

**Westfield River
Wild & Scenic
Advisory Committee**

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We're on the Web!

See us at:

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Advisory Committee**

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Huntington, MA 01050

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CITY, ST 22134**

LOOKING AHEAD... 2008 the year of Wild & Scenic

In 2008, we will celebrate not only the 40th Anniversary of the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, but also the 15th Anniversary of the National Wild & Scenic designation on the Westfield River. In our continued efforts to protect this nationally recognized river, we have already integrated Stream Team Survey results into ongoing projects and activities.

Survey findings were incorporated into a new Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Program which will be launched in the Fall of 2008. Stream Team volunteers will be able to assist in the collection of samples on the West Branch. In addition, follow-up surveys will be conducted in the

About the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee...

The mission of the Committee is to preserve, protect, and enhance the special qualities and outstanding natural resources of the Westfield River watershed in concert with local communities.

The Committee is comprised of representatives of the towns of Becket, Chester, Chesterfield, Cummington, Huntington, Middlefield, Savoy, Washington, Windsor, and Worthington, as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the National Park Service, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, The Trustees of Reservations, and the Westfield River Watershed Association.

Spring and Summer to collect more detailed information along several river segments.

Throughout 2008, the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee (WRWSAC) will continue to work with the Stream Teams to develop Action Plans and implement the recommended actions for each of the branches. Project funding will be available through the FY2008 Partnership Rivers budget for the Westfield River.

Stream Team survey reports and maps will be displayed and made available in each of the Towns along the West Branch.



Image donated by Hilltown local artist MICHAEL WOLSKI (www.MICHAELWOLSKI.com)

West Branch Highlights:

- Over 65 volunteers surveyed approximately 70 miles of the Westfield River
- The West Branch is the longest free-flowing segment in Massachusetts.
- The headwaters of the West Branch begin in October Mountain State Forest - the largest contiguous state forest in Massachusetts

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Executive Summary

West Branch

WALKIN' THE WATERSHED - Stream Teams in Action 2007

65 VOLUNTEERS SURVEY OVER 70 MILES OF THE WESTFIELD RIVER!

Fifteen years ago, the Westfield River became Massachusetts' first National Wild & Scenic River. Today over 78 miles of the Westfield River are designated as part of the National Wild & Scenic River system.

In 2007, the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee sponsored an extensive shoreline survey of the East, West, and Middle Branches and several of the headwater tributaries. The goals of the survey were to:

- Inventory and assess the Wild & Scenic features along the Westfield River;
- Develop a roadmap of short-term and long-term strategies and actions;
- Assist communities in long-term protection of the Westfield River; and
- Encourage stewardship of the Wild & Scenic features.

Over 65 volunteers surveyed approximately 70 miles of the Westfield River. Using protocols developed by the Riverways Adopt-A-Stream Program, Stream Team volunteers used their observational skills to document scenic, historical, geological, recreational and ecological features along the river.

Shoreline Survey Reports and large format maps have been developed for each branch which highlight the assets, problems and priorities for action identified by the volunteers. This Executive Summary outlines survey findings and priorities for action along the West Branch of the Westfield River.



THE WEST BRANCH OF THE WESTFIELD RIVER

Beginning at the confluence of Shaker Mill Brook and Depot Brook, the West Branch of the Westfield River connects remarkable scenic, geological, historical, recreational and ecological features.

Large expanses of vegetated riparian areas provide exceptional vistas

along the river corridor. Prominent overlooks and incredible views of the river can be found along Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway - rated one of the top ten scenic byways in the United States.

(Continued West Branch, Page 2)

WEST BRANCH, continued from Page 1

Shaker Mill Brook drops into a beautiful ravine formed by steep ledge and surround by a hemlock forest. Water tumbles down Center Brook and forms a series of drops including a 20-foot-high waterfall.

The West Branch provides a rare opportunity in southern New England of a naturally occurring high quality Class III-IV whitewater run that is not dam controlled. Among October Mountain State Forest, Hiram Fox Wildlife Management Area, and Keystone Arch Trail there are ample recreational opportunities including hiking, paddling, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, biking, cross-country skiing and horseback riding.

The West Branch is the longest free-flowing river reach in Massachusetts. The West Branch and its tributaries provide a variety

of important habitats including outstanding cold water streams, prime juvenile salmon habitat, rare natural communities, and large forested areas dating back to the 1830's.

The Keystone Arch Bridges are among the most venerated contributing historic resources of the Westfield River's National Wild & Scenic designation. Built in the 1840's, these bridges were the first railroad to span a mountain overpass - today they stand over the West Branch of the Westfield River in tribute to the ingenuity of their time. The Keystone Arch Bridges and surrounding landscape prominently beckon to the forefront as being one of the most remarkable areas along this National Wild & Scenic River.

SCENIC FEATURES

In 1910, Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway was the first mountain crossover built for automobiles. Today it provides travelers with dramatic views of the remarkable river corridor.

Large stretches of trees and native vegetation line the banks in many places creating a sense of wilderness as well as providing outstanding habitat.

Volunteers noted several scenic vistas and overlooks, waterfalls, and characteristics which contribute to the outstanding scenic features along the West Branch.

In their own words:

"The section of Shaker Mill Brook is very scenic with a long, shallow

waterfall/cascade and several deep pools surrounded by hemlocks"

"This segment of the river is generally scenic, with pleasing vistas of the river flowing beside wooded hillsides. The most scenic vista along this section is of the lowermost Keystone Arch bridge - which is fairly easy to access from Middlefield Road. "



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Riverways Adopt-A-Stream Program, Massachusetts Department of Fish & Game

Special Thanks to:

Westfield River Environmental Center, Westfield State College Westfield River Watershed Association

Meredyth Babcock, Stream Team Coordinator 2007

Individuals and Businesses who donated prizes for the *Rapid, Riffle, Run* Drawing.

All the Stream Team Volunteers

Short-term Actions (actions which can be completed in 6 months to a year):

- **Sponsor educational programs** for landowners and residents on how to keep river healthy
- **Organize river clean-ups**, especially along Shaker Mill Brook and West Branch in the areas near Bancroft and Old State Road
- **Remove broken water pipe** upstream of footbridge in Huntington
- **Work with MassHighway to recover bridge construction debris** below Bancroft Bridge
- **Conduct follow-up surveys***** on several segments
- **Install and update informational kiosks*****

Long-term Strategies and Actions (actions which take 1-5 years):

Fish Habitat: Maintain and improve fish habitat.

- Improve fish passage along Shaker Mill Brook by replacing the collapsed McNearney Road*** culvert and upstream perched culvert
- Remove debris blocking Abbott Brook culverts to reduce short-term flood concerns and investigate ways to improve fish passage and prevent future clogging of culverts

Land Conservation: Encourage various land conservation options along Wild & Scenic segments

- Contact local land trusts regarding several critical parcels currently for sale, including 245 acre parcel along Shaker Mill Brook and a 250 acre parcel along the West Branch

Invasive species: Continue to monitor and, where appropriate, remove and eradicate invasive species. Strategies may include:

- Educational workshops with landowners
- Mapping of invasive species to assess feasibility of removal
- Study techniques for removal

Water Quality: Promote and maintain good water quality

- Work with railroad to cleanup discarded railroad ties and debris on riverbank
- Cleanup junkyard near river (***)Note: In 2006, Town of Chester worked with landowner to clean-up materials)
- Monitor bank erosion where skidder drove across river during illegal logging operation several years ago
- Investigate excessive algae growth
- Conduct water quality sampling

Erosion: Work with professional to assess and address erosion concerns and areas where flood capacity has been reduced

- Conduct a fluvial geomorphic assessment of the West Branch
- Evaluate reduced flood capacity at town and railroad bridges
- Address areas of excessive bank erosion and/or locations where infrastructure is threatened

Historic Preservation: Protect and preserve historic resources and remains.

- Advocate for the restoration of the Keystone Arch Bridges
- Preserve historical rock structure and bridge along Center Pond Brook
- Recover old grinding wheels and granite blocks and use for historical interpretation

Recreation: Make recreational improvements and encourage appropriate river recreation.

- Address recreational hazard created by fallen trees blocking safe passage by either reorienting them or cutting small passageway
- Install and encourage "Carry in, Carry Out" at Hull Forestlands property along river

***These action items are in progress. For more details, see "Looking Ahead...2008 the year of Wild & Scenic", PG 8

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Based on the survey findings, Stream Team volunteers recommended short-term and long-term actions to preserve, protect and enhance the special qualities of the Westfield River. The following is a summary of their recommendations.

ASSETS

Volunteers noted assets found along their segments. Below is a list of values and assets identified along the river and within its corridor:

- Fish & Wildlife habitat
- Beaver habitat creates good habitat for wildlife, especially dragonflies
- Well-shaded banks, burrows and dens along riverbank
- Potential conservation areas
- Potential recreational opportunities
- Good water quality
- Keystone Arch Bridges, especial scenic vistas surrounding the bridges
- Whitewater paddling opportunities
- Historical rock structure and bridge
- Waterfalls
- Large floodplain field adjacent to the river
- Insect hatches
- Public access areas and parking
- John W. & Mildred G. Wright Memorial Forest
- Fishing access
- Limited shoreline development
- Hull's Conservation Restrictions
- Stewardship of residents and landowners
- Good birding opportunities
- Limited recreation in some areas

"Near the confluence with the river there is series of stunning falls and up for sale at the moment. It would be great if an environmentally conscious buyer could be found."

PROBLEMS

Volunteers identified problems found along their segments. Below is a list of potential problems which could degrade the river, habitat, recreational, scenic and/or historical features found along the river segments:

- Trash and dumping, including 50-gallon drums, old cars, snow machines, and metal debris
- Bank erosion
- Road construction and traffic control debris washed downstream
- Discarded railroad ties and debris
- Invasive species including Japanese knotweed, Barberry, and multiflora rose
- Recreational hazards
- Potential hazardous materials buried at old mill site
- Fish passage barriers
- Discharge from drains pipes
- Reduced flood capacity of bridges
- Old water and sewer pipes discarded in river
- Excessive algae
- Historic remains in river not safeguarded
- Abbott Brook culverts are clogged and present fish passage barrier and potential flood hazard
- ATVs and dirt bike trails too close to river
- Riprap bank along railroad is "slipping"

"At the first house after the Bancroft Bridge, the shoreline on river right is choked for about 35 yards with Knotweed. The Knotweed has spread most of the way down the river from Middlefield to Chester."

GEOLOGICAL FEATURES

For centuries the Westfield River worked with the forces of geological time to create some of the most superb geological features in Massachusetts. The most noteworthy geological features along the West Branch include Shaker Mill Brook Ravine and Center Pond Brook waterfalls.

Volunteers noted gorges, as well as waterfalls, unique rock formations, outcroppings, ledges and other evidence of the power of the river's water.

In their own words:

"Water quality throughout this segment appears to be good, and the

stream bed generally consists of cobbles and boulders of quartzite, schist, granite, and gneiss."

"The ledge exposure and chute below the Chester Elementary School has nice exposures of schist and has been sculpted by erosion from the river."



"There is a series of wonderful small waterfalls. I am thrilled there are so many treasures hidden in the woods near our house."

HISTORICAL FEATURES

Volunteers recorded evidence of cellar holes, stone walls, family graveyards, and old mill sites strewn along the banks of the West Branch.

The historic villages of North Becket, Chester and Huntington align the river banks of the West Branch. The most noteworthy historic feature are the Keystone Arch Bridges. Constructed in the 1840s by George Washington Whistler, these remarkable bridges carried the longest and steepest railroad of its time. Today two of the bridges are still used to carry cargo and passages along the active railroad line.

In their own words:

"Near the outskirts of Chester an abandoned emery mill, including several structures and a bridge across the river, is encountered"

"Thick rock structures on either side of the brook appear to have been a stream crossing at some point. The structures are beautifully maintained and very surprising to come upon in the thick wood. It would be important to see that they are protected."

"Her young son made an interesting discovery. He discovered a wooden conduit approximately four feet in diameter made of wood and extended for a few hundred yards above ground before it disappeared underground."



ECOLOGICAL FEATURES

The West Branch and its surrounding uplands provides habitat for rare insects, such as the Ocellated Darner dragonfly, and for rare plants, such as the Endangered Large-Laved Sandwort.

The West Branch is recognized as the longest free-flowing river segment in Massachusetts without any impediments or diversions. The excellent cold-water habitat supports a variety of fish species and aquatic organisms. Several years ago, Atlantic salmon nests were identified in the West Branch just below the confluence with Yokum brook, the first natural salmon reproduction to occur in this basin in 200 years.

The Middlefield-Peru Forest Reserve encompasses areas surrounding the West Branch. The forest reserve contains trees that date back to 1830 or earlier. These older forests contain more stabilizing features, such as fallen trees (aka nurse logs) and an abundance of wildflowers and ferns.

Volunteers noted numerous species of flora and fauna and described some of the natural communities they observed. In addition, volunteers noted in-stream and stream corridor conditions, e.g. water quality, substrate, shade cover, and riparian vegetation.

In their own words:

“At the start of this section of Shaker Mill Brook it appears to be a series of abandoned beaver ponds. It had snakes, thousands of Newt and frog eggs and a number of wonderful open wetlands for birds and dragonflies.”

“Several brooks entered where there are ravines. There is very beautiful mixed forest with clear, beautiful creek. Also, small and huge beaver dams, deer and moose crossing in the creek.”



“This section is lovely. Clear, fast moving, full of life – this is a pretty brook. There is a beautiful ledge and waterfall and resulting pool. The children enjoyed swimming, catching frogs, looking for stream life, and trying to fish.”

RECREATIONAL FEATURES

With several large tracts of public land along the West Branch, there are ample opportunities for recreational pursuits. The 2.5 mile Keystone Arch Trail provides the best opportunity for the public to combine the experience of scenic river vistas, wildlife viewing, and historic interpretation as you wind your way through the woods to visit two of the Keystone Arch Bridges standing 150’ above the West Branch of the Westfield River.

Volunteers found many people enjoying the river corridor. They recorded a myriad of uses – hiking, swimming, fishing, hunting, paddling, wildlife viewing, biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, picnicking, nature study, etc. They noted the location of trails and public access sites, as well as suggestions for improving recreational trails and facilities.

In their own words:

“Easy fishing access to the river with some parking along road side near beginning of the segment.”

“This is a beautiful, wild stretch of the West Branch. There are a few signs of human activity, except for the occasional train going by on the tracks along the south side of the river. Yet there is also convenient access from the dirt road on the north side.”

