

The writing's on the water

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Book Review

"Confluence: A River, The Environment, Politics, & The Fate of All Humanity," by Nathaniel Tripp, 161 pages, Steerforth Press, Hanover, N.H. 2005 - \$21.

"Buzzards Bay: A Journey of Discovery," by Daniel Sheldon Lee, 229 pages, Commonwealth Editions, Beverly, MA 2004 - \$24.95.

Newton environmentalists have welcomed recent improvements in the water quality and general health of the Charles River and of Boston Harbor. Reduction in pollution, restoration of fish life, and the addition of waterside pathways, parks and other amenities have added up to a large plus in the lives of Greater Bostonians. Only a little removed from us are two other important bodies of water, the Connecticut River and Buzzards Bay, both deserving of our attention. Recently published books by two journalist/naturalists have shed light on the unhappy history of environmental challenges to these major waterways. Nathaniel Tripp, author and part-time farmer in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, has served on the Connecticut River Joint Commission, also on municipal zoning boards. This has brought him into regular contact with power company officials, loggers, dairy farmers, scientists, fishing interests, real estate lobbyists, property owners and many advocacy groups. He describes the interests and actions of each of these parties, viewed against the background of his own intimate knowledge of the river, one of New England's major watersheds.

He recalls the 1930's era of dam construction, focusing especially on those built in the Fifteen Mile Falls region along the upper reaches of the river. The creation of large reservoirs above these dams allowed the New England Power Company to control the release of water in order to generate electricity in response to peak demand from cities and factories, many of them farther south in Massachusetts. This was quite profitable, but these daily alterations in river flow interfered with the usual seasonal cycles, resulting in marked changes in the downstream riverbed, its vegetation and its fish life. As the power company bought land along the river valley, many people were forced to leave the region, and there was a marked change in the economy of nearby rural regions of Vermont and New Hampshire. Also, the remaining dairy farms and woodlands came increasingly under the ownership of large conglomerates, and as outside ownership increased, life in the small villages along the upper river changed markedly. Tripp does inject much local color into his story, included, for example, are his accounts of instructing local school children in the ways of the river, of his annual canoe trip downriver with Gov. Howard Dean, and of his trek into Quebec to investigate complaints of the Northern Cree over the building of power lines in their territory.

For many years there has been an attempt to restore Atlantic Salmon as a breeding species in the Connecticut River. This effort appeals even to those environmentalists who don't fish, but Tripp offers words of concern about its impact on other native fish species. He also notes that salmon restoration is viewed by many to be of benefit primarily to wealthy sportsmen, with neglect of some less glamorous species important to the dinner table of local fishermen. He warns us - "One of the greatest vulnerabilities of the environmental movement is its elitist reputation. This characterization finds an especially ready ear among the rural American farmers, woodsmen, and mill workers who live close to the outdoors and are already being stressed for economic as well as for social reasons."

This slim volume contains many interesting anecdotes about people and places along the Connecticut, told in an informal style. Underneath it all, the author doesn't try to hide his anger at human greed, and he admonishes those who "came along and tried to subjugate nature without

really understanding the long-term consequences of what they were doing". Only in his final chapters does he use the fate of the Connecticut River as an example of what is happening in larger scale around the world - a brief fulfillment of the book's somewhat ambitious-sounding subtitle.

Daniel Lee's story of Buzzard's Bay is more wide ranging in its scope. For example it includes an historical account of how the Bay was used for food and transportation by Native Americans of Southeastern Massachusetts in the era before Bartholomew Gosnold's 1602 arrival. Each chapter covers a single topic such as the attempt to preserve threatened bird life on shores and islands, the impact of hurricanes on towns around the Bay, the status of commercial fisheries, the role of the special summer school for boys on Penikese Island, and the changing patterns of wildlife around the Bay. Conservation issues are discussed in each case, and the author includes much information gained from interviews with various environmental experts as he accompanies them in the field.

He acquaints us with the "Coalition for Buzzards Bay," a key watchdog group which monitors water quality and provides an annual "report card" for each bordering community, listing its level of success in controlling the release of pollutants. He reports on the effects of the oil spills of the past few decades and the continuing hazard of transporting two billion gallons of oil through the Bay each year! He reminds us, however, that the greatest overall threat to the water is from sewage generated by the increasing population around Buzzards Bay. Conventional septic systems and wastewater treatment plants do not prevent nitrogen derived from these sources from reaching Bay waters. Released from such human waste, and also from heavy use of fertilizers on farms, lawns and golf courses, nitrogen leads to overgrowth of algae and subsequent drop in oxygen content of the water. It is feared that this will fall to levels no longer permitting marine organisms to survive.

Both of these books, short as they are, provide easy reading and much useful information for the environmentally-minded.

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