

View From the Canoe

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For the Musconetcong River the so-called new millennium has been a time of natural disasters alternating between severe floods and extreme drought. The topsy-turvy hydrological conditions have been compounded by man's inept attempt to control water with flimsy dams and our penchant for paving over the landscape with asphalt.

I wrote about this in the spring issue of River News, just as the region plunging headlong into another drought emergency (see www.musconetcong.org). The article explored the relationships between floods, drought, geology, and how we use land and water.

Then Mother Nature made a monkey out of me. By the time we sent River News out the winds shifted, bringing copious amounts of rain. It looked like the worst drought in 35 years would be swept from our short memory. With river levels back to near normal for May and June the Musky was "canoeable" for the first time in well over a year. Reservoirs filled up and the landscape turned lush and green again.

Entering into July it was as if someone turned off the great spigot-in-the-sky. The drought returned with a vengeance along with a scorched landscape and record low water levels.

But did the drought ever end? Not where ground water levels are concerned. While blessed with rain in May and June, the green lawns and overflowing lakes created a false sense of drought relief. The region still had a major precipitation deficit built up over the past eighteen months.

MWA received reports from long-time residents who live along the upper reaches of the river that the flow is the lowest that they have ever witnessed. The last record drought was around 1966 so memory may play a role here. But there is no doubt that the river is unusually low due primarily to the fact that ground water levels are so low. Ground water is the source or base flow for the river, and base flow is extremely low.

Another important factor causing the dangerously low water levels in the uppermost reach of the river is related to how much water is released from Lake Hopatcong.

This is an extremely complex situation that will be revisited in a future issue of River News. But for now, suffice to say that it appears that the health of the river -- as expressed by flow -- is a low priority when it comes to deciding how much water is released from New Jersey's largest lake. The greater priority seems to be holding water back because Lake Hopatcong is deemed an emergency water supply for Boonton Reservoir (AKA out-of-basin transfer).

Economic factors may also be overriding concerns about the health of the river. Lake Hopatcong is New Jersey's premier power-boating destination. Marina owners and residents along the lake understandably like to see a full lake.

The late spring rains did fill the lake to the point that it was flowing over the top for a short period of time. With the lake back down two feet only a trickle of water is being released into the river. The stretch of river between Lake Musconetcong and the Lubbers Run confluence is dangerously low. The Musconetcong Sewer Authority discharges effluent in this section of the river, raising water quality concerns.

Based on statements made in the press by various officials concerned with the lake, the health of the river isn't even on the radar screen. This may simply be due to a lack of awareness about conditions in the river. This will soon change.

That brings us to another unnatural disaster to strike the beleaguered Musky. Tilcon, a mining conglomerate, owns the sand and gravel quarry situated along the river in Mount Olive Township, just below the I-80 overpass. Over the past several years this facility has been the source of the most intense sediment pollution I have ever observed. To be fair, Tilcon purchased the quarry a few years back so they inherited some of the quarry's problems.

These problems, some of which have only worsened since Tilcon took over the quarry, include chronic and severe discharges of polluted water, quarrying too close to the river, lowering of ground water table, and more recently, grand theft of the river.