

East Branch



Image donated by Hilltown local artist
MICHAEL WOLSKI (www.MICHAELWOLSKI.com)

East Branch Highlights:

- Over 65 volunteers surveyed approximately 70 miles of the Westfield River
- The East Branch is one of the largest intact river networks in the Northeast (>200 miles)
- Large contiguous forest areas >15,000 acres surround the East Branch
- Home to the only occurring population of Lake chub (fish) in Massachusetts

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WALKIN' THE WATERSHED - Stream Teams in Action 2007

65 VOLUNTEERS SURVEY OVER 70 MILES OF THE WESTFIELD RIVER!

Fifteen years ago, the Westfield River became Massachusetts' first National Wild & Scenic River. Today over 78 miles of the Westfield River are designated as part of the National Wild & Scenic River system.

In 2007, the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee sponsored an extensive shoreline survey of the East, West, and Middle Branches and several of the headwater tributaries. The goals of the survey were to:

- Inventory and assess the Wild & Scenic features along the Westfield River;
- Develop a roadmap of short-term and long-term strategies and actions;
- Assist communities in long-term protection of the Westfield River; and
- Encourage stewardship of the Wild & Scenic features.

Over 65 volunteers surveyed approximately 70 miles of the Westfield River. Using protocols developed by the Riverways Adopt-A-Stream Program, Stream Team volunteers used their observational skills to document scenic, historical, geological, recreational and ecological features along the river.

Shoreline Survey Reports and large format maps have been developed for each branch which highlight the assets, problems and priorities for action identified by the volunteers. This Executive Summary outlines survey findings and priorities for action along the East Branch of the Westfield River.



THE EAST BRANCH OF THE WESTFIELD RIVER

Beginning at the confluence of Drowned Land Brook and Center Brook in Savoy, the East Branch of the Westfield River connects remarkable scenic, geological, historical, recreational and ecological features.

Large expanses of vegetated riparian areas provide exceptional vistas

along the river corridor. Prominent overlooks and incredible views of the river can also be found along River Road in Windsor, Route 9 in Cummington and the East Branch Trail in Chesterfield and Huntington.

(Continued East Branch, Page 2)

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Westfield River Watershed Association

Meredyth Babcock, Stream Team Coordinator 2007

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All the Stream Team Volunteers



EAST BRANCH, continued from Page 1

Carved out by millions of years of rushing water, Windsor Jams, the Pork Barrel, and Chesterfield Gorge offer spectacular geological features including cascades, gorges, and unique rock formations.

The East Branch includes extensive networks of trails and recreation areas which provide infinite recreational opportunities including hiking, swimming, paddling, fishing, wildlife viewing, mountain biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and horseback riding.

The East Branch and its headwater tributaries provide a variety of important habitats including outstanding cold water streams, prime juvenile salmon habitat, fresh water wetlands, one of the longest connected river systems in the Northeast (>200 miles), a variety of rare natural communities, and an intact forest core area (>15,000 acres).

SCENIC FEATURES

Scenic views abound along the East Branch - the spectacular cascading falls culminating in a 50 foot drop at Windsor Jams, the undeveloped nature and the virgin forest that adorns the steep canyon walls of the Chesterfield Gorge, and the pristine river views along the East Branch Trail.

Large stretches of trees and native vegetation line the banks in many places creating a sense of wilderness as well as providing outstanding habitat.

Volunteers noted several scenic vistas and overlooks, waterfalls, and characteristics which contribute to the outstanding scenic features along the East Branch.

The High Bridge stands at the entrance way to the Chesterfield Gorge and is one of many historical remains which can be found along the river corridor. Cellar holes, stone walls, family graveyards and mill sites are scattered throughout the East Branch valley.



In their own words:

“The view of the river bend is one of the reasons to spend the day on the Westfield... along both banks... absolutely no view of habitation, roadways, bridges, etc. Near the west bank is a ledge overfall with a lovely pool trimmed in an overhang of green and leafy ferns and other vegetation.”

“It was a beautiful scene looking up the river on an early summer evening with locust trees in bloom.”

“The mountains surround you from every direction in this sleepy little dale.”

GEOLOGICAL FEATURES

For centuries the Westfield River worked with the forces of geological time to create some of the most superb geological features in Massachusetts. In the “Pork Barrel” section, the East Branch tumbles over rocks to form large, deep pools in four-mile long gorge. Sheer granite cliffs rise 70 feet above the river below giving the Chesterfield Gorge the nickname the “Grand Canyon of Western Massachusetts”.

Volunteers noted these gorges, as well as waterfalls, unique rock formations, outcroppings, ledges and other evidence of the power of the river’s water.

In their own words:

“This segment, just below the steep-sided, more dramatic

Chesterfield Gorge, is a good section in which to notice the more subtle shifts and changes in the river. Each bend in the river is marked by deposition of river stones and sediment on the inner side of the curve. In places the rounded stones give way to bedrock, fantastically smoothed and carved by the water.”

“In the spring when snowmelt is occurring, stones and considerable sized boulders are forced downstream with incredible water force. If one stands along the riverbank, the sounds of the moving rocks crashing their way downstream is audible over the roar of the river... when the ‘dust’ settles the rock lined walls and sandy banks of the river tell a story.”



“This is a fantastic project. I haven’t had this much fun in I don’t know when!”

HISTORICAL FEATURES

Volunteers recorded evidence of cellar holes, stone walls, family graveyards, and old mill sites strewn along the banks of the East Branch. These remains included the abutments of the High Bridge built in the 1760’s at the entrance to Chesterfield Gorge and served as the Boston to Albany Post Road. The historic village centers of Savoy, Cummington, West Chesterfield and Huntington align the banks of the river and contribute to the historic and cultural stories still being told today.

In their own words:

“Early settlers used the rich floodplain areas for farming and the river water as a source of energy at the mill sites. Many of these still remain in some form and make for exciting ‘discoveries’.”

“Since 1762 when English settlers began to move to Township Number 5, Cummington has had a continuous relationship with the river. Much evidence of that relationship lies buried in the riverbed – old rusted tools, pipes, agricultural and mechanical artifacts, even an old baking sheet.”



ECOLOGICAL FEATURES

The well-protected shorelines and large contiguous forests surrounding the East Branch provide a diversity of habitats. Several rare and endangered species occur in the East Branch – including the only remaining fish population of Lake Chub (*Couesius plumbeus*) in Massachusetts.

Volunteers noted numerous species of flora and fauna and described some of the natural communities they observed. In addition, volunteers noted in-stream and stream corridor conditions, e.g. water quality, substrate, shade cover, and riparian vegetation.

In their own words:

“One example of unexpected flora is the presence of a few large stands of healthy sycamore trees...these sycamores are likely the most northerly to be found in Western Massachusetts.”

“...many insects were flying above the water. Tree and barn swallows were gliding above the water catching their dinner. Red-winged blackbirds and cedar waxwings perched along the banks. A purple finch was singing and roosters were crowing from the farm in the village.”



RECREATIONAL FEATURES

With large tracks of public lands along the East Branch, there are ample opportunities for recreation. The East Branch Trail follows the river for over 6 miles from the Chesterfield Gorge to Knightsville Dam. The Wildwater Races – the longest continuously run whitewater race in the country – glides on the waters from the East Branch.

Volunteers found many people enjoying the river corridor. They recorded a myriad of uses – hiking, swimming, fishing, paddling, wildlife viewing, biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, picnicking, nature study, etc. In addition, they noted the location of trails and public access sites.

In their own words:

“While I was standing by the mouth of this stream, kids floated by on inner tubes. Though the water was fairly shallow, they were having a great ride. They rode the current to the bridge where they got out and walked to town.”

“This segment is wild & beautiful. Its uniqueness is its rugged shoreline and therefore its lack of accessibility. The steep hillside makes trails near the river impossible.”



PROBLEMS

Volunteers identified problems found along their segments. Below is a list of potential problems which could degrade the river, habitat, recreational, scenic and/or historical features found along the river segments:

- Presence of invasive species, including Japanese knotweed, barberry, Rigosa rose, Glossy buckthorn, purple loosestrife, bittersweet, honeysuckle, phragmites
- Lack of sufficient riparian buffer
- Limited shade cover and high water temperatures
- Trees infested by insects
- Tree roots dislodging stones in historic bridge abutment
- Low water levels
- Foul odors
- Suspect discharges at pipe outlets
- Swimming pool water drained into the river
- Road runoff and salt contamination
- Proximity of parked vehicles to the river's edge
- Build-up of algae or sediments
- Herbicide use and dead vegetation
- Problems with trespassing on posted private property
- Trash, illegal dumping areas, road construction debris
- Limited emergency access at popular river destinations
- Erosion where drainage crosses trails and at river access sites
- Eroded banks near structures
- Mill/barn falling into river

"A pipe emerges from the bank. It carries drainage water from the road. I questioned the nearby homeowner... recent tests have shown that this homeowner's well water contains high levels of salt."

"The beach above the east tributary appears to have been sprayed with herbicides; the ferns were dead and other plant life was brown."

ASSETS

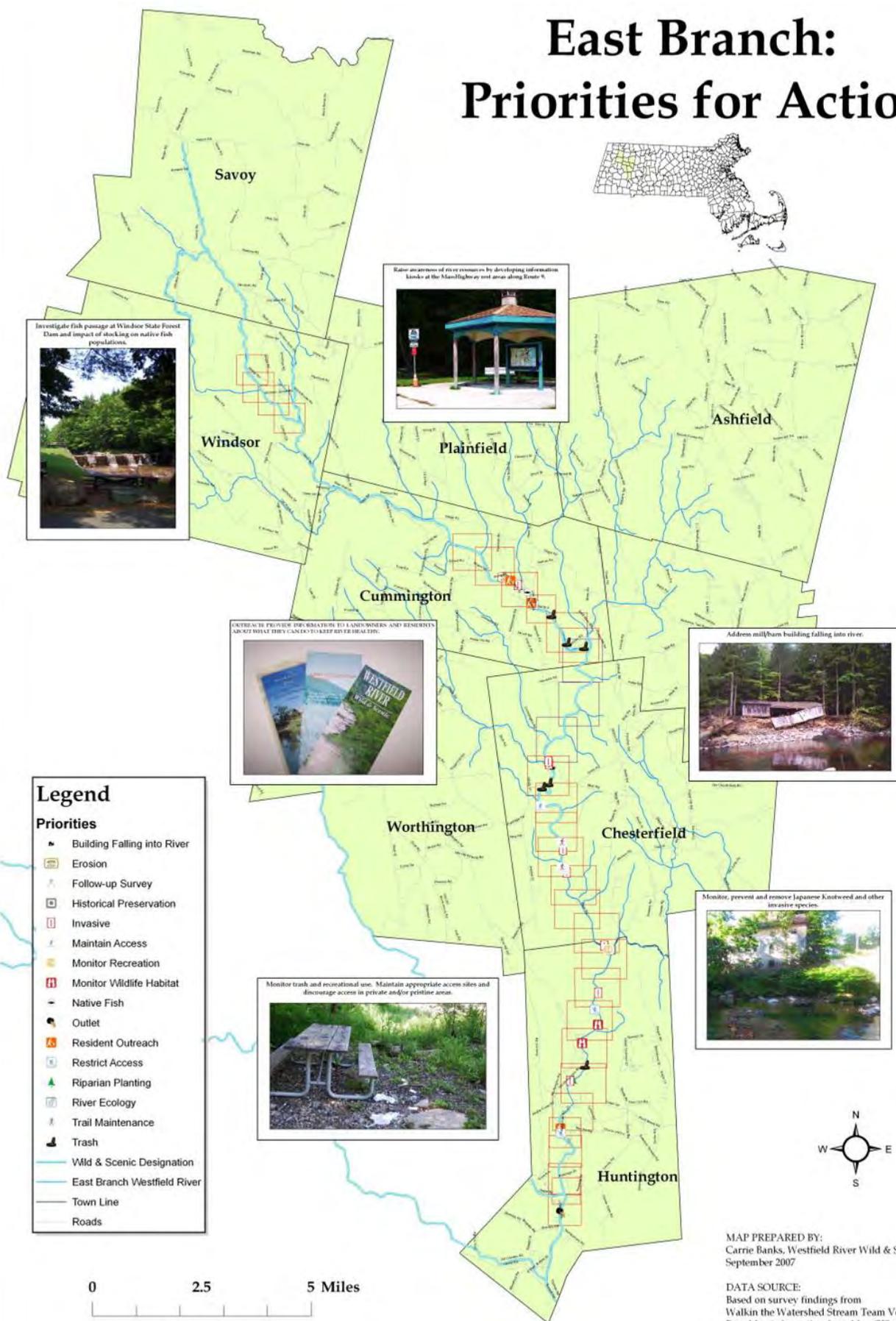
Volunteers noted assets found along their segments. Below is a list of values and assets identified along the river and within its corridor:

- Residents of towns who love river
- Stewardship of landowners and/or river users
- Lack of trash
- Town maintains a picnic area with ample vegetation along river
- Proximity to schools allow for opportunities for nature study and conservation projects with students
- Effective conservation management techniques
- Maintained facilities and picnic areas
- Good accessibility, especially along East Branch Trail
- Areas where limited access helps maintain pristine conditions
- Scenic vistas of the river from River Road (Windsor), Rte 9, former River Road (Chesterfield), and Rte 112.
- Green screens (i.e. vegetated buffers)
- Extremely pristine, wild and primitive sections
- Stretches of undeveloped woods are an asset to wildlife
- Important wildlife habitat, especially for bird migrations
- Potential conservation areas
- Indicators of good water quality (good buffers, clear water, no odors, etc.)
- Cold-water seeps which provide refuge for fish and other aquatic organisms
- Excellent opportunities for wildlife observation
- Historic bridge abutments, stone walls, old farms and other historic structures
- Chesterfield Gorge
- Flood control
- Water source for annual whitewater races

"To paraphrase John Muir, 'Everyone needs beauty as well as bread.'

Since 1973, I've been hiking the Westfield to receive its good tidings. Here nature's peace flows into you, as sunshine flows into trees, and cares drop-off the autumn leaves."

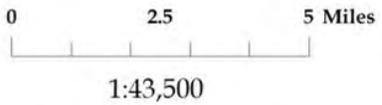
East Branch: Priorities for Action



Legend

Priorities

- Building Falling into River
- Erosion
- Follow-up Survey
- Historical Preservation
- Invasive
- Maintain Access
- Monitor Recreation
- Monitor Wildlife Habitat
- Native Fish
- Outlet
- Resident Outreach
- Restrict Access
- Riparian Planting
- River Ecology
- Trail Maintenance
- Trash
- Wild & Scenic Designation
- East Branch Westfield River
- Town Line
- Roads



MAP PREPARED BY:
Carrie Banks, Westfield River Wild & Scenic Coordinator
September 2007

DATA SOURCE:
Based on survey findings from
Walkin the Watershed Stream Team Volunteers
Base Map information from MassGIS

FOR PLANNING AND INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Based on the survey findings, Stream Team volunteers recommended short-term and long-term actions to preserve, protect and enhance the special qualities of the Westfield River. The following is a summary of their recommendations.

Short-term Actions (actions which can be completed in 6 months to a year):

- **Sponsor educational programs** for landowners and residents on how to keep river healthy.
- **Organize river clean-up** at access points and pull-offs along Rte 9 in Cummington, near Chesterfield Bend, behind Knightville Dam, Rte 112 in Huntington, and Gardner State Park.
- **Remove tree roots** dislodging historic bridge abutment in collaboration with the Army Corp of Engineers.
- **Address mill/barn falling into river**
- **Monitor Water Quality***** in several locations
- **Investigate Quarry Pond and outlet by river**
- **Determine herbicides used by homeowners and educate about impacts** of pesticides and herbicides on the river and offer natural alternatives
- **Conduct follow-up surveys***** on several segments
- **Install and update informational kiosks*****
- **Monitor development** along River Rd (Chesterfield)

Long-term Strategies and Actions (actions which take 1-5 years):

Invasive species: Continue monitoring and, where appropriate, removal of invasive species. Strategies may include:

- Educational workshops with landowners
- Mapping of invasive species to assess feasibility of removal
- Study techniques of removal within Knightville basin***

Trails and River Access: Improve existing trails and public access points and investigate connecting trails.

- Help boyscouts rebuild bridge over river to regain access to trails on mountain in Savoy
- Improve parking and signage to state forest area near confluence with Swift River
- Explore ideas of primitive trail between Rte 9 and Rte 143
- Conduct culvert and drainage work along East Branch Trail
- Address erosion at "Lunch Rock" by placing stepping stones
- Maintain locked gates at Gilbert Bliss State Forest and Knightville Basin to reduce erosion from ATVs and prevent illegal dumping
- Discourage public use in several locations

Riparian Buffers: Improve riparian buffers and investigate areas of erosion.

- Work with landowners to improve riparian buffers
- Plant shade cover in lower Knightville Valley basin

Fisheries: Improve cold-water fishery habitat

- Investigate improvements in fish passage at Windsor State Forest dam and Knightville Dam
- Consider management techniques for promoting woody habitat
- Study consequences of stocking rainbow trout on native fish

***These action items are in progress. For more details, see "Looking Ahead...2008 the year of Wild & Scenic", PG 8



**Westfield River
Wild & Scenic
Advisory Committee**

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We're on the Web!

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LOOKING AHEAD... 2008 the year of Wild & Scenic

In 2008, we will celebrate not only the 40th Anniversary of the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, but also the 15th Anniversary of the National Wild & Scenic designation on the Westfield River. In our continued efforts to protect this nationally recognized river, we have already integrated Stream Team Survey results into ongoing projects and activities.

Survey findings were incorporated into a new Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Program which will be launched in the Fall of 2008. Stream Team volunteers will be able to assist in the collection of samples at 5 locations on the East Branch. In addition, follow-up surveys will be

conducted in the Spring and Summer to collect more detailed information along several river segments.

Throughout 2008, the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee (WRWSAC) will continue to work with the Stream Teams to develop Action Plans and implement the recommended actions for each of the branches. Project funding will be available through the FY2008 Partnership Rivers budget for the Westfield River.

Stream Team survey reports and maps will be displayed and made available in each of the Towns along the East Branch.

About the Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee...

The mission of the Committee is to preserve, protect, and enhance the special qualities and outstanding natural resources of the Westfield River watershed in concert with local communities.

The Committee is comprised of representatives of the towns of Becket, Chester, Chesterfield, Cummington, Huntington, Middlefield, Savoy, Washington, Windsor, and Worthington, as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the National Park Service, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, The Trustees of Reservations, and the Westfield River Watershed Association.

**Westfield River Wild & Scenic
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