

Berkshire Woods & Waters

ACEC would be aces for Berkshire waters

By Gene Chague

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LENOX

The recent news that the newly-formed organization called Save the Housatonic is attempting to establish an area of critical environmental concern in the Housatonic River watershed comes as good news to local sportsmen and conservationists. (See July 21, 2008 Berkshire Eagle article entitled Groups seek special label). Hats off to the Berkshire County League of Sportsmen, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Mass Audubon and Green Berkshires for heading up this project.

Although the details will be unveiled at an Aug. 7 meeting at the Lenox Town Hall, it was disclosed that the ACEC would cover the area from Memorial Park in Pittsfield to about two miles south of Woods Pond. Some of the brooks that feed the river in this stretch from north to south are: Sackett, Sykes, Yokum, Mill, Roaring, Sawmill, Felton, Woods Crossing, Washington Mountain, and several others that are unnamed or their names are unknown to me. There are many smaller streams that feed the above listed ones, too. Undoubtedly, there are ponds such as Felton Pond on October Mountain that will also be included in this area. Think of all of the plants and wildlife that these water bodies support. Most of these brooks contain populations of wild brook trout and they could certainly benefit by the additional layer of environmental review.

Included in this area are thousands of acres of open space owned and managed by the the Massachusetts

Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Berkshire Natural Resources, and the lands preserved and/or protected by the various towns in the area, such as the Post Farm in Lenox.

According to Fish and Wildlife Board Chairman, George Darey, the area is unique in that it contains the largest contiguous wetland that is open for passive recreation west of the Connecticut River. According to the DFW, the area from New Lenox Road in Lenox to Woods Pond in Lenox Dale is considered the second-best warm-water fishery in the

commonwealth.

What effects, if any, this designation would have on the General Electric Polychlorinated biphenyls clean up is unclear at this point, but no matter. Sportsmen and conservationists should seize the moment and give moral and financial support to the proposed ACEC. This river, its watershed and the critters that live in it deserve nothing less.

Because of past GE discharges of PCBs into the 26-acre Silver Lake in Pittsfield, it was required by a consent decree between the Environmental Protection Agency and GE to remove about 400 cubic yards of contaminated sediments from a section of the lake and then cap the entire lake bottom. In a recent report to the Citizen's Coordinating Council, Kenneth Munney from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service reported that based on fish tissue (which showed PCB levels from 24 to 168 parts per million) some fish removal is warranted. The fish targeted for removal will be the larger sized carp, goldfish, largemouth bass, yellow perch, white sucker and sunfish. They will be removed, dispatched and disposed at an out-of-area toxic waste dump.

According to Munney, two reasons for the fish removal (which will be conducted by electroshocking and gill netting) are to eliminate the possibility of PCB recontamination when the older, larger fish die and drop to the bottom, and also to eliminate the possibility of the larger fish stirring up the sediment when they are poking around (presumably for food or spawning). The lake will not be restocked, but rather the smaller fish will be left to repopulate it naturally. The fish removal operations are scheduled to begin this summer and continue through the fall.

Local environmental groups such as the Berkshire Environmental Action Team and the Housatonic River Initiative are upset because habitat restoration was also spelled out in the consent decree along with the destruction of the fish. They believe that neither GE, nor the USFW, plan to restore the habitat because they might be liable if the cap fails because of the restoration. (Some feel it is likely that plants would eventually penetrate the cap). Because of the change of the remediation plans, a modification to the consent decree was required.

Some environmentalists feel that GE should be required to clean up the lake at least enough to restore habitat all along the shoreline. They are hoping that the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection will intervene and insist on a restoration which would then

require a better cleanup.

One can't help but wonder what kind of remediation will take place on Silver Lake when there is concern that poking fish or plant growth could undo some of the remediation effort.

There is one other Housatonic River related matter that I would like to pass on. A few weeks ago I bumped into Jack Teahan, an old fishing friend from the Springfield area who I had not seen in 10 years. After exchanging the usual niceties and silently observing how each of us had aged, he couldn't wait to tell me about a wonderful experience he had recently when he took a day off to do some fishing in the Housatonic River catch-and-release area in Lee.

Yes, he caught some nice fish, but what really made his day was how friendly and helpful the people were that he met on different sections of the river. They unselfishly told him where to fish and what flies to use and also suggested where to have lunch. Jack remarked that the whole day was a wonderful, memorable fishing experience in the Berkshires.

With treatment like that, it's no wonder that the catch-and-release area is becoming a destination point for more and more out-of-area visitors.

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