

# Stealing the River

It seems like every time I head south disaster strikes the Musconetcong. I was attending a family reunion in West Virginia when the catastrophic August 2000 flood filled the quarry and Lubbers Run liberated its self from the Lake Seneca dam. Imagine my surprise when the Musconetcong appeared as the lead story on the Weather Channel.

During this event the Musconetcong burst into the Tilcon Quarry at a place where the mining of sand and gravel has taken place within just a few yards of the river. Since the quarry absorbed the initial flood surge Tilcon was credited with saving downstream communities from serious flooding. This dubious claim obscured the fact that the primary source of flooding was the failure of three poorly maintained and inadequate headwater dams. More importantly, the flood surge caused by the successive dam failures exposed how the Tilcon Quarry poses a long-term threat to the river.

Meanwhile, in order to resume operations the quarry discharged millions of gallons of sediment polluted water into the river over a period of several days, with the blessing of the NJDEP. During that period the river was so choked with sediment that visibility in the river was zero.

Shortly after the flood we canoed the river and flew over the area to document Tilcon's crude attempts to patch up the scant strip of land separating the quarry from the river. They built a dike of rock and dirt, placing it right in the river channel. The dike would not be tested for some time due to the extended drought conditions.

The second quarry related disaster occurred in May while I was attending the National River Rally in Asheville N.C. along with several hundred river activists from around the nation. They represented some 130 organizations, mostly small watershed groups. I listened to the stories of dozens of river volunteers and staffers. It was a three-day group therapy session for rivergeeks.

But once again, while enjoying the beauty of the southern Appalachian Mountains, the Musconetcong took another hit. During a moderately high water event the river cut through the shabby dike that Tilcon placed along the river. The dike was simply undercut and eroded away by the natural flow of the river.

For a period of time the quarry stole most of the river's flow. MWA received several frantic reports from residents, fishermen and municipal officials that the river was drying up. Eventually the quarry men were able to stem the flow about 200 yards into the quarry where they managed to place a smaller dike.

Once again it is possible to canoe directly into the quarry, which is what we did immediately upon my return. Beth Barry and I launched a canoe above Waterloo Village and paddled downriver to get a closer look at the problem.

The lame attempt by Tilcon to build a dike into the river channel in turn caused a chain reaction of degradation. A large deep channel has been cut into the riverbed because of the location and

placement of the dike. On the opposite shore severe stream bank erosion has caused the river to be clogged with downed trees.

During my 5-year tenure with the Musconetcong Watershed Association, the sand and gravel quarry operation along the river in Mount Olive Township has been by far the most serious source of pollution and greatest threat to the health of the Musconetcong River. What is really disturbing is that based on our observations it appears that neither Tilcon nor the NJDEP has the expertise to fix these serious problems.

My efforts to engage the MWA in a positive role with Tilcon and NJDEP have been unsuccessful. I managed to get invited by the NJDEP Bureau of Water Enforcement to a site inspection of the scene of the crime, but the quarry operators forbid my participation.

This is a long-term problem that is not going to be solved any time soon. But it is our role to seek accountability and demand that effective long-term solutions be implemented. In that regard we will seek to work with Mount Olive Township, and NJDEP. Other options will be explored, such as seeking help from enforcement-minded organizations that have the resources force the quarry operators and the state to obey the law.

Stay tuned.