

New York Times
New Jersey Section Page 1

Putting the Wild Back Into the River

By KEVIN COYNE

Published: June 17, 2007

Hackettstown - The Musconetcong River pauses when it reaches the restaurant that Rodger Cornell owns on its banks, blocked here, as it is at 24 other spots along its green and placid passage through the Highlands, by a dam that has long since outlived its purpose.

“As pretty as it was a week ago, when water was running over it, it’s just that ugly in the summer when it’s dry,” Mr. Cornell said, as he stood on the shady riverside patio of the Pump House, pointing toward the old sawmill dam that came with the property when he bought it 29 years ago and that he has been hoping to get rid of ever since.

The river ran low and slow on this sunny June morning, exposing a battered wall of crumbling concrete maybe 6 feet high and 40 feet wide that track hoes will start gnawing at by the end of the summer, making it the first dam to be removed in an ambitious long-range plan to turn back the clock along at least one narrow corridor of New Jersey.

The Musconetcong is a small river in a small state, spilling out of Lake Hopatcong and meandering 42 miles, just shin-deep in spots, through forests and farms and little mill villages to the Delaware. It joined some grand company recently, though, when more than half its length was designated by the federal government as a “wild and scenic river,” the newest addition to a list of 165 rivers that includes the Yellowstone, the Snake and the Rio Grande.

“It’s not working the way it’s supposed to work now, and what we’re doing is taking it back to where it was when the Native Americans lived here,” said Bill Leavens, 61, who once farmed along the river and who is now president of the Musconetcong River Watershed Association, which is leading the effort to remove the dams. “I’d like to see them all done in 10 years.”

The dams are mostly a century or more old, built at a time when the river was regarded as an electrical current to plug into: Trap some water and use it to power your mill. But the old gristmills and sawmills, like the one across from Mr. Cornell, are long defunct, and with the closing last year of the paper mill at Warren Glen, just one industry is left along the river, the graphite mill in Asbury.

The dams, though, have remained, blocking fish from migrating upstream; trapping wide shallow pools of warm water without enough oxygen to sustain the trout that fishermen flock here for; and sometimes even collapsing and releasing flood waters, as several did after a big storm in 2000.

“That’s when I got the letter from the state that said, ‘Fix it or remove it,’ ” said Mr. Cornell, who is 57, and who runs the Pump House with his wife, Eileen, and their four children. “I didn’t have the money to do either.”

He called the watershed association, looking for some help. A long, complex series of negotiations ensued, in which Mr. Cornell gave up the development rights to the acre of land he owns across the river from his restaurant, and \$170,000 was raised from county, federal and private sources to remove the dam this summer. Once the equipment is in the river, the watershed association would like to keep it there long enough to take out another dam around a bend just upstream that’s owned by Hackettstown.

And then they’d like to head all the way downstream, to the first dam up from the Delaware, in the tiny old paper mill village of Finesville, and march north, one dam at a time, restoring the free flow of a wild river. It would not be quick, and it would not be cheap: an estimated \$4 million to remove just the first four, which includes the biggest dam on the river, the 30-foot one at the old Warren Glen paper mill.

“There’s been a real change in the public perception of the river,” said Mr. Cornell, who used to wade into the river with his two sons once a week in summer to

pull out tires, shopping carts, even a couch that had floated downstream and gotten caught at his dam. “We haven’t had to clean this in over five years. People aren’t throwing stuff in the river. That used to be like an avocation.”

When he wades in now, he carries a fly rod, and catches more trout than he ever did before from water that, he says, is cleaner and less foamy than it once was. “Look, he’s got one right there,” he said, pointing to a fisherman reeling in a rainbow trout from a deep, cool pool next to the dam.

Mr. Cornell serves plenty of fish, including trout, at the Pump House, but the ones that get caught here mostly go right back in for somebody else to catch again. For the restaurant, “we buy them somewhere else,” he said.

E-mail:

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company