Restoring Natural Resources in the Housatonic River Watershed

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program

Highlights

- **Protected 267 acres of wildlife habitat;**
- **Constructed five canoe access areas and 2.6 miles of recreational trails;**
- **Conducted rare species surveys (2 species of rare dragonfly have already been documentd for the first time in the Housatoic watershed); and**
- **Provided environmental education to schools in ten towns.**

The Problem

The Housatonic River flows through western Massachusetts and Connecticut and empties into Long Island Sound. From 1932 through 1977, the General Electric Company (GE) facility in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, released polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into the Housatonic River environment. The PCBs contaminated the river's water, sediment, riverbanks, and floodplain, as well as various species of fish and wildlife.

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program

When hazardous substances enter the environment, fish, wildlife, and other natural resources can be injured. The Department of the Interior, along with State, Tribal and other Federal partners, acts as "trustee" for these resources. Trustees seek to identify the natural resources injured and determine the extent of the injuries. Trustees work with the responsible parties to carry out restoration activities, or recover funds from responsible parties to carry out the restoration activities. These efforts are possible under the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDAR), the goal of which is to restore natural resources injured by oil spills or the release of hazardous substances.

Restoring the Resources

In October 2000, the Natural Resource Trustees, which include the Massachusetts Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (MA EEA), the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CT DEP), the Department of the Interior's United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), reached a settlement with GE for various specific restoration activities as well as for approximately $15 million in natural resource damages. These funds have been divided between the geographic areas of Massachusetts and Connecticut for restoration projects in the watershed. Through Round 1 of funding allocations, the Massachusetts Trustee SubCouncil allocated $4 million to ten multi-year projects:

USFWS

Restoration projects help protect the rare Bog turtle.

Leo Kenny, Vernal Pool Association

Protecting land along the Housatonic provides vital habitat for the Wood frog.

Aquatic Biological Resources and Habitat

Rare Species Recovery

- Expand protection for rare species by identifying previously unknown species locations throughout the watershed, generating conservation maps, and identifying sites for habitat protection and rare species restoration.
- Partners: Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.

West Branch Housatonic River

- Remove the Mill Street Dam to restore natural flows to approximately 13 contiguous river miles.
- Partners: City of Pittsfield, Massachusetts Riverways Program, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

Wildlife Resources and Habitat

Habitat Protection on the Mainstem

- Acquire and protect 161 acres of undeveloped land (1.4 miles of shoreline) abutting the Housatonic River in Great Barrington.
- Partners: Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Inc.

Habitat Protection on the Southwest Branch

- Acquire 31 acres along the river's Southwest Branch to protect wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities.
- Partners: City of Pittsfield.

Floodplain Forest Restoration

- Restore and enhance floodplain forests along the Housatonic River through native plantings and invasive species control, and conserve habitat through land acquisitions and easements totaling approximately 75 acres.
- Partners: Project Native, Inc., The Nature Conservancy, Sheffield Land Trust, Kampoosa Bog Stewardship Committee, Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Environmental Education and Outreach

Housatonic Environmental Literacy Program (HELP)

- Enhance the stewardship of the Housatonic River by working with local schools to implement an environmental education and hands-on river experience program involving all 4th and 6th graders within the watershed (ten towns).
- Partners: Massachusetts Audubon Society, Housatonic Valley Association

Berkshire Conservation Agent Program

- Provide municipal conservation commissions with technical assistance and training regarding the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act, including field work, application review, permit preparation, and monitoring and administration of projects, resulting in increased protection for wetlands in the Housatonic River watershed.
- Partners: Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

Recreational Uses

Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk

- Stabilize and restore the steep river banks along a recreational trail by removing non-native invasive vegetation and planting native species. Enhance river stewardship through environmental education.
- Partners: Great Barrington Land Conservancy, Simon's Rock College, Flying Cloud Institute

Enhanced Public Access

- Construct five new canoe access areas along the Housatonic River.
- Partners: ESS Group, Inc., Housatonic Valley Association, City of Pittsfield, Towns of Lee, Lenox, Great Barrington, and Sheffield.

Old Mill Trail

- Construct a passive recreation trail along 2.6 miles of the Housatonic River.
- Partners: Housatonic Valley Association, Crane & Company, Inc.

Dennis Donohue/ through-my-lens.com

Birds such as Downy Woodpecker (pictured left), Eastern Tufted Titmouse, Veery, Northern Parula, Blackpoll Warbler, and Mourning Warbler will benefit from protection and restoration of floodplain forests.

Ken Munney

Kayaking the river.

Veronica Varela

Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk.

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