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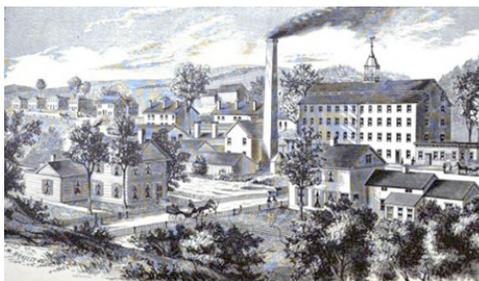
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TRY ONE ISSUE!



Editor's Note: In this month's Insider Column for Western Massachusetts and Vermont, Jay Baver wrote about a special piece of land in Berkshire County and the Housatonic River that runs through it. This section of the Housatonic is under threat from a proposed restoration effort that could negatively affect the integrity of the fishery. Read more about the magic of this fishery and the threats it faces in this extended Web Extra. To help keep this fishery alive, please go to www.savethehousatonic.org

The bank of the Housatonic River was a stone's throw from the front yard of my childhood home. Considering that I suffered from a serious form of fishing fever starting at the age of five, you might think that the Housatonic provided me with hours of non-stop angling entertainment and exploration. Actually, quite the opposite was true.



Pontoosuc woolen mills - Smith's History of Pittsfield, 1876

My grandfather spent his career making paper at the Columbia Mill, located just upriver from our house, and his stories about the chemical-laden pulpy mess that was dumped in the river were enough to keep even me away. Neither one of us knew the full extent of the river's pollution or building population of sport fish. The Clean Water Act put a stop to much of what my grandfather had witnessed at the mill, and over the last 35 years, the Housatonic has been able to cleanse itself of much of the pollution caused by the paper mills. Unfortunately, the river has not been able to cleanse itself of another form of pollution that General Electric dumped into it. Today, almost all of the mills and the General Electric plant are gone, but the PCBs dumped into the river remain.

The Housatonic River is the main drainage for Berkshire County, and whenever any of the stocked lakes in the county flood or any of their dams are breached, the stocked trout, pike and tiger muskie escape into the river, along with all of the other lake-dwelling fish. These fish have thrived in the river, mostly under the radar of anglers because of the river's toxic past. A little over 10 years ago, I started hearing rumors of big brown trout being landed with regularity in the river. One of my friends was catching these fish and agreed to take me, and with video camera in tow, I witnessed several good-sized brown trout being landed. My entire perception of the river changed as a result. I started to fish the river frequently after that and was astounded not only by the amount and size of brown trout, but also by the size and numbers of northern pike.

When I first started fishing the Housatonic I was in graduate school, which meant I had winter and summer breaks that allowed for some intensive fishing sessions lasting weeks on end. One of those years I had a fishing competition with a friend of mine named Harold Armstrong. The goal was pretty simple; catch as many trout as you could in 1 year. For the better part of the year we ran neck and neck, blowing by 100 trout each by early spring, and by summer we had bolted past 200. The next big mark was 300, and by the fall Harold had pulled 16 trout ahead of me. He was up to 299, and I was stuck at 283. The river didn't account for many of our trout, but it certainly had quality going for it.

We caught most of our numbers with stocked trout in the local lakes and ponds and put up serious numbers in the brooks. Harold was one of the guys who always looked down on the Housatonic River as a fishery. After a lifetime of hearing how horribly polluted it was, it was hard for him to imagine how much it had changed. Harold refused to fish the river with me until I showed him some video of the quality browns guys were catching on flies. I remember the first time he saw the video, I could almost see the wheels turning in his head wondering what kind of damage a Thomas Buoyant or Rapala would do, not to mention a night crawler.

It was September, and every trout we had caught in the river for the year was a brown. Some of these fish easily hit the 2-pound mark. One afternoon we decided to fish the area right below Woods Pond Dam. It had been particularly hot, so we anticipated mostly warm water species, but part of the beauty of the Housatonic is you never really know what you're going to catch. I decided to fish the big pool that's right off of the mill parking lot and Harold headed up to the

In August 1997, the EPA and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection produced a small brochure, "Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) A Fact Sheet." They wrote:

WHAT ARE PCBs?

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are a family of man-made chemicals that contain 209 different variations, or congeners. PCBs are typically found in the environment as mixtures of different congeners. These mixtures are also known as "Aroclors", a trade name of the Monsanto Corporation. There are no known natural sources of PCBs. PCBs are typically oily liquids, ranging from colorless to light yellow in color. They have no smell or taste. Because they do not burn easily and are a good insulating material, PCBs have been widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors, and other electrical equipment. Consumer products that may contain PCBs include old fluorescent lighting fixtures, hydraulic fluids and electrical devices or appliances containing PCB capacitors made before PCB use was stopped. The manufacture of PCBs was stopped in the United States in 1977 because of evidence that PCBs build up in the environment and cause harmful effects.

HOW DID PCBs GET FROM GE INTO THE ENVIRONMENT?

PCBs are present in Housatonic River sediments, in soil, and in fill. There are also plumes of PCB-contaminated oil underneath the General Electric (GE) facility in Pittsfield. The plumes underneath the GE facility are masses of PCB contaminated oil, several feet thick, that are present as a separate layer and do not mix with the groundwater.

Over the years several environmental groups have disputed the claim that the underground plumes of PCB-contaminated oil have been contained. They have raised the issue that the plumes are a continuing source for PCB-contamination of the river. They note, in addition, that much of Pittsfield's groundwater is now unsuitable for drinking water, and that a significant aquifer that lies beneath Brattlebrook Park and the current site of Vincent Sand and Gravel is unusable due to PCB-contamination.

From: savethehousatonic.org

falls. We were both using the tried and true crawler, and on Harold's second cast to a rock in the shaded area of the river below the falls his line went tight. I was some distance away at the beginning of the battle, but after about a minute I knew he had a good fish, I asked him what it was and he said he didn't know; it was acting like a trout, but its weight would seem to indicate bass. After several minutes of the fish running up and down stream, Harold brought the fish to his feet and landed it. It was a massive rainbow trout that must have tipped the scales at around 3 pounds. This rainbow was in the river well before official stockings occurred years later, so exactly where it came from was a mystery, but the fact that a fish as healthy as it could be caught in our Housatonic was encouraging and for Harold a crowning achievement to our trout competition. As Harold released the rainbow he declared he was all done fishing until the water got hard in winter. Little did either of us know what waited for us on the other side of the dam later that year.

Before I get to what happened on Woods Pond later that year it's worth noting that I had two "firsts" at the same spot that Harold caught his rainbow trout. From almost the exact same spot, but on the near side of the river I was tossing a purple Roostertail and hooked into a fish that's profile appeared to be pike, but when landed proved to be my first and only tiger musky up to this point. By tiger musky standards it wasn't huge at 24 inches, but the fact that you can catch trout and musky from the same spot in the river is notable. Also, the spot below the dam is the location of my first carp I ever took with a bow and arrow. I had been trying for weeks to arrow a carp at Kelly's Cove, another Housatonic River off shoot, but had only been able to arrow a white sucker. I noticed some big carp cruising around the big pool below the Woods Pond dam one day and on my second try I arrowed a fish that went around 15 pounds. I had tried so hard to accomplish this first that I was elated and then quickly discouraged by the prospect of pulling a barbed arrow through the body of a large carp and then trying to figure out what to do with the fish. Well, as it turns out my first bow-killed carp was also my last. It was a let down compared to being able to watch a fish swim away at the end of a battle.

I had been hearing about the pike fishing on Woods Pond for a couple of seasons, and I decided that during my winter break I was going to give it a shot. I had never landed a pike through the ice before and the prospect of



Aerial shot of GE Site - Photo Courtesy EPA



Dredging Cell C in the 1/2 Mile Section - Photo Courtesy EPA



Hill 78 landfill, May 2000 - Photo Courtesy EPA



being able to catch them right down the street from my house was too good to pass up. Harold and I decided to try, and the day we picked couldn't have been worse. It was one of those December days where the precipitation was inevitable, but whether it was going to be liquid or solid varied by the minute. The early morning snow was encouraging, but by the time we hit the pond and got our 5



Workers lay concrete blocks during 1 1/2 Mile Remediation - Photo Courtesy EPA

tip-ups in the snow had turned to rain. One of the good things about Woods Pond is that it's pretty small, so you can easily watch your setup from the seat of your truck on land. We got into the truck and watched as our tip ups began to get ripped out of the holes by the high wind that started to accompany the rain. One of my tip ups was headed for the open water of the river. We decided it was time to go, but as we picked up one of my flags went off. Although I thought it was a wind flag, it turned out to be a 12-inch pike. Success. There were indeed pike here, but there would be better days to chase them.

A few days later the weather settled down and Harold and I began to aggressively drill holes and look for weed lines and drop offs. We found what appeared to be a secondary channel from the river and we set up our bait 1-2 feet off the bottom. Harold struck first and began to battle a sizeable fish that once through the hole was a pike in the 8-pound class. This was a big fish through the ice in the Berkshires, and the largest that Harold had ever taken through the ice. That pike would prove to be one of the smallest of the day. For the next 3 hours we took a steady take of pike up to 12 pounds. It was phenomenal. We made plans to come back with some of our friends on the weekend.

We found great success on the pond that day and we wanted to share the hot spot with our friends. I had begun filming with my new digital video camera and the plan was to capture as many pike on film as we could that weekend. Saturday morning was perfect, no wind, clear skies, and a steady flow of ice anglers that finally totaled 90! If each of them put 5 tip ups into the pond there would be 450 suspended baits for the day.



PCB warning Woods Pond - Photo Courtesy EPA

If you've ever seen the Woods Pond episode on On The Water TV you'll understand what kind of day it was. We had to do a pike montage because we landed so many fish that day. The biggest in our group was a little over 13 pounds. We weren't the only ones catching fish, it seemed like everyone was catching, and the even better news was that they were all letting the fish go. If there ever was a silver lining to heavily polluted bodies of water, it's that the fish aren't harvested for the table, at least usually.

The secret was out: The Housatonic River has been reborn into a tremendous fishery. The Massachusetts Division of Fish and Wildlife has said they consider the area from New Lenox Road in Lenox to Woods Pond in Lenoxdale to be the second-best warm-water fishery in the Commonwealth. The area below the dam in Lenoxdale has since been made catch-and-release only, and it is now stocked with trout. People from all over New England are utilizing it and learning about its world-class fishing. Right below the dam at Woods Pond, I have caught brown trout, rainbow trout, tiger muskie, northern pike, perch, largemouth and smallmouth bass, rock bass, and carp.

The reason I'm writing about this now is that the stretch of river that I hold in the highest regard as a fishery is at stake. General Electric has agreed to clean the river of PCBs, which you may think is a good thing, but the way in which they do it is critical if the integrity of the fishery is to be maintained. General Electric's cleanup of the first contaminated portion of the river in Pittsfield has created a sluiceway with riprap banks and very little fish-holding structure. The bottom of

the river was excavated with little regard to the maintenance or support of a fishery. If General Electric cleans the next portion of the river in the same way, the entire fishery will be devastated.

The question of what to do with the river in its current state is not an easy one to answer. There is no doubt that the entire area currently boasts an impressive fishery, but it also has one of the most contaminated river bottoms in the world. Some of my angling friends don't want any action to be taken on the river so we can continue enjoying the great fishing and not have to worry about a cleanup effort disrupting an already good thing. After seeing what General Electric did to the river in Pittsfield, I don't blame them for this opinion.

What if there was a way to clean the river of PCBs and not disrupt the fishery or natural ecosystem of the river? As it turns out, there may be more than one way to achieve this goal. I'm not going to get into alternative technologies or the specifics of the proposed cleanup, but I am going to say that we can ill afford to do nothing at all, nor can we clean up the rest of the river in the way that was done in Pittsfield. There is a better way. This is likely our only chance to do this right so that we will one day be able to utilize the river's resources without having to worry about PCB contamination.

The EPA has the final say in what is going to happen to the rest of the Housatonic River cleanup, but the state of Massachusetts has a mechanism that may offer some guarantees, or at least roadblocks, that will prevent the cleanup from devastating the fishery and natural environment of the river system. A group of like-minded sportsmen, environmentalists and conservationists has banded together to support what we think is the proper cleanup of this area of the river. This group, of which I am a part, is called Save the Housatonic. We are seeking special environmental designation from the state that would create an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) that would enact a high degree of conservation standards, raise the levels of environmental review, and promote stewardship of the 1300-acre parcel. An ACEC designation would also prevent dredging the river and creating a landfill on the site for the contaminated soils without a state-granted waiver.

The ACEC is one of the few things that we can do to help maintain the integrity of a fishery that I believe still has not lived up to its potential. The incredible fishing of the last 10 years is only the beginning for this stretch of the Housatonic River. From world-class trout fishing to epic ice-fishing for pike, the river is a true New England gem for fishermen and outdoor-lovers. To learn more about how you can help keep this fishery alive, please go to

www.savethehousatonic.org.

