

A threat to Housatonic designation

Tuesday, January 27

With a lot of support from sportsmen, environmental and recreational groups, elected officials and Berkshire County residents, the Save the Housatonic coalition of Mass. Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Berkshire County League of Sportsmen and Green Berkshires, Inc. has nominated 13 miles of the upper Housatonic River and its surrounding drainage area as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). This is a state designation that gives the river and its neighbors extra environmental protection, which is really needed now that plans for dredging and disposing of PCBs are being considered.

For over 50 years, the Housatonic River was a floating garbage dump. I remember when people used to go up to Pittsfield to watch the river burn from the oil and gas draining into it. And for decades, industry dumped its wastes and G.E. dumped thousands of PCBs into the river.

But in the past 25 years, the river has been getting cleaner. People, towns and industry have stopped dumping trash, sewage and wastes into it. Laws such as the Clean Water Act have been enacted. Volunteers have removed tons of trash, including refrigerators and hundreds of tires, on clean-up days. If safeguards like the existing laws were in place 30-40 years ago, the PCB pollution that exists today in the river corridor would never have happened. People care about the river now and they want to protect it and use it safely.

Since the cleanup began, one of the best warm-water fisheries and some of the best pike fishing in Massachusetts have developed in the Housatonic. Go out on weekends and see the ice fishing on Woods Pond.

Besides fishing, the river area attracts residents and tourists alike for bird watching, canoeing and kayaking, berry-picking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. It is the largest area along a major waterway in western Massachusetts open to the public, thanks to over 1,000 acres being owned by Mass. Audubon Society, the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and Lenox.

The Housatonic is one of the most studied rivers in the state because of its natural resources. It runs through the largest wetland west of the Connecticut River and is a major flyway and nesting area for waterfowl. The Upper Housatonic has been named an "Important Bird

Area," and it is the home of many rare and endangered species. It is also an incredibly scenic river.

The boundaries of the ACEC were drawn based on careful study of how best to protect the river and its neighbors. Biologists, environmental groups and users of the river contributed their knowledge. But now a few powerful people want to chisel the boundaries for their own interests, and they are working hard behind the scenes to weaken the ACEC nomination.

The boundaries should not be changed. Any industrial project along the river should be open to scrutiny. The number one concern of public officials in south Pittsfield, North Lenox, Lenoxdale, Lee and the town south of Woods Ponds should be the health, safety and welfare of their citizens. People should know about projects being considered that could affect their homes, their health and their river, and they should have input into the considerations. These projects should not be excepted from the ACEC boundaries.

Millions of dollars have gone into cleaning up and protecting the Housatonic. Many people have devoted a lot of effort and time. We don't want to turn back the clock and make the river vulnerable to pollution again, or make it a place that people avoid. We have many thriving neighborhoods along the Housatonic. Let's keep it that way.

If you care about the Housatonic River, now is the time to show it. Come to the public hearing on the ACEC this Thursday at 7 p.m. at Lenox Memorial High School, on East St. in Lenox.

GEORGE DAREY

Lenox

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