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Crap Game on the Blackstone

By Ted Williams

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Much has been written about how inappropriate it was for managers of the upper Blackstone sewage treatment plant in Millbury—through pure carelessness and stupidity—to dump four million gallons of raw effluent into the Blackstone River on October 2, 2003, just as valley residents caroused in celebration of the 175th anniversary of the Blackstone Canal.

I can't agree. I thought it was entirely appropriate. By not bestirring themselves to install a backup generator, managers were following tradition. Only in the last 20 of those 175 years has the river been used as something other than sewer and power source. For generations buildings were constructed with windowless backs to the Blackstone so people wouldn't have to look at it. In Worcester it was covered with cement and cobbles, so people wouldn't have to smell it.

I have attended ceremonies at the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island where one dignitary after another went on and on about America's industrial revolution. "It all started here," they kept proclaiming. What started here was our tradition of murdering rivers and their far-reaching aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. In 1790 Samuel Slater took it upon himself to build a dam to power his cotton mill, thereby extinguishing prolific runs of salmon, shad, alewives and blueback herring. Never before had Rhode Island permitted anyone to build a dam without providing fish passage. When enraged fishermen tore down the barrier, Slater, with the forces of law and order on their side, rebuilt it. Instead of lionizing Slater we should be hanging him in effigy.

It strikes me as unfair to scold the sewage managers for literally playing crap with the health of fish, wildlife and people who live in the Blackstone Valley. The managers were, after all, obeying state precedent, enunciated in 1937 by the Massachusetts Planning Board: "Waterways are the 'highways' by which a limited amount of waste matter must be taken care of... The Blackstone River is essentially an industrial stream [whose] industrial importance comes before any recreational advantage."

And what more fitting time to dump human excreta into America's first dirty river than the anniversary celebration of the Blackstone Canal? The project, completed in 1828, was a rape of rich riparian habitat; and, while the current canal-and-lock system is a valuable historical resource, today it serves us better as a reminder of now not to treat aquatic habitat.

One of the dignitaries I heard speak at Slater Mill was Bruce Babbitt, then secretary of the interior. He warned us of a nationwide "multi-pronged assault on the architecture of environmental protection." It wasn't just campaign rhetoric. Today that assault continues and accelerates under the presidency of George W. Bush. In January 2003, for example, the administration ordered agents enforcing the Clean Water Act not to bust parties who filled or fouled "isolated waters" (i.e., headwaters) that are non-navigable and completely in one state. And in a proposed rule it suggested that headwaters don't count anymore and invited comment on how to define the word "isolated" so as to make the law more palatable to those it inconveniences. If the rule goes through, it could degrade 80 percent of the stream miles in the United States.

Those who run the Upper Blackstone sewage treatment plant and our federal government seem nostalgic. Apparently, they believe the public wants industrial-revolution water quality. But I think Americans want post-industrial-revolution water quality—rivers they can swim in, rivers that don't catch fire, rivers they want to travel to and on instead of away from.

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The Blackstone had been getting cleaner. I moved to its valley in 1970, just as Congress passed the Clean Water Act. Dogs happily tolerate major filth, but that year a dog belonging to my insurance agent frolicked in the river and died as a result. In 1970 the only fish in the river's main stem were white suckers. Today, because of the Clean Water Act, the main stem supports 19 species of fish and, for long stretches, its bottom is carpeted with crayfish. Painted turtles by the thousands bask on rocks and logs. Waterfowl and shorebirds feed in its marshes and mudflats. Otters, minks, muskrats and beavers abound. These days (or at least on days when the Upper Blackstone treatment plant isn't overflowing) I allow my dog to frolic in the river. As a result he only stinks.