

## OUTBOARDS OFF THE RIVER

By Morgan Bulkeley

AT THE suggestion of members of its advisory council, the Pittsfield Conservation Commission has been investigating the possibility of restricting or banning power boating on the Housatonic River and its branches within city limits.

The commission has just received an opinion from the city legal department that this can be accomplished by local ordinance.

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AT FIRST GLANCE such an action might appear to be discriminatory. Under conditions existing in Pittsfield, it is not so at all. Indeed, the Conservation Commission believes that banning power boats (except for necessary cleanup programs, rescue missions and certain fish and wildlife operations) would contribute to the public interest, welfare and safety.

Pittsfield is fortunate to have Onota Lake and large parts of Pontoosuc Lake and Richmond Pond within its bounds, all of which are open to motor boating. With these deep-water bodies available for fishing and motorized recreation, the Conservation Commission feels strongly that the Housatonic River should be preserved for quieter and more peaceful uses, such as canoes, rowboats, kayaks, fold-boats, and the like.

Eventually, implemented disposal plans, upgraded sewage treatment and continuing cleanup will improve fishing and once more make swimming a possibility in places. Doubters might be interested to know that brown trout are already being caught in the West Branch as

far down as the South Street bridge. Do we want the gasoline engine to violate the river after we've spent money, time and effort to clean it up? Does the engine ride us?

Actually, the Housatonic River which divides into three branches in Pittsfield is not well suited to outboard motors. The branches are narrow and shallow, especially in summer, and the murky waters conceal plentiful rocks, shifting sandbars and unpredictable snags and fallen trees. If the power boater shears a pin, he must usually cross private property to solve his problem. The boater who relies on oar or paddle power goes his merry way after a short portage or a refreshing ducking.

After years of observing wildlife along the Housatonic River, Edgar Hoyer, a district wildlife officer for the state Division of Fisheries and Game, has concluded that power boating, with its intrusive noise and wash, could become the straw to break the wildlife's back. It would be especially disturbing to geese, ducks, herons and waders at nesting time.

This columnist will certainly corroborate that, after seeing an outboard go speeding upriver above Wood's Pond. The driver would slow down only when signaled, presumably by his son, that some bird offered a particularly tempting target for their .22 rifle. We witnessed that the two were simultaneously breaking federal, state and local laws; but being armed only with paddles, we could do nothing about it.

Outboards should be kept from the river to protect boaters themselves and also the peace, property and safety of private landholders along both banks of the river. If this is not done, it is doubtful that easements or much public land can ever be acquired to form park

sections linked by hike-and-bike trails along the river corridor. This little ordinance could be a foundation making possible a much bigger plan.

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THE PITTSFIELD Conservation Commission will seek the support of the Housatonic River Watershed Association and other conservation commissions in an effort to extend the restriction on motor boats, if secured, town by town, to the southern limit of the county. Every Massachusetts town has similar local jurisdiction over its nontidal waters, subject only to passage of a bylaw, proper public notice and approval by the director of the Division of Motor Boats. If the majority feels it is in the public interest, who can say no? The time to take action is now before the problem becomes acute.

The object is not to discourage boating on the river, but rather to encourage the kind of boating that will promote the public interest, welfare and safety and at the same time be compatible with the river conditions and wildlife.