

TO SAVE A RIVER

By Morgan Bulkeley

THERE ARE other ways besides polluting to destroy the natural attractions and values of a river. That is one reason why Massachusetts pioneered with a broad Wetlands Protection Act that requires a permit for "removing, filling, dredging or altering any bank bordering on any existing stream."

That is also why the locally administering Pittsfield Conservation Commission asked questions when the Riverview West Apartments sought a permit to riprap 1,800 feet of bank along the middle branch of the Housatonic below the West Street bridge. Why riprap an almost-straightaway that had not eroded in hundreds of years?

* * *

The Western Mass. Electric Co. had not found it necessary to riprap on the opposite side, where any beginner-geologist could see that erosion was more likely because of the slight outside curve. Furthermore, recent flood studies by the Army Engineers showed that there was no need for riprap in this stretch of river, and they concluded that the landscaping of the bank by Western Mass. Electric was "effective and decorative."

It then turned out that it was taxpayers' dollars that might pave this bank of the Housatonic -- 25,000 of them. A blind condition on the HUD purchase-and-development funding required the riprap -- or should we say boondoggle.

Obviously some HUD regulation calculated to safeguard all the circumstances equated the middle branch of the Housatonic (spanned by

a 30-foot bridge) with the wide Missouri.

A good basic rule of river management is never to riprap a bank except where the river is stealing valuable land. We know of an instance in Sheffield where the Housatonic was cutting away so much of a farmer's pasture that a string of fence posts was suspended by barbed wire out over a long river bend. Failing other recourse, the farmer riprapped the bank with junk cars. On balance, the damage to the river was far greater than the small saving in hay.

We have also seen what can happen to a river as a result of indiscriminate riprapping with stone. The Park River in Hartford is similar in size to the middle branch of the Housatonic in Pittsfield.

It was the scenic little river that Mark Twain chose to contemplate from his riverboat porch while he wrote about the Mississippi.

It was the river where many Toms and Hucks, including this columnist, built their first rafts, probed for turtles and crayfish, and caught strings of sunnies on bent pins. Generations of boys affectionately dubbed it the Hog River.

* * *

Ironically, to their elders the Park River became a nuisance with its increasing pollution and occasional flooding. When it entered the business district and the Capitol grounds, it was progressively riprapped in a straightjacket of stone. It completely lost its tree-lined banks and biological nature as it disappeared beneath the bridges like a sterile canal.

One final indignity put a long stretch of the river underground like a sewer, and there was no more winter skating in the shadow of the Capitol. It all started with riprap.

* * *

In Massachusetts the Wetlands Protection Act allows conservation commissions to approve permit applications or to impose conditions in the public interest. In the case of riprap, the issue -- as on the Housatonic middle branch -- is as clear-cut as rape. Approval or denial is demanded, there are no conditions.

The Department of Natural Resources is the arbiter in this first local permit denial. Let us hope that they understand grassroots desire for a natural, scenic and landscaped river.

Let us also hope that HUD will drop its stipulation for expensive and unnecessary riprap that might set a devastating precedent, and instead will divert some of the savings to a simple, grassy, riverbank promenade that would set an example to public, business and private ownerships upstream and down. It is the opportunity that Hartford missed.

* * *

A river needs friends. In the face of apathy it has no way to go but downhill. Only positive action on the part of many can make up for long years of abuse and mismanagement.

Anyone who has read this far or who has canoed or walked along some part of the river may wish to preserve and expand the Housatonic Greenway or promote its interests by maintaining a membership in one or more of the following concerned environmental organizations. A river needs friends.

(Please see list on next page)

Berkshire Natural Resources Council
20 Bank Row
Pittsfield, MA 01201

Berkshire County Land Trust and Conservation Fund
20 Bank Row
Pittsfield, MA 01201

Berkshire-Litchfield Environmental Council, Inc.
Box 552
Lakeville, CT 06039

Housatonic Valley Association
P.O. Box 28
Cornwall Bridge, CT 06754

Massachusetts Audubon Society
South Great Road
Lincoln, MA 01773

The Nature Conservancy
79 Milk Street, Suite 300
Boston, MA 02109

Trustees of Reservations
572 Essex Street
Beverly, MA 01915