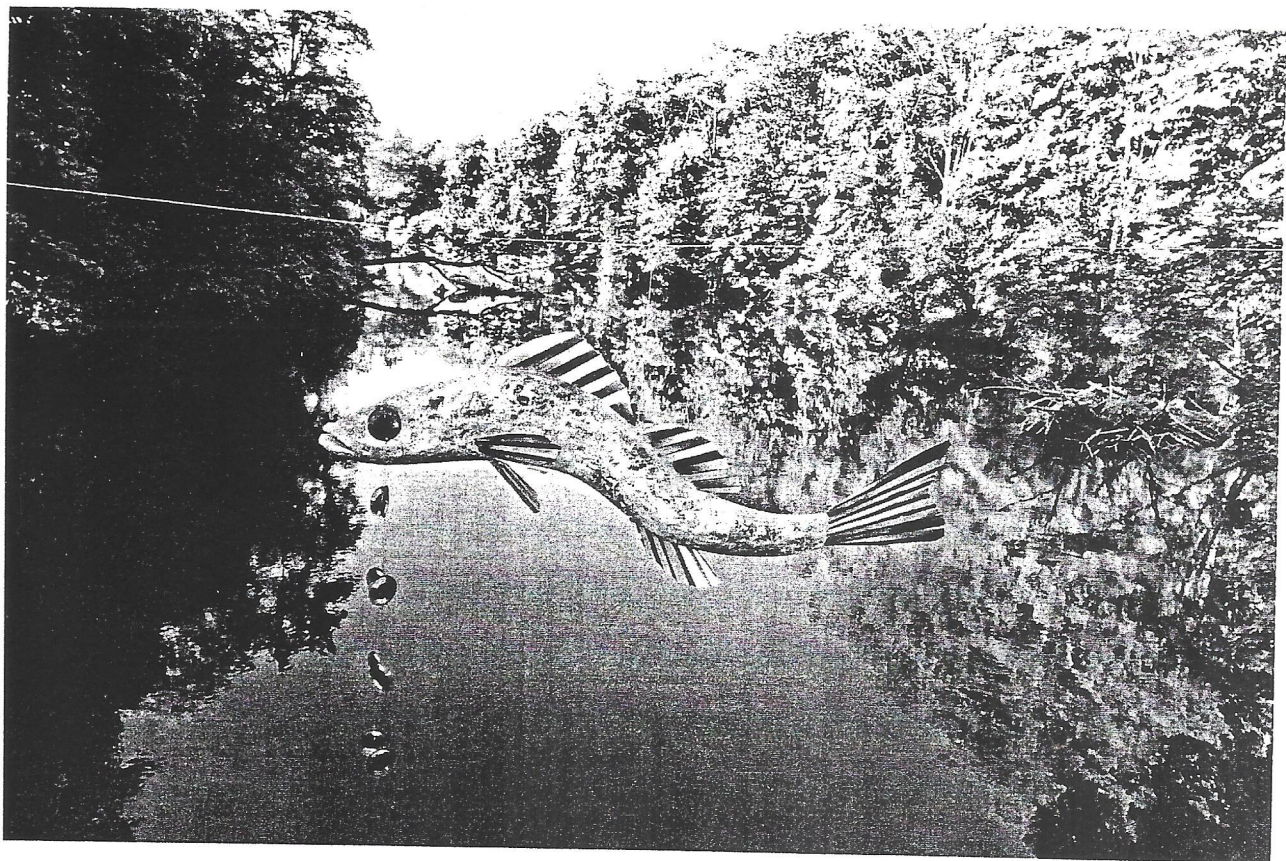
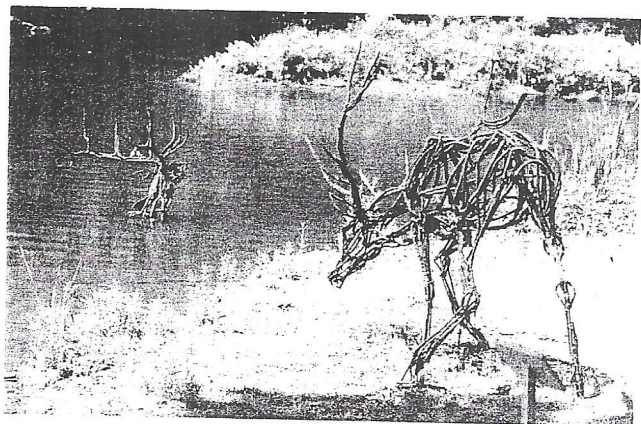
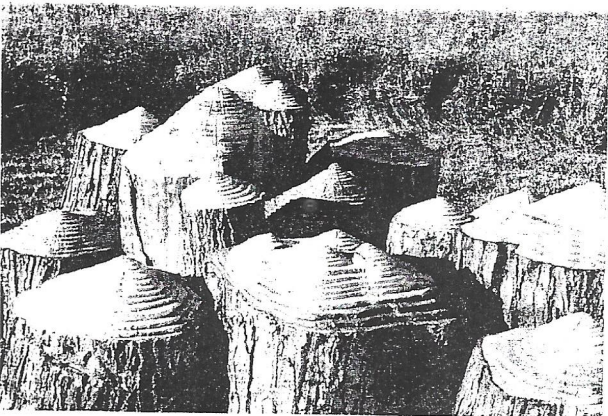


N.E.Travel

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Down by the riverside



Jon's sculpture "The Fish That Cried Its Eyes Out" and Matthew Weber's "Growth Ring Eddies," respectively, near and at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, and "River Elk," a set of sculptures by Wendy Klemperer, near the Berkshire Mountain Bakery in Housatonic.

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DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

**SCULPTORS AND SCULLERS, PAINTERS AND PERFORMERS ALL CELEBRATE
HOUSATONIC RIVER SUMMER**

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Article Text:

HINSDALE Environmental activists Dennis Reagan and his wife, Chris, were leading a group of about a dozen kayakers and canoeists down the East Branch of the Housatonic River, through a high wetland plateau. Water lilies rose up from their pads like brilliant yellow fists. We passed rare millet grasses, dense low-lying shrubs, and scores of beaver dams.

Then we entered a flooded woodland area, "like a drowned forest," observed Reagan, director of Berkshire programs for the Housatonic Valley Association, a conservation group. Small maples twisted their limbs in every direction, casting eerie reflections over the swamp. Scattered through the forest like stars in a night sky were stunning clumps of wild irises, their petals neon blue against the black water.

The kayakers and canoeists were thrilled. Most had never seen this area before. They had had no idea how to get to it or whether it was safe for boating. This river, they knew, has had a bad rap as a kind of dump, what some locals called "a trash river."

But the boaters also had heard about many years of cleanup efforts and a series of events this summer led by naturalists and artists celebrating the river's revival. The East Branch exploration by kayak and canoe was one of these events.

"People are finding the river again," Reagan exulted, as his canoe glided serenely downstream, through water so clear we could see crawfish cavorting on the bottom. "They're realizing how beautiful it has become."

Later that day, at the opening of two shows of sculpture in and by the river one in Stockbridge, the other in the village of Housatonic Ann Jon, who heads the contemporary art group Sculpture Now, applauded the collaboration of environmentalists and artists to call attention to the Housatonic. The river still isn't clean enough for swimming or eating any fish caught in it, she acknowledged, but it's much better than it was. At opening ceremonies at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, where all sorts of sculptures decorated the riverbanks, Jon toasted "the healing power of the river and the healing power of art."

The six-month river celebration called Housatonic River Summer includes seven river festivals, five juried shows of river-related sculpture, painting, and photography, many canoe trips and river walks, talks, concerts, dance performances, storytelling, film showings, a candlelight parade of boats, workshops on river ecology, community fairs, picnics, and more sponsored by about 20 artistic, cultural, and educational organizations, as well as more than 15 river conservation and land trust groups, in Western Massachusetts and western Connecticut. All the events are open to the public, with proceeds to finance river improvement projects.

A full calendar of events is available at www.housatonicriversummer.org. The Sheffield Art League, the umbrella sponsor of the celebration, has published a companion book, "Art and the River," with chapters written by many of the main participants. They tell the story of the river from the viewpoint of artists and naturalists who cherished it, and explore problems caused by its abusers.

As Richard Nunley writes in the book, the Housatonic is the main watercourse between the Hudson and the Connecticut rivers, but it is shorter, smaller, and less grand. From its headwaters in Pittsfield, it flows 132 miles through Western Massachusetts and western Connecticut, through swamps and meadows, cornfields, woods, and pastures, past the remains of mills and factories, past picturesque bergs and small brick cities, until it finally plummets through Bulls Bridge Gorge and, at Milford Point, Conn., empties into Long Island Sound.

This varied terrain, as well as the river's intimate scale (and the presence of supportive art patrons nearby),

have lured artists for years. In fact, writes museum curator and art historian Maureen Hickey, almost every important painter of the American landscape in the 19th and early 20th centuries painted the area watered by the Housatonic and its tributaries. She quotes Herman Melville describing the midsummer scene near his home in Pittsfield in 1856: The countryside "was such a picture that in berry time no boy climbs hills or crosses vales without coming upon easels planted in every nook, and sunburnt painters there."

Other observers were similarly enthusiastic. In 1835, the actress Fanny Kemble rhapsodized about the Housatonic Valley, where "a beautiful little river wanders singing from side to side." Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. summed up the views of many in one pithy line: "The best tonic is the Housatonic."

Ever since Colonial settlement in the 1700s, however, the river also has been harnessed by sawmills, paper mills, iron foundries, factories making cotton, leather goods, and machine tools, and equipment plants like General Electric in Pittsfield. These manufacturers, and many residents who lived near the waterway, often dumped their raw sewage and other waste products into it.

By the mid-20th century, "whole reaches of the river were nothing more than heaps of trash stranded on fallen trees and other snags," writes longtime resident George Wislocki. Oil shimmered on its surface. Paper dyes changed its color daily. Locals shunned it and warned their children not to go near. Said community organizer Rachel Fletcher, from Great Barrington, "Legend was that if you happened to fall into the river, you would smell for a week and you might even glow."

In the 1970s, with the help of the federal Clean Water Act, community activists began to focus attention on the river's plight. For 18 years, Fletcher has led a total of more than 1,900 volunteers who removed about 360 tons of garbage including shopping carts, refrigerators, tires, sofas, and the remains of an entire burned-out pharmacy, she said from the river's edge and created a walkway and a garden in their place. Many others have been monitoring the condition of plants and wildlife along the river, testing soil samples, pressing for more stringent safeguards.

As the water quality gradually improved, some locals began building riverside businesses and creating access points for those who want to boat and fish. In Hinsdale, Al Lussier has just opened Ozzie's Steak & Eggs, an eatery with a riverside deck, and in the village of Housatonic, Richard Bourdon is planning a cafe with outdoor riverside seating projects neither man would have considered until recently, when looking at the water and enjoying a meal became more compatible activities.

The art shows for the river celebration, which concludes in November, include historical works by artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as many pieces created expressly for this celebration. Among the new works are 28 sculptures located by the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge and the Berkshire Mountain Bakery in Housatonic. Admission is included in the price of a ticket at the museum and is free at the bakery. Access is easy and picnicking is welcome at both sites.

Some of the sculptures reflect upon themes suggested by the river. Near the Berkshire Mountain Bakery, Wendy Klemperer's four steel "River Elk" play at the river's edge and gradually become one with the water, exploring ideas about "migration, flight, and disappearance," she said. Nearby hangs a line of foam fish made by 20 students at Mt. Everett Junior and Senior High Schools in Sheffield, with each fish "showing the personality of the kid who made it, as if the kids were transmuted into the fish," explained their art teacher, Peggy Reeves.

In a field by the Rockwell museum, Kim Radochia's "Currents" evokes the river in 20 bands of polished stainless steel, and Matthew Weber's "Growth Ring Eddies" playfully explores the beauty in the gnawings of beavers who cut down riverside trees.

Other pieces suggest the fragility of the ecosystem and the problems caused by its pollution. Hanging by a bridge near the Norman Rockwell Museum, Jon's "Fish That Cried Its Eyes Out" drops reflective tears into the water. On the same bridge, "PCB Duck" by Amos Scully and Stephanie Ashenfelder invites viewers to pump river water into a hollow, see-through plastic duck and consider the plight of Housatonic waterfowl, which still sometimes swim in contaminated water.

Sitting by an oxbow bend in the Housatonic, Nancy Goldberger, the main organizer behind the events this summer, said the collaboration of artists and environmentalists is intended to acknowledge that they share an appreciation of nature, a sense of place, and a recognition that "the river needs us all." They hope the six-month celebration marks the evolution of the river "from its spoiled past into a new future as a source of inspiration."