

River Voices

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Challenges in Watershed Activism

by Pete Lavigne

Ecologists perpetually talk about the interdependence of nature and lip service is given to this notion on Earth Day, but, in practice, environmental problems are approached one fragment at a time, not as a complex, multivariate, interdependent landscape. The coexistence of technology, and biodiversity depends on switching from a fragmented to a landscape view. John Cairns, Jr.¹

Watershed is the environmental buzz word of the nineties. Debates on what watershed approaches mean politically and geographically, echo through the halls of Congress, offices of national conservation organizations, and on the pages of the nation's leading journals. A fine debate and worthy issues for the 1880s and the closing of the Western Frontier.²

Improved upon, refocused, energized, and revised, the time for watersheds—comprehensive, integrated environmental and political approaches to our riverine ecosystems, has arrived again 100 plus years later. The watershed approach to our river systems and, indeed, our entire natural environment, does lead the environmental debates of the 1990s as well.

Ecological Literacy

How many of you know your ecological address? Do you know what watershed you live in? Simply put, a watershed is the land from which water drains into a particular stream, pond, or other water body. All land is part of one watershed or another. It is extremely important, for everyone, young, old, or in between, to know their ecological address. It is fundamental to our work as citizen activists, environmental

engineers, resource scientists, and regulatory administrators. Knowledge of your watershed, your ecological address, shows an understanding of our place in the ecosystem. Knowledge of our place in the ecosystem clearly indicates an understanding of the interconnectedness of the human and natural environment.

We've heard a lot of talk about "cultural literacy" over the last decade. We rarely hear, at least in broad public debate, about ideas and paradigms essential to cultural and physical survival in the coming century. Ecological literacy, the knowledge of our ecological addresses and relationships, raises important issues about our ability to thrive in comfort and splendor for the next millennium.³

Consider the current public debate over supposed "takings" of private property resulting from common, limited, (and generally timid) environmental protection measures. A basic level of ecological literacy throughout society would render the debate moot. Ecological literacy knows the inanity, the preposterousness, of the thought that individual property owners, (you, me and our neighbors) should have to be paid to protect resources (land, air, and water) that in common are required to sustain every human life and all other species on the planet.

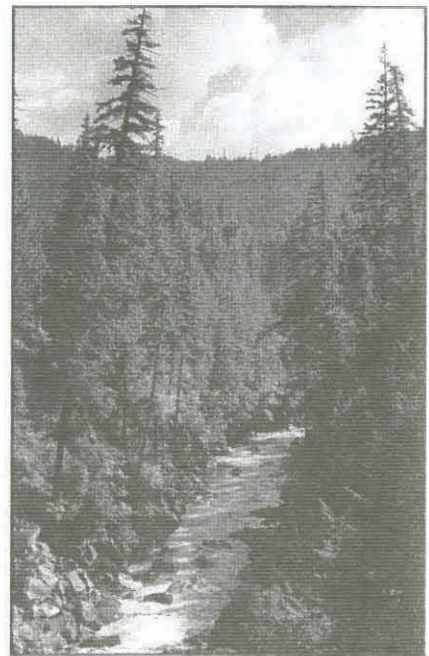


photo of White Salmon River, WA by Tim Palmer

Protecting river corridors is an essential component of river conservation, but to truly protect river ecosystems, a watershed approach is necessary.

Watershed Approaches

A major challenge for the river watershed conservation movement includes gaining a greater public understanding of the role that natural rivers and streams play in enhancing the daily life of each and every citizen. In particular, we need to communicate river watershed protection in ways with which people can relate.

People relate to what they can taste, touch and feel. Waste products and recycling are popular and easy to understand because we have to deal with

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them every day as part of living. The importance of river molluscs (clams and snails), macroinvertebrates (bugs), and their relationship to a healthy and natural environment is a more difficult concept for the general public to grasp. The knowledge necessary to know that effectively protecting a river means effectively addressing population growth, urban sprawl, air quality, solid waste disposal and a myriad of other issues throughout the watershed has to become a part of our culture, a part of our ecological literacy.

Today's Challenge

Mere improvement in sewage treatment and reduction in waste disposal inputs alone will not save our river systems. Across this country the creeping suburbia exemplified by the tremendous coastal and river bank development boom of the 1980s threatens to undo the progress represented by water quality improvements since the passage of the sewage treatment mandates in the federal Clean Water Act. The explosion in destructive shoreline development, ironically made attractive by the improvements in water quality, threatens to permanently cripple the natural habitat and other resources that make our rivers so important to a sustainable natural environment.

New Approaches

Citizen-based non-governmental river protection organizations in New England and in other scattered areas throughout the country have led a quiet revolution in environmental management for the last four decades. A significant minority of these groups advocated and began to implement educational programs addressing the fundamental interconnections between water quality, water supply, wetlands, air quality, and wildlife habitat. Local and regional river watershed associations, including the Cahaba River Society (AL), the Housatonic Valley Association

(CT), the Merrimack River Watershed Council (MA/NH), and many others have been ahead of the curve in the national environmental movement with their efforts to restore and protect the environment on an ecosystem basis, using river watersheds as the basic unit.

What does this mean on a practical basis? It means redirecting agency work, in addition to redirecting the work of private nonprofit river corridor protection and advocacy groups—to step back and take a look at the watershed, take a look at the global issues in the watershed and then figure out how we are going to apply our daily battles to those issues in a pro-active way.

Watershed approaches mean educating adult decision makers to regional issues and figuring out useful and innovative ways to adapt governmental boundaries to drainage basins and multiple jurisdictions.

An effective watershed approach involves a tough step-by-step process allocating precious resources and limited staff. It means stepping back a little, trying to figure out the critical issues, the global issues for the watershed. It also means making tough choices to get away from spending a lot of time in day-to-day mitigation efforts, and in the state permitting statutes, and spending more time and effort on political change enabling comprehensive approaches solving broader issues.

Most importantly, an effective watershed approach means focusing public attention to solutions for the single most critical environmental issue throughout the United States and the world, the rising population growth rate in the U. S. caused by the baby boom of the 1990s.^{4,5}

One of the keys to effective watershed approaches involves creating political support for redirecting agency efforts. We are seeing the beginning of this kind of change within the Clinton Administration, and conversely, the loss of political support for these kinds of

changes in Congress and the Western states.

1990s & Watershed Conservation

The 1990s could be the decade of river conservation. A coordinated river and watershed conservation movement could strengthen the Clean Water Act, institute comprehensive recovery plans for endangered fish species, negotiate far-reaching mitigation for dams that are being relicensed, and forge and pass comprehensive new tools for river protection including the Watershed Protection and Restoration Acts, and the Urban River Restoration bills (See Action Alert).

To take advantage of these opportunities it will be necessary to mobilize a grassroots movement that can counteract the influence of the "backlash" that is becoming more and more organized. The people who are showing up at public hearings in droves to attack river conservation proposals seem sincerely to believe river conservation is just a front for the federal government to steal their land. That at least is what the organizers, supported by extractive private industries, have told them.

The framework for a grassroots movement exists in the 2,500+ river guardian groups across the country. It doesn't seem, however, that the traditional national environmental organizations will focus on this grassroots constituency, perhaps with the exception of volunteer monitoring programs in the Izaak Walton League, GREEN, or RiverWatch Network. Quite understandably, the national organizations want to focus their energies on the more direct roles of lobbying, litigation, intervention with agencies and gaining media attention for river issues.

Building A Watershed Movement

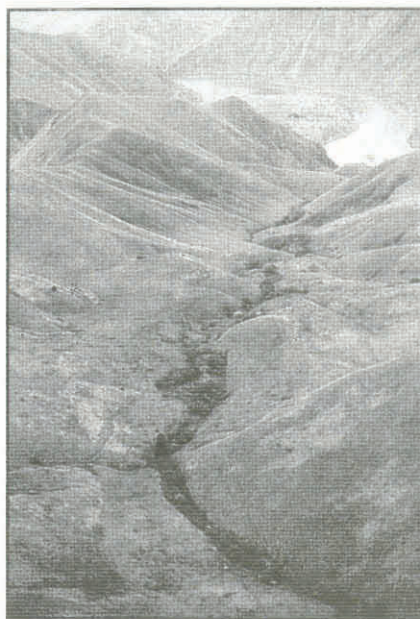
The challenge then, is to work at the regional, state and grassroots levels to foster a cohesive movement of river

and watershed conservation. This means recruiting and empowering leaders. It means building organizations capable of carrying out campaigns. It means linking up all these leaders and organizations so that they can work together for the common goal, to stem the tide of river deterioration and forge new tools for watershed conservation. It also means building the personal relationships where we live, with our neighbors and businesses, river conservation colleagues, and key decision makers at all levels of society.

Environmental Justice

In two aspects this is easy. We are a nation dependent on rivers for our drinking water. More than 85 percent of all Americans take some part of their everyday water from rivers. Watershed approaches also provide unique opportunities for improved environmental justice in America. Rivers are so intricately woven into the fabric of urban and rural society. They directly touch the wealthy and poor alike. The poor in America are most at risk when a river becomes degraded. They rely on rivers for drinking water to a larger extent and are most exposed to pollution and contamination. Watershed planning, with an emphasis on connecting urban grassroots organizations and poorer rural communities with basic decision making about river health, 'daylighting' streams, riparian habitat, and water resource allocation, can become a major tool for improving human health and increasing equity in America's environmental policy.

One small start has been made with the effort of River Network, the Pacific Rivers Council, American Rivers, the American Whitewater Affiliation, the Coalition to Restore Urban Waterways, and a number of other state and regional organizations. These organizations include the Cahaba River Society, the Merrimack River Watershed Council, New York Rivers United and others who



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have informally banded together to support the Watershed Protection and Restoration Acts and the various Urban River Restoration bills now before Congress (See Action Alert).

Long-term success for river and watershed protection and restoration will hinge on the ability of this tentative alliance to work more closely together, to mobilize existing river guardian organizations, and to reach out to new constituencies in the inner cities, business, the federal government, environmental organizations and the states in a new National Watershed Campaign over the next six years.

Campaign goals could include:

- a coordinated Strategic National Watershed Restoration Initiative;
- major changes to the Clean Water Act;
- reorganization of the EPA and

other federal agencies;

- uniform and consistent standards for all federal land agencies;
- ecosystem and watershed level planning by all federal agencies;
- a comprehensive ecosystem-based watershed restoration program;
- a moratorium on new dam construction;
- periodic "State of the Nation's Rivers" reports; and
- stable, long-term funding and sufficient financial and tax incentives for riverine restoration.⁶

Some of these efforts are underway. Federal agencies including the EPA, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management, have all adopted new programs for ecosystem and watershed restoration and management. The immediate challenge for River Network and the watershed conservation movement is to coordinate, connect and expand the grassroots constituency as fast as river science and public policy have developed.

Endnotes

¹Cairns, John Jr. "Developing A Strategy for Protecting and Repairing Self-Maintaining Ecosystems," *Journal of Clean Technology and Environmental Science*, 1991.

²Udall, Stewart R. *The Silent Crisis in the Next Generation*, 1988 (especially chapters 7, 9-10).

³Orr, David. *Ecological Literacy*, Sunny Press, 1992.

⁴Ahlburg, Dennis A. and Vaupel, James W. "500 Million Americans by 2050?" *Carrying Capacity Network FOCUS*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1993.

⁵Rauber, Paul. "Cribonometry" *Sierra*, pp 36-41, May/June 1993.

⁶Pacific Rivers Council, *Entering the Watershed: An Approach to Save America's River Ecosystem*, 1993, P.O. Box 309, Eugene, OR 97440. ☛

Pete Lavigne became director of River Network's River Leadership program in 1992. He is a former executive director of the Merrimack River Watershed Council and the Westport River Watershed Alliance.