverbank into a state-of-the-art greenway trail. This case study will explore how river restorations can impact the life of a community in ways beyond the physical reclamation of the river.

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The Housatonic River watershed defines the Massachusetts region of Berkshire County, shaping its natural ecology and its industrial, agricultural and social landscape. Native Americans had a long association with the river, especially the Mahicans who regarded its waters as a primary source of life. With European settlement, the river entered a darker industrial period, developing into a "working river" abused by years of waste and neglect.

In the last century, excessive, often 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 a usable part of the landscape, although it remains a resource of extraordinary natural beauty with a profound cultural legacy. Wending its way like a spine through the Berkshires hills, it ties the region's towns and communities together. The river remains the common thread.

Against this background, the people of Great Barrington have worked for the last decade to reclaim the town's abandoned riverfront and revive the river's place within the community. Through a hands-on stewardship program in practical ecology, twelve hundred school children and

adult volunteers have transformed a blighted riverbank into a beautiful town park and greenway trail. River Walk, the first public greenway on the Housatonic River in Berkshire County, is a model for numerous towns on Massachusetts rivers. This simple trail has inspired the town to face toward the river and its rich historical and natural heritage. Great Barrington's perception of its local landscape now includes the river which runs through it. As citizen volunteers are reclaiming their river, the community is renewing itself.

River Walk raises the issue of redesigning the "leftover" riverfront spaces abandoned by industry, a challenge as relevant to our major cities as to small towns like Great Barrington. How does one approach these discarded places, once the heart and soul of our cities and towns? In earlier times, riverfronts were the central focus both of Native and new American settlements. They continue to convey profound historic and existential meaning today.

The Housatonic River

The Housatonic, one of five major rivers in Massachusetts, emerges from three distinct headwaters above and around Pittsfield in the central Berkshire hills.¹ From here, the river flows one hundred and fifty miles south through the urban corridor of Pittsfield, then on through rolling woodlands, farms and floodplains and several small towns before entering Connecticut and finally emptying into Long Island Sound.²

In spite of its vast problems, the Housatonic remains a resource of great natural beauty with spectacular river views and significant geologic formations of limestone, marble and schist. The river basin is considered the second most biologically diverse region in the state, sporting a rich diversity of wildlife that includes bog turtles, Canada geese, American black ducks, otters, bald eagles, osprey and many others.³ Woodland trees include the cottonwood, red ash, sycamore, silver and red maple, black willow and the American elm. The shallow marshes and floodplain forests are home to a wide variety of native vines, ferns, sedges and wildflowers.⁴

The River in Berkshire History

The Housatonic River has played an important role in the cultural and commercial development of the region. Both Native American and European peoples have utilized it, although in vastly different ways.

The river's name is derived from the Mahican Indian name "Ou-thot-ton-nook," which means "beyond the mountains."⁵ In pre-colonial times, several Native American villages were located by the riverbank.⁶ The Mahicans regarded the Housatonic as the source and essence of life. They fished for shad, salmon and fresh water mussels, and hunted for ducks and mallards. Their gardens, planted in the river's floodplain, were naturally fertilized by the annual spring floods.

Since Colonial days, the Housatonic has been the impetus for the county's commercial and industrial development, powering mills and providing water supplies to industry for more than two centuries. As towns industrialized, raw sewage, paper mill discharges and household wastes polluted the river, while the riverbank provided a dumping ground for mills, factories and domestic households.⁷ In this century, beginning in the mid-1930s, the General Electric Company (GE) contaminated the river with continuing releases of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a man-made toxic insulating fluid used in the manufacture of electrical transformers and capacitors.⁸

The environmental picture is not entirely bleak, however. In 1972, the federal Clean Water Act signaled a greater overall awareness of water quality, mandating sewage treatment plants and pollution control systems in the mills. Today the Housatonic River does not smell and has returned to its natural color. The Massachusetts Rivers Protection Act,⁹ enacted in 1996, now addresses non-point source pollution from agricultural and other types of contaminated run-off.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the river and flood plains continue to suffer serious PCB contamination, with massive concentrations along the twelve-mile stretch directly south of the General Electric transformer plant in Pittsfield and high concentrations resulting from further PCB migration downstream.¹¹ The river has been deemed unswimmable and a fish consumption advisory is in effect for one hundred miles.

Under the threat of a Superfund designation, the area from Pittsfield south into Connecticut has been the subject of negotiations between General Electric,

the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the City of Pittsfield. In September, 1998, a settlement agreement was announced providing for significant investments in the removal of PCBs from the river and the GE plant site, as well as brownfields redevelopment in Pittsfield and compensation for natural resource damages.¹²

Thus, the Housatonic River of today has been affected by a diverse history of changing attitudes. The Native American view held the river as sacred, a source of life so precious it was unthinkable to defile. American industry took a different stance, harnessing the river's flow to power mills, then using it to dispose of waste.¹³ As a result, the industrial communities that grew up along the river routinely turned their store and house fronts away from the waterway. Long abused and neglected until recently, the river was barely perceived as part of the Berkshire landscape and culture.

"Here in our Housatonic, is a noble example of how hard a river dies,"¹⁴ wrote John Coleman Adams, a Universalist Minister at the turn of the century, when urban rivers across America suffered the plight of mills, dams and deforestation. His thoughts apply equally to our present-day use of chemical fertilizers and the legacy of PCB contamination. Many Berkshire adults, warned as children to stay away from the river, remember its foul smell and the routine change in color from discharges of toxins and dyes. Although water quality has vastly improved since then, the riverbanks remain clogged with refuse and the river is perceived as polluted and undesirable.

In spite of these historic and present-day abuses, the hope remains that the river can once again unify the Berkshire landscape and epitomize the essence of the region. As Adams reminds us, the Housatonic "like a silver cord binds the scenes of Berkshire into one volume." Comparing its beauty to "the old habits and ways of a friend," he notes, "Whenever in its course the lover of Berkshire comes upon it, the river seems to bear to his soul a message from the very heart of the county.... It is alive with the life of the hills."¹⁵

The Town of Great Barrington

River Walk is located in the center of Great Barrington, a bustling New England town typical of many Berkshire communities along the river. Great Barrington serves as the commercial, retail and cultural center for southern Berkshire County.¹⁶ Incorporated in 1761, the town currently has a

year-round population of approximately seventy-five hundred, which swells to three times that number in summer. There is a diverse mixture of "natives" of Italian, Polish and Dutch descent, transplanted "local" residents, and "second home owners" with primary residences in metropolitan Boston and New York.

In Great Barrington it is often said that "All politics are local." The community practices the longstanding New England tradition of "home rule" through town meetings and a Board of Selectmen. Its self-reliance is strengthened by the town's remote rural setting at the westernmost end of the state, many miles away from the state capital in Boston. A marker at the northeast corner of what is now the Town Hall notes that the first open resistance to British rule in America occurred there in 1774.¹⁷ Residents note with pride that the town set the stage for the 1787 Shays' Rebellion, the notorious armed uprising of debt-ridden farmers against the state government.¹⁸

Great Barrington today is an attractive New England town with a small, but diversified economic base that has shifted in the last few decades from an agricultural and industry-driven economy to one based on tourism.¹⁹ The impressive turn-of-the century Main Street storefronts are being revitalized and the dormant Housatonic mills restored to make way for artists' studios, galleries and small cottage industries.

The town's rich commercial tradition has been built to a large degree around the Housatonic. Much of Main Street parallels the river with the backs of numerous buildings facing the waterway. But before River Walk, little had been done to acknowledge the river's existence. Were it not for the single "Main Street" bridge that spans the Housatonic, one could spend an entire day in Great Barrington without realizing that a river runs through the town.

Great Barrington's Housatonic River Walk

For more than a decade, the Great Barrington community has endeavored to reclaim the river by creating River Walk, the first public greenway trail on the Housatonic in Massachusetts. In the eleven years since it began as a fledgling riverbank cleanup, the project has raised awareness of watershed ecology along the entire river corridor. Visitors to River Walk can appreciate the river once again for its scenic beauty and recreational potential, as local volunteers take an active and ongoing role in its care and protection.

River Walk has added the Housatonic River to the process of redefining one's sense of town life and identity. The first 136-foot section of the walk was opened in 1992. As of summer 1998 it consists of an 825-foot-long walking and nature trail along the west bank of the river in Great Barrington's downtown center. It is a work-in-progress, with an additional one thousand feet of trail expected to be completed by the year 2000. Since 1988, twelve hundred citizen volunteers have donated more than twelve thousand hours of labor in the field during 265 work days. Led by qualified professionals, people from all walks of life have taken part, including businessmen, government officials, merchants, farmers and laborers. Fully half of River Walk's volunteers have been school-age children.

After removing more than 245 tons of rubbish and construction debris, including the remains of a building destroyed by fire,²⁰ the volunteers have restored the native ecology of the riverbank and installed an all-natural, state-of-the-art foot trail along the steep slope.²¹ Practically all of the work has been performed by hand. In appreciation of this enormous volunteer effort, riverbank property owners have granted permanent public access to the downtown trail. The conservation easements are managed by the Great Barrington Land Conservancy on behalf of the local community.

River Walk is a prime example of how a grassroots initiative can change both the physical condition of a river and the outlook of a community through organizational perseverance and hard physical work. In the face of considerable skepticism, the project began with limited ambitions, rather than grand visionary plans. Small, tangible steps were taken one at a time, incorporating the views of local citizens at every juncture. From this commitment to do a small thing well, a larger vision emerged that has captured the imagination of all Berkshire County.²²

While the long range goal of the organizers and volunteers is to extend the River Walk trail to approximately one-half mile between two downtown bridges,²³ their efforts have leveraged the funding for other professionally realized restoration projects. A feasibility study encompassing both sides of the downtown river corridor was contracted by the local Main Street Action Association and completed with EOCD funding in 1996.²⁴ The \$1.3 million plan, prepared with extensive community input, proposes: a two-lane multi-use trail for bikers, joggers, cross-country skiers and the physically challenged along the river's western Main Street side;²⁵ a light hiking trail

along the east bank linking with existing East Mountain trails; canoe accesses; foot bridges; and river parks. Federal Transportation Enhancement or ISTEA²⁶ funding is in hand to professionally design and install a portion of riverside bikeway that will link local public schools with town ball fields, the Great Barrington Fairgrounds and the town's Senior Center.

Impact on the River: River Protection and Stewardship

A rigorous volunteer component distinguishes Great Barrington's project from others across the country.²⁷ The "volunteer" section of trail provides the centerpiece for a town-wide greenway system, setting the tone for "professionally-realized" projects yet to come. Beyond the actual trail itself, volunteers have drawn attention to the river's wider natural environment, creating a broad-based constituency of watershed advocates. They demonstrate, on a continuing basis, the many practical measures that ordinary citizens can undertake to improve the quality of the river and its adjacent riparian lands. Because River Walk is so prominently located in the center of town, the project has become a showcase for simple methods of riverbank and water quality protection, inspiring neighbors and out-of-town visitors to become stewards of their own riverfront properties.²⁸

The challenge of reclaiming the natural ecology of the river and its banks has been met in various ways. Following cleanup activities, the riverbank is replanted with indigenous vegetation, as invasive species are removed.²⁹ The steep riverbank,³⁰ subject to erosion and pollution from adjacent land uses, is stabilized along the walkway through a combination of techniques that includes seeding, mulching, vegetative planting, terracing and drainage installations. Field work is organized to protect the delicate slope by using manual, labor-intensive methods, rather than heavy machinery. To further minimize any impact, volunteers form lines for hand-to-hand removal of debris.³¹

In some places, water run-off from parking areas is routed through drop inlets, trapping oil or sediment that previously might have been discharged into the river. In other places, where the riverbank has been raised artificially with industrial gravel fill, shadblow, pussy willow, grey and red osier dogwood and other woody species are planted to prevent erosion.

One section, where a neighboring church had routinely disposed of grass clippings and leaves in massive clumps over the riverbank, had been subject to significant erosion. Volunteers have created a new system of composting bins for the church. Its organic materials are now reused as soil amendments and mulch for new plantings along the riverbank.

Materials and applications for the project are selected with careful consideration. Herbicides and pesticides are avoided as a form of weed control. Boardwalk decking and stairs are made from Trex™, a material derived from reclaimed plastics and waste woods that are one hundred percent recyclable. The treadway is laid with a mixture of gravel and soil stabilizer, rather than asphalt.

Below the trail, three concrete sculpted Flowforms aerate and partially purify water that enters the river from a storm drain on Main Street. Inspired by hydrologist Theodor Schwenk and developed by John Wilkes and Jennifer Greene, Flowforms derive from the work of anthroposophist and educator Rudolf Steiner. They have been installed throughout the world in banks, schools, health centers and parks, and have been used successfully in sewage plants to help process raw sewage organically.³²

Highly visible and accessible, River Walk promotes the importance of preserving one of the region's most vital natural resources, as it demonstrates the critical, continuing need for an active stewardship of our natural landscape. Recognizing that a visitor may well be experiencing the river for the first time, the planners have carefully designed the trail to ensure an appropriate and respectful interaction. As volunteers work to clean and protect the river, they become examples to others walking along completed sections of trail just feet away.

How River Walk is built is in many ways more important than how much is accomplished. The physical construction of River Walk brings people back to the river through hands-on stewardship activities. The process is critically important. The conscious decision to rely upon volunteers instead of hired professionals helps ensure the river's future protection.

The guiding philosophy is to create an on-going constituency that cares. If each member of the community picks up but one piece of trash from the river, it may never be abused again.³³ Rather than measuring the trail in linear feet, organizers note that River Walk is more than a thousand volunteers long.

Years of industrial abuse and neglect have taken a great toll on the river. For too many years, businesses and people regarded the river and its banks, not as a vital resource, but as a convenient dump. One of the most gratifying results of the River Walk project is seeing Great Barrington's working class community re-fashion its older industrial work ethic into a new ecological code of conduct, redirecting a sense of pride in one's work and one's labor to forge positive bonds with the river. As the town continues its shift to a more diversified demography that includes transplanted professionals, second-home owners and tourists, River Walk helps to create connections between natives and newcomers. Beyond the borders of Great Barrington, River Walk's model of hands-on stewardship provokes in its many visitors and volunteers a tangible awareness of the watershed, and an understanding that ordinary citizens can make a difference.

Impact on the Community

Great Barrington's River Walk utilizes citizen involvement to reconnect the community to the river and restore an abandoned natural resource to the fabric of community life. More than a physical trail, River Walk has galvanized the community to embrace the river as an environmental, educational, economic and social resource.

River Walk has affected the life of the community in many ways. 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 viewed through a wider lens, with history, culture and ecology a vital part of the picture. There is a new regard for wildlife habitat, native flora, vistas and views, alternative avenues of transport, geological formations, wetland and floodplain ecology, historic and prehistoric patterns of human settlement and local legend. While such concerns were once confined to the historians and chroniclers of an abandoned river, they now contribute to the general citizenry's understanding of town and of place.

River Walk and the Revitalization of Main Street

The Housatonic River flows through Great Barrington parallel to the town's central corridor, passing within two hundred feet of Main Street in some places. The riverfront's recent restoration has played a key role in the town's Main Street revitalization. The existing River Walk trail and its

future greenway expansion offer unique opportunities for tourism and alternative off-road foot and bicycle routes linking schools, parks, town playing fields and a senior center.

River Walk has broadened the townscape beyond a single Main Street artery, while giving a new face to Main Street itself. The local Chamber of Commerce credits River Walk with stimulating downtown economic development, including the renovation of two Main Street buildings near the trailhead. One building is now owned by Orion Magazine, a nationally distributed nature quarterly. The other was recently purchased to create a museum of the Housatonic River.

As Great Barrington turns to face the river, River Walk is helping to define new planning standards. The town's most recent Master and Open Space/Recreation Plans declare that the restoration of the Housatonic River will be a top priority for the town.

For its part, River Walk links the river to Main Street wherever possible. A *trompe-l'œil* specialist is working with the community to transform an unsightly cinderblock wall near the trail's Main Street entrance into a mural depicting various native plants that grow along the river. Artful and educational, this building improvement will connect the River Walk experience to Main Street by alerting passersby to the river's natural wonders. Another link is being developed along an abandoned downtown lot within sight of Main Street. Volunteers have cleaned the area of rubbish and debris, and created a downtown "pocket park" to access the river trail.

Special events help to blend the river experience into town life. Morris Dancers regularly include the River Walk trail in their spring itinerary of dances. In 1991, a community-wide river parade, the Housatilla Float, launched a flotilla of decorated canoes, kayaks, rafts and rowboats, turning Great Barrington's portion of the river into a Venetian Main Street for the day. While the event commemorated local cleanup efforts, it also celebrated the broader Berkshire community, promoting the river as a common link. Leading the flotilla of artists, farmers, officials, businessmen, environmentalists, sportsmen and families were representatives of the Stockbridge Munsee Indians, Mahican descendents who returned from Bowler, Wisconsin, to travel the river of their homeland for the first time in more than two hundred years.

Beyond its role in revitalizing Main Street, River Walk has enhanced the individual riverfront properties which now provide access to the trail. At first, riverside homeowners feared that a riverwalk would bring increased vandalism to an area already devastated by dumping, drug use,

loitering and other abuses. Now that River Walk provides an appropriate and carefully maintained means of accessing the river, such abuses are practically non-existent. Once-reluctant property owners are eager to join in and their riverbank, considered a blight-ridden liability, is regarded as coveted "riverfront property." As the property values of restored private riverfronts continue to increase, River Walk's conservation easements guarantee public access to the river in the future.

River Walk and the Value of History

Returning the river to its community ensures access to a natural resource with a rich cultural and historical heritage. Great Barrington's history and development are inextricably linked to its river. River Walk enables people to confront, understand and appreciate a major part of their history.

Even before the Colonial period, the Housatonic River played a vital role in the shaping of the local community. Recent excavations have uncovered a Native American village thought to have been occupied by nomadic hunters traveling from the Hudson River area. The south-facing village is located in Great Barrington just above the Housatonic River on a secondary terrace.³⁴

In the vicinity of River Walk lies the site of an old fordway where an east-west Native American trail crossed the Housatonic River on its way from Westfield, Massachusetts, to the Hudson River just below Albany, New York. It is generally believed that the "Great Wigwam" massacre took place there in August, 1676, when Major John Talcott overtook a band of Narragansett Indians.³⁵

Talcott's massacre at the river marks the first recorded appearance of Europeans in Great Barrington. Later, the town's first settlers used the river to operate simple paddlewheels for grist and sawmills. As industrial technology advanced, the river powered larger paper and textile factories. In one location along the River Walk trail, one can still see where the river was dammed to power a grist mill.

Many buildings important to Great Barrington's local history lie along the River Walk trail. A portion of the walkway follows an abandoned turn-of-the-century roadbed once used for carrying coffins by horse and carriage to a funeral home bordering a Catholic church. To this day, the deeds to neighboring riverfronts specify access to this older right-of-way.

The future bikeway portion of Great Barrington's greenway system is scheduled to pass through a number of historic sites. Two notable examples include the 1854 Housatonic Agricultural

Fairgrounds, one of the oldest agricultural fairs in New England, and Searles Castle, the home of Mrs. Mark Hopkins, designed by the firm of McKim, Mead and White, and completed in 1887.

Opposite the existing trail on the east riverbank, where the river was once dammed to power a grist mill, the remains of an old rubber factory are still visible. Built in the early days of electricity, it was here that inventor William Stanley developed transformers for transmitting alternating current. In 1886, Stanley used his transformer and generator to light twenty-five stores and offices on Great Barrington's Main Street. Stanley became the first person to successfully transmit high-voltage alternating current electricity and the town became the first to have AC-powered electric street lights.

Unhappily, a devastating consequence of Stanley's transformer production came to be felt river-wide. In the 1890s, General Electric acquired Stanley's Pittsfield plant for the continued manufacture of power transformers. As time went by, GE used chemical PCBs for insulation in its transformer production, and massive quantities of the contaminant leaked into the river where they remain today.³⁶

Townpeople from all walks of life have been touched by the Housatonic River. One of Great Barrington's most famous citizens, W.E.B. DuBois, the historian and chronicler of black American life, was born in 1868 near the Housatonic River and the site of the Great Wigwam massacre. DuBois held a special regard for the river throughout his life. Two years before he died, he called for a cleanup of the river, proclaiming that "it should be a clear and limpid stream, flowing gently through grass, trees, and flowers; flanked by broad roadways and parks as the life stream of the town."³⁷

River restorations such as River Walk enable history to be viewed at its living source. Each time a volunteer removes trash from the river, a piece of history is taken in hand, offering a glimpse into what life might have been like long ago. River Walk invites the citizens of Great Barrington to confront the abuses of their industrial history, to reconsider more sustainable strategies of Native American inhabitants and to redirect the making of their present and future with a heightened regard for the natural landscape and ecology.

River Walk's populist approach, where local people work together to solve local problems, assumes that rivers ought not to be separated from the people who live beside them. While history reveals countless abuses of our river resources, River Walk offers the possibility of a positive relationship through a renewed sense of stewardship. In eleven years, River Walk has helped raise awareness of the Housatonic watershed by bringing hundreds of working volunteers to its riverbanks. With this hands-on contribution to the river and its habitat comes a commitment to protect and maintain the watershed for generations to come.

Beyond its efforts to create a sustainable physical environment, River Walk is also strengthening the local social environment. The re-forging of healthy connections to the river enhances one's sense of community, local history and place. Intangible community values such as neighborliness and public service, once the backbone of healthy rural localities, are becoming a way of life once again.

Perhaps the most significant community benefit has been the revival of volunteerism. River Walk provides ordinary people with the means for making a contribution, for making a difference. Citizens from all walks of life engage in labor intensive techniques of trail making, cleanup and landscaping, often forming human chains to maneuver materials up and down the steep and fragile bank. The emphasis on manual, hand-to-hand labor reinforces community solidarity, while protecting the delicate ecology of the riverbank.

River Walk's hands-on approach invites community participation, as local residents, rather than outside planners, determine the river's fate and reclaim the river as their own. Their involvement continues from initial design and planning through all phases of implementation. By directly participating in the design and execution, volunteers define for themselves what they want for the river. As they work on the river, performing simple acts of care taking and nurturing, they develop a selfless sense of ownership. Much like the Native Americans before them, they act from a sense of stewardship and social responsibility.

Operating at a small, grassroots scale, River Walk demonstrates the effectiveness of design-by-community-consensus. Decisions often are made by volunteers as they work in the field. Organizers utilize the skills and talents of the town's diverse community, drawing from a wide range of traditional and alternative strategies. Collaboration among organizers, property owners,

town officials and the volunteers themselves has produced not merely a trail, but a unique and carefully nurtured linear river park. This, combined with ecological design applications, has resulted in a strong community sense of environmental accountability and a renewed pride of place.

Great Barrington's efforts have produced a public river walk with conservation protection that has been earned by the community. For many of the hundreds of volunteers who gather at its banks, River Walk has been experienced as a laying on of hands. The beauty that has resulted, like much of New England's landscape, is more hand-crafted than it is wild.

Because the community's contribution is voluntary, not coerced, and born of neighborliness and love, not shame or guilt, its commitment to the river has endured for more than a decade. It has brought a new attachment and affection, and a heightened sense of place that is strengthened and rededicated with each additional act of labor.

River Advocacy: Housatonic River Restoration

River Walk's environmental impact has been felt throughout Berkshire County. New greenway projects, in urban and rural settings, have been launched up and down the river in neighboring towns such as Pittsfield, Lenox and Lee. Since River Walk has developed against the background of GE's widespread PCB contamination of the river, the project is helping to create a constituency of river advocates to speak for river issues county-wide.

Anticipating eventual restitution from GE for natural resource damages,³⁸ river advocates are adopting grassroots techniques for ensuring community participation and for building community consensus in the county's effort to reclaim and restore the Housatonic River. These techniques have already been used on a more local scale by River Walk organizers.

Housatonic River Initiative (HRI), the county's leading citizen advocate for a cleanup, believes that the important decisions about how to spend natural resource damages money should be shared by all people of the Berkshires. In 1997, with funding from the U.S. EPA and the Massachusetts Environmental Trust, HRI formed a new organization, Housatonic River Restoration (HRR), drawing upon the many people and groups who care about the river to create an overall restoration plan.

The extent of General Electric's PCB damage crosses municipal boundaries, affects many different stakeholders, and impacts a wide range of constituencies. It includes every Berkshire community from the headwaters in Washington and Hinsdale, through the river's urban corridor in Pittsfield, to more pastoral settings in South County towns and Connecticut. HRR believes that the best way to devise a fair and effective restoration is through a broad-based and comprehensive public process.

To implement this process, HRR has instigated a community-wide collaborative conversation in every town along the river, through which thousands of Berkshire County residents are envisioning what the Housatonic environment could be. They include schoolchildren, wildlife biologists, conservation commissioners, municipal leaders, businessmen, canoeists, river activists, farmers, sportsmen, homeowners, educators and local historians. These and other "shareholders" in the river are offering ideas about how to:

- keep the river free flowing and clean of debris in appropriate ways
- create and improve walkways, trails, canoe landings and other means of access for recreation
- restore fisheries, wildlife and native plant species
- protect historic and cultural features along the river
- identify key open space along the river that requires protection or restoration or that might provide needed public access.
- develop education and river awareness programs
- ensure environmentally responsible use of the river and adjacent riparian lands
- develop monitoring and data collection programs
- recommend legislative measures for a healthy river watershed
- ensure active community participation in carrying out restoration plans
- ensure the continued care and stewardship of a restored Housatonic River

From this process, it is expected that a restoration plan for the river will emerge, together with a community-based organization to implement the plan and manage the river into the future.

Through a natural resource damages endowment, HRR could give individual communities the

logistical, technical and financial capability to restore and reclaim the river for their daily use and enjoyment.

In the past, the PCB issue has seriously divided the Berkshire community, pitting the business interests of north county, the site of the largely abandoned GE facility, against the desire of environmentalists to preserve the pastoral beauty of the river's south county stretch. An equitable distribution of natural resource damages money would provide an opportunity to turn decades of strife into a positive future for everyone. By taking an inclusive approach to the river's restoration, a plan can emerge that has full community support.

Reinventing the Wheel

Great Barrington's grassroots approach to river restoration may be seen in many other projects. New York's Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, launched in 1969, operates a Classroom of the Waves, enabling over eleven thousand children each year to learn about the Hudson River. The Hudson's Riverkeeper project enables an advocate to work full-time to protect the river's interests.³⁹ Meanwhile, in the Pacific Northwest, the Earth Conservation Corps' Salmon Corps of participants from five Native American tribes are working to repair and restore the Columbia and Snake River tributaries and to reclaim the Salmon's historic gravel spawning beds.

Recognizing the power of rivers to galvanize entire communities and unite them around a common goal, President Clinton proposed an American rivers restoration program as the single new environmental initiative of his second term.⁴⁰ In 1998, he proclaimed the Hudson, the Mississippi, the Rio Grande, the Potomac and ten other waterways as American Heritage Rivers. The President's commitment to river protection acknowledges that the issue transcends simply environmental concerns and deeply affects a diverse array of community interests.

Reclaiming America's rivers is as much about reviving America's communities as it is about the rivers themselves. As we restore these natural lifelines, we relearn our history, invigorate our local economy, provide opportunities for recreation, and teach ourselves and our children about our fragile interconnection to the larger ecosystem.

In one sense, River Walk teaches that by "reinventing the wheel," each community can engage in its own reinvention. What makes the River Walk trail vital and special are the unique aspects born of a rigorous citizen involvement. What might appear on a satellite map from space to be one small, indistinguishable dot, Great Barrington's Housatonic River Walk is, in a much larger sense, an opportunity to preserve and develop our natural heritage and to create a unique set of community traditions.

¹ The other four major rivers that flow through Massachusetts and end at a coastline are the Connecticut, the Blackstone, the Merrimack and the Charles. The Housatonic is formed from three branches of headwaters: the East branch from Muddy Pond in Washington; the West branch from Pontoosuc Lake in Lanesboro and Onota Lake in Pittsfield; and the Southwest branch from Richmond Pond in Richmond. C. P. Smith, *The Housatonic: Puritan River* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1946), pp. 8-9.

² The river drains about 500 square miles in twenty-five Western Massachusetts towns and descends 1,944 feet before entering the state of Connecticut. *Housatonic River Greenway Feasibility Study* (The LA Group and Openspace Management, October 1, 1966), p. 3.

³ *Housatonic River Greenway Feasibility Study* (The LA Group and Openspace Management, October 1, 1966), p. 3. The bog turtle is endangered in Massachusetts and found only in this basin.

Other land animals, waterfowl and fish include: raccoon, skunk, whitetail deer, beaver, muskrat, wood ducks, mallard, red and gray foxes, painted turtles, snapping turtles, carp, perch, bass and trout. Bird life also includes: great blue heron, kingfisher, egret, crows, woodpeckers, cardinals, great horned owls and hawks.

⁴ See P. Weatherbee, *Flora of Berkshire County* (Pittsfield: The Berkshire Museum, 1996).

⁵ The Indian name was heard and translated as Ousetonnuc or Housatunnuk in Massachusetts, Wyantenock in northern Connecticut, and Westenhook by the Dutch in New York. C. Taylor and G.E. MacLean, *History of Great Barrington (Berkshire) Massachusetts* (The Town of Great Barrington, 1928), p. 10.

⁶ Originally, the Mahicans came over from the Hudson River to use the Berkshire highlands as a summer hunting ground, then gradually settled the area. After the Mohawk drove them completely from the Hudson River Valley, they permanently settled the Berkshires about 1628. Shortly thereafter, however, they succumbed to a smallpox epidemic and were practically eliminated.

About 100 years later in 1724, the few that remained, led by Chiefs Konkapot and Umpachenee, sold their lands to the Commonwealth. A year later, English settlements began to appear, eventually developing into towns such as Sheffield and Great Barrington. *A Canoeing Guide for the Housatonic River in Berkshire County* (Pittsfield: Berkshire County Regional Planning Commission and Housatonic Valley Association, 1996), pp. 4-5.

⁷ English settlers first harnessed the river to power sawmills, grist mills and furnaces for iron works. By 1800, as towns and manufacturing opportunities expanded, the river was used

increasingly for textile factories and paper production mills such as Crane, Meade and Eaton, the maker of paper used in stocks, bonds and U.S. greenbacks. In the nineteenth century, steam engines and electricity were developed in conjunction with the river. Monument Mills in Housatonic was powered with electricity developed locally by William Stanley. C. Dewey, *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts. Part I, Containing a General View of the County* (Pittsfield: Samuel W. Bush, 1829), pp. 22-28.

⁸ PCBs were banned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1979 as a probable cancer-causing agent. Studies also suggest a link to developmental and neurological disorders, including lower IQs in children, and to problems with intellectual function, the nervous system, the immune system, the reproductive system and premature births. "EPA Launches Action Plan for Environmental and Economic Restoration of Pittsfield and Berkshire County," in *Environmental News*, EPA Region 1, New England, April 6, 1998, pp. 1-2.

⁹ The Rivers Protections Act, an amendment to the Wetlands Protection Act, establishes a Riverfront Resource Area or "buffer" of two hundred feet.

¹⁰ Non-point source pollution refers to any contaminant that enters the river other than directly through a pipe.

¹¹ Migrating PCBs have been largely contained in two catch basins: Woods Pond Dam in Lenox and Rising Pond Dam in Housatonic. The distance from the GE plant in Pittsfield to Rising Pond is roughly 28 miles and roughly 47 miles from the plant to the Connecticut border.

¹² "Statement of John P. DeVillars Concerning EPA/GE Negotiations" *Environmental News*, EPA Region 1, New England, September 24, 1998, p. 1. The parties are presently formalizing the terms of the agreement into a Consent Decree. GE's contribution to remediation, restoration and redevelopment activities is valued at between \$150 and \$250 million.

The Housatonic River site is currently governed by U.S. RCRA legislation. With a Superfund designation, the U.S. EPA could finance the cleanup of PCBs from the river system with federal tax dollars, then sue GE to recover triple damages. "EPA Launches Action Plan for Environmental and Economic Restoration of Pittsfield and Berkshire County," *Environmental News*, EPA Region 1, New England, April 6, 1998, pp. 1-2.

¹³ Long after the mills were in operation, the river continued to be used as a dumping ground. Rapid development of the riverbank area in the late 1800s and early 1900s led to disposal of effluent from dwellings and other buildings into the river, furthering their need to be shielded from view and access.

¹⁴ J. C. Adams, *Nature Studies in Berkshire* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 110. "The hour in which the modern man settles beside a river is a bad one for the stream, for he begins at once to tax his powers to see how he can destroy the attractions and advantages which have drawn him to its banks. He tries to tire it out with work, to exhaust it with cruelties. He strangles it with dams, and poisons it with dye-stuffs, and chokes it with sewage, and stifles it in steam-boilers. He tries to starve it to death by cutting off the forest on the mountains whence it feeds itself. He sedulously kills all the fish between its banks." Adams, p. 109.

¹⁵ Adams, pp. 106, 107, 109.

¹⁶ The three main roadways in the region, Routes 7, 23 and 41, converge on Great Barrington's Main Street for about a mile. This stretch of road serves as the commercial downtown for

Great Barrington and several surrounding communities whose combined population is about twenty-five thousand people.

¹⁷ C. Taylor and G.E. MacLean, *History of Great Barrington (Berkshire) Massachusetts* (The Town of Great Barrington, 1928), pp. 199-200, 519.

¹⁸ See C. P. Smith, *The Housatonic: Puritan River* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1946), pp. 192-213.

¹⁹ Manufacturing, health care, a growing second-home market for the New York metropolitan area, a retail community and a tourist industry all play roles in the local economy. South Berkshire County enjoys an international reputation for its cultural attractions, including Tanglewood (the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra), the Norman Rockwell Museum, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the Berkshire Theater Festival and Shakespeare & Company. Great Barrington, with its historic buildings and vigorous commercial center of shops, restaurants and cinemas, is very much a part of this activity.

²⁰ In 1978, when a fire destroyed a local drug store, firemen doused the blaze and bulldozers shoved the remains on to the steep riverbank behind, where it remained until the River Walk volunteer cleanup began ten years later.

²¹ In 1988, the Community Land Trust in the Southern Berkshires led the removal of thirty yards of inherited rubbish and demolition debris behind their newly acquired Riverbank House at 195 Main Street. Six months later, approximately seventy students from the Searles Middle School eighth-grade class cleared 266 feet of riverbank by their school of its litter, excess brush and storm damage. In 1991, a cleanup behind Brooks Pharmacy, built on the site of the 1978 fire at 197 Main Street, owned by Melvin Katsh, drew volunteers from throughout Berkshire County, resulting in the removal of more than two hundred cubic yards, or seventy-five tons, of storm damage and demolition debris. The cleanup was followed by stabilizing, mulching, seeding and landscaping the steep bank.

In appreciation of these volunteer efforts, the owners of the riverbank at Riverbank House and Brooks Pharmacy granted permanent access for a downtown community walking trail of 136 feet, making the Housatonic River accessible to Great Barrington's Main Street.

River Walk's first section of trail opened to the public on November 1, 1992. In October, 1994, volunteers completed an additional 277 feet of trail to the south behind St. Peter's Catholic Church on Main Street and the Lucien Aigner residence on Dresser Ave. A new one hundred and fifty-foot section behind 31 Dresser Avenue was added in November, 1996. Volunteers are now creating an additional one thousand feet of River Walk trail along the riverbank adjacent to Searles Middle School and the Berkshire Corporation parking lot.

²² The project began modestly in 1988 when a dozen volunteers decided to clean a single riverbank property at 197 Main Street. As more sites were added to the cleanup, the number of new volunteers increased with each new season. In 1991, the decision to create a small stretch of trail led to a more formal organization, with a small team of planners offering legal, fund raising, trail making and landscaping assistance, as well as professional technical leadership to volunteers working in the field. A few planners and technicians receive some monetary compensation, but more than half of their time is donated. Since 1991, the project has been sponsored by the Great Barrington Land Conservancy, a local 501(c)3 non-profit land trust that manages River Walk's conservation easements, financial accounts and insurance program, and receives grants and other contributions on its behalf. River Walk receives additional money through the local Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.

²³ The two bridges cross the river at Cottage and Bridge Streets.

²⁴ The EOCD is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Office of Communities and Development. The study was prepared by the LA Group and Openspace Management, together with River Walk organizers. For a detailed description of the plan, see *Housatonic River Greenway Feasibility Study* (The LA Group and Openspsace Management, October 1, 1966).

²⁵ Additional foot trails will lead through environmentally sensitive areas.

²⁶ ISTEA funding is regulated through the U.S. government's Intermodel Surface Transportation Efficiency Act.

²⁷ River Walk was given the 1997 American Rivers Gold Medal Urban Rivers Restoration Award for its achievement in grassroots activism. Its volunteer efforts have received local, state and national recognition by the Garden Club of America; the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission; the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and Executive Office of Education; the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management; the Massachusetts Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Environmental Law and Enforcement; the Massachusetts EOCD "Small Cities" Grant Program; the Soil and Water Conservation Society; and the American Greenways DuPont Award Program.

²⁸ In 1997, River Walk established a presence on the worldwide web (<http://www.grbriverwalk.org>), disseminating its techniques to places as far away as New Zealand.

²⁹ To diversify the native flora, volunteers have planted herbaceous species such as maidenhair fern, ostrich fern, Canadian ginger, sedge, hay-scented fern, sweet woodruff, May apple, Christmas fern, early meadow rue, foamflower, Labrador violet and golden Alexanders. Native shrubs and vines such as sweet pepperbush, witch hazel, winterberry, Virginia creeper, blackberry and cranberry viburnum have been added, along with native shadblow, sycamore and hemlock trees. Invasive species such as bittersweet, multiflora rose, garlic mustard, Japanese knotweed and Norway maple, have been removed.

³⁰ The slope increases as much as 45° to 55° in some places.

³¹ This technique has the added benefit of enabling each volunteer to handle, and acknowledge, every piece of material as the group works together to get the job done.

³² See M. Carde, "Flowforms: Rx for Dying Water?" *Design Spirit* (Fall, 1990), pp. 30-39. To purify water effectively, Flowforms must be combined with a system of wetlands filtration. At River Walk they are used primarily for their aesthetic value and as an educational demonstration to encourage town officials to consider a similar technology for a nearby wastewater treatment facility on the river.

³³ Labor-intensive construction techniques involve as many people in as many aspects of the process as possible. Before the eighth-grade class at Searles School cleaned the riverbank on its school grounds, the students prepared the permit application to work in the wetlands and appeared before the town's Conservation Commission and Board of Selectmen.

³⁴ B. Drew, "Indians Settled Near River in Villages About 3,500 Years Ago," *The Berkshire Courier* (August 1, 1991), p. 6.

³⁵ Although the precise location of the massacre is disputed, a marker commemorating the event was erected in 1904 on the west bank of the river at the entrance to the Searles Middle School grounds, noting that the actual event took place twenty rods to the north of the stone. C. Taylor and G.E. MacLean, *History of Great Barrington (Berkshire) Massachusetts* (The Town of Great Barrington, 1928), pp.7, 519-520.

³⁶ B. Drew, *River Walk: History Underfoot* (Great Barrington: Attic Revivals Press, 1995), pp. 8-9.

³⁷ Letter of response to an invitation to attend the Town of Great Barrington's two hundredth anniversary celebration. Great Barrington Historical Society Archives, 1961.

³⁸ Under U.S. Superfund legislation, parties responsible for pollution are sometimes required to reimburse Natural Resource Trustees, or the appropriate state and federal agencies, for the loss of the use of that resource. The recent settlement agreement with GE provides for \$25 million in natural resource claims.

³⁹ D. Ziegler, *Lessons Learned: A Casebook for Successful Urban River Projects* (Washington, D. C.: American Rivers, 1997), pp. 29-33.

⁴⁰ "Tonight, I announce that this year I will designate ten American Heritage Rivers to help communities alongside them revitalize their waterfront and clean up pollution" (State of the Union Address, February 4, 1997).