

The Watershed Watch

For more than three generations flood problems in the Passaic Watershed have been the object of study. The current Passaic River Basin Study will be the ninth major report on the Watershed. It is an advanced engineering and design study being undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineers. The objective of this plan is "the development of feasible and publicly acceptable basin-wide plan for meeting the flood control and other associated water and related land resource needs of the people of the Passaic River Basin."

Since study of the basin started, no major recommendation has been implemented and it is doubtful that this new \$12 million study will result in any major implementation. Why?

There are 112 municipalities in the basin, each with competing demands on the watershed. Various interested parties have made recommendations that contradict each other. The Corps publicly admits that its own list of planning objectives contains serious contradictions. Recently the ecological movement has made people in the basin aware of a larger contradiction. Somehow, we have misidentified the unit of survival as the human species itself. This is a grave mistake. For us the unit of survival is not the human species itself, but the human species in its environment. If we destroy our environment we will destroy ourselves.

But just what does constitute environment destruction? There are some scientist who seem to have a fairly clear idea, yet other scientists will disagree

with them. The public is left with an array of contradictory “authoritative” statements.

To speak immediately of water, land, pollution, and other problems amid this cluster of contradictions is to misidentify the real problem. The real problem is that it is impossible for the Army Corps, or anybody else, to carry out contradictory commands. No feasible, publicly acceptable plan can come from such a situation.

To resolve this problem, *Talking Wood* is initiating a watershed watch. The watch relies on shared perception of the watershed by people living here. Perceptions are embedded in film and video so that they can be shared with others and passed on to succeeding generations. The design of the watch varies from being as tight as a musical score to being as loose as enjoying a place with a camera. To go on watch is to look for those patterns that are necessary to the major development of watershed life. The figures that regulate its underlying structural stability. Just as a child learns language by collecting a vocabulary of words and then discovering the syntax of their relationships, so the watch is designed to amass a “vocabulary” of patterns and thereby figure out the syntax of how this watershed is working. Such a syntax could then constitute an agreed upon system of restraints that would regulate the way people live in this watershed. Such a system would be married to observables in the environment and not to competing civil or scientific authorities. Given that these observables would be here for anyone to examine, it can be anticipated that such a system will achieve broad agreement, be stable and ongoing, and provide a common context out of which specific proposals for “flood control” etc. could be considered.

Starting with the Solar Eclipse on February 26, *Talking Wood* will initiate the *watershed watch*. Our first watch will take place in Pompton Lakes. (Pompton means “wry mouth” in the native language.) Aerial photographs of Pompton and a calendar worksheet are provided on the full foldout of this page. Future watches are being planned on the Watchung Mountains in Wayne and Paterson and other locations in Passaic.

Watershed Watch Calender for Pompton Lakes

Looking at the clouds out of the kitchen window, noting changes in the neighborhood while walking, enjoying the change of seasons: watchfulness is part of living. With this *Watershed Watch* we are suggesting a way of coordinating our natural watchfulness to yield a mosaic perception of the place we live in. Eleven sites in the Pompton Lakes area have been identified by our scouting team. People are invited to go to these sites, with or without cameras, for the lunar cycle beginning with the solar eclipse on February 26. During the week of the new moon we suggest paying attention to the feelings that arise in each site visited. In the week of the quarter moon, we suggest paying attention to the facts presented by each place. Guides will be available during this week to point out specific features of each site and to answer questions. The week of the full moon is a time for going back to these sites and thinking about the future, about ways to ensure living in this place on a long term basis.

Picture taking is encouraged during each moon phase. Please write your name, the site and date on the back of each photograph and drop off the photos before March 23 at the *Talking Wood* office. Photos will be organized into a mosaic and displayed at the Pompton Lakes Library during the month of April.

Paterson as Green City

The Great Waterfall fooled the founders of Paterson. The founders saw the falls in terms of “industrial power.” They used it to run cotton and silk mills, to make locomotives and revolvers. But industrialization killed the life of the river. The salmon that native people took from the foot of the falls with their hands have been gone for generations. Now you’re lucky if you can catch a few small bottom fish by the falls.

The power of the great falls is only part of a greater power. That greater power is the web of life in the Passaic River Watershed. The Passaic Watershed is a weave of falling leaf forest life. The seasonal fall of leaves and the steady fall of water are part of the same powerful life process.

The Seal of Paterson shows a boy kneeling to plant a silk mulberry tree. You don’t know a place until you know its plants. The silk mulberry never would grow in this climate, despite the efforts of industrial planners. Above the image of the boy are the words, etched in Latin, “With Hope and Work.” Paterson was Silk City. But the strike that broke out in 1913 and the competition from synthetic fibers crippled the industry. Silk City failed. The industrial power of Paterson failed.

Yet something else can happen. The web of life, though weakened, is still with us. We can work with the greater power of the watershed to cultivate a Green City. Here, in Paterson. Here, where the water splits the rock. We can:

- Clean up the river so the Atlantic salmon can spawn here again.

- Learn about the native plants of this region.
- Return organic wastes to the soil.
- Plant community gardens in vacant lots.
- Organize food co-ops.
- Use the area colleges to develop urban/suburban agriculture and aquaculture.
- Plant trees.
- Develop a health care delivery system proper to this place.
- Develop technology proper to a green city.
- Develop work programs appropriate to a green city.
- Use ecological and energy principles for housing programs.
- Minimize the use of the automobile.
- Build jogging and bicycle paths.
- Develop solar energy applications here.
- Reopen the hydroelectric power plant at the falls for cheaper, non-polluting energy.
- Use the hydroelectric power plant at the falls for a cable TV network dedicated to educating people about the web of life in the Passaic Watershed.
- Organize hiking and canoeing trips throughout the Passaic Watershed for the children.
- Organize a Watershed Watch the children can participate in.
- Teach photography and video to the children so they can record and share their observations.
- Develop committees of correspondence between the children in Paterson and children in other parts of the watershed.

- Teach the children the difference between the ecology of the Passaic Watershed and the ecologies of the different places their grandparents come from.
- Develop more parks by the river so people can sit in peace and watch the river flow.

When the Onondaga Indians of the Eastern Woodlands are asked why they do things that give them no immediate reward they answer that they do these things "for the seventh generation." Why cultivate a Green City? For the Seventh Generation.

Watershed Watch: Video at the Great Falls

This is a report on the formal watershed watch work done at the Great Falls during the fall of 1978. At the invitation of Roy Skodnick, Director of the Pascack Valley Video Project, I agreed to orchestrate a video sketch of the Great Falls for the group of six Roy is working with. Roy's interest in working at the Falls grows out of his love for William Carlos Williams' poem, *Paterson*. My own approach to landscape study is based on five years of exploratory video work with Earthscore Foundation in High Falls, New York. Part of that exploration was a year long observation of a waterfall in which I collected between thirty-five and forty different water flow patterns on videotape. The first thing I did in Paterson was to identify six different sites around the Falls that would give us camera access to as much of the phenomenon of falling water as was physically possible. I then showed the group three different modes of videotaping: scanning, selecting, and a combination of scanning and selecting. The orchestration involved each participant taking a turn with the

portable video camera in each mode from each site. Such turn-taking is designed to yield a mosaic perception more reliable than perception provided by individuals working separately.

As expected, different people on the project had different perceptual strengths and we learned from each other. Eileen Greenfield is especially good at selecting and consistently added to our collection of water flow patterns. Jim Krell and Bethany Jacobson are strong in paying attention to their own feelings while moving with a camera, and this makes for good scanning. Once Curt Schlenker let go of cinema cliches, his scanning became interesting and his experience with photography was helpful in terms of selecting. Both Roy Skodnick and Francesca Lyman have the sort of patience and comprehensive awareness that makes for good scan/select tape.

Roy's strength in select/scan comes partly from having studied Aikido for three years. Aikido is in the same family of exercises as T'ai Chi which I have studied for years. The optimum scan/select mode that I have been able to develop comes from a move in T'ai Chi known as four corners. In four corners, you turn 360 degrees shifting weight from one leg to the other. By scanning while the weight is on the back leg and selecting while shifting to the front leg you can blend the intelligence of T'ai Chi with video camera work.

The scanning mode is similar to the trance-like state brought about by ordinary television viewing, except that in scanning the mind stays alert and alive, is not passive and "spaced out." The selection mode is similar to the sort of thinking associated with quick eye movements or reading. By combining and orchestrating these modes in six visits to the Great Falls, we worked out a method and a got a good sample of material. The seven hours of tape that we

took constitute a sketch. Given time and resources, this sketch could be developed into a full-fledged video study of the water flow patterns at the Great Falls.

The Great Falls constitute the richest single source of patterns in the Passaic Watershed. The vocabulary of patterns that can be collected there will enrich our understanding of other configurations in the watershed.