

Housatonic River Project

The Housatonic River Project is a series of events to be located on the Housatonic River from its source at Muddy Pond, Massachusetts to the mouth in Stratford, Connecticut during the Fall of 1992 to Spring 1993. This series of events will bring together professional artists and community people, environmentalists and business people, the elderly and children. The focus is on the river and the sense of place that it gives to people who live on it and care about it. The river as metaphor for a system that connects communities will be explored. The interaction between the river's environment, its history in the expression of its people and its present communities will provide material for events to which everyone will have access. We hope to support seven collaborations of artists, environmentalists, organizations, and community groups who will form projects to identify and provide long lasting impacts on the community where the event is performed. These can take the form of lectures, performances, seminars, documentation, and exhibits. Some will be single events and some will tour down the river.

The approach that I am taking in this project is mediations between the various constituencies on the river. In two extended trips down the river, I have uncovered numerous conflicts, some historical, some societal. These have involved Native Americans with the Kent School; General Electric with the environmental-ists; private artists with nonprofit organizations; fisherman with canoeists; utility companies and communities who want access to recreation. By researching specific historical information, it is understandable how these conflicts have emerged and this project will attempt by a series of meetings and collaborative events to process long standing conflicts to the beginnings of potential resolutions. These events will help people see other points of view from their own and expand their awareness of other people's situations. Each constituency has a specific investment in the river for very different reasons; the process will help each one identify and share each other's concerns. Perhaps some common ground will be found; reframing long held assumptions is desirable.

I am the artistic director on the project along with the project co-ordinator, Loris Bradley from Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Massachusetts. Sue Rees, a photographer and sculptor from Bennington College is involved along with journalist Julius Rosenwald. We consulted with Nan Jay-Jenks, associated with the Environmental Studies Center at Williams College. She was very enthusiastic and interested and has agreed to serve as our "cultural geographer" consultant on the project. In our two extended trips down the river, we have interviewed the

following people: Bob Mellace, Planning Board, Pittsfield, Massachusetts; Russ Hampden of the American Indian Archeological Institute; Ben Ortiz of the P.T. Barnum Museum; Woldemar Neufeld, artist who has painted all of the Bridges on the river; Rachel Fletcher, Great Barrington River Clean-up; Bernard Kerchner, Housatonic River Paddlers, Canoe Group; Lynne Werner, the Housatonic Valley Association; Mr. Perry, Rowing Coach and Art Coordinator, Kent School; and numerous other individuals in informal settings. We are having a series of meetings at the Lenox Public Library, the New Milford Public Library, and the Shelton Public Library. These meetings are aimed at hearing the community members' concerns and interests in the river and how they might build coalitions or enter the project. The river is currently seen in three quadrants: from Muddy Pond to the Connecticut border; from Canaan Connecticut to New Milford, Connecticut; and from New Milford to Long Island Sound. We expect to bring together all seven collaborations of people to Jacob's Pillow in April of 1992 to find more common ground and to give support and fertile time for planning and development of their projects.