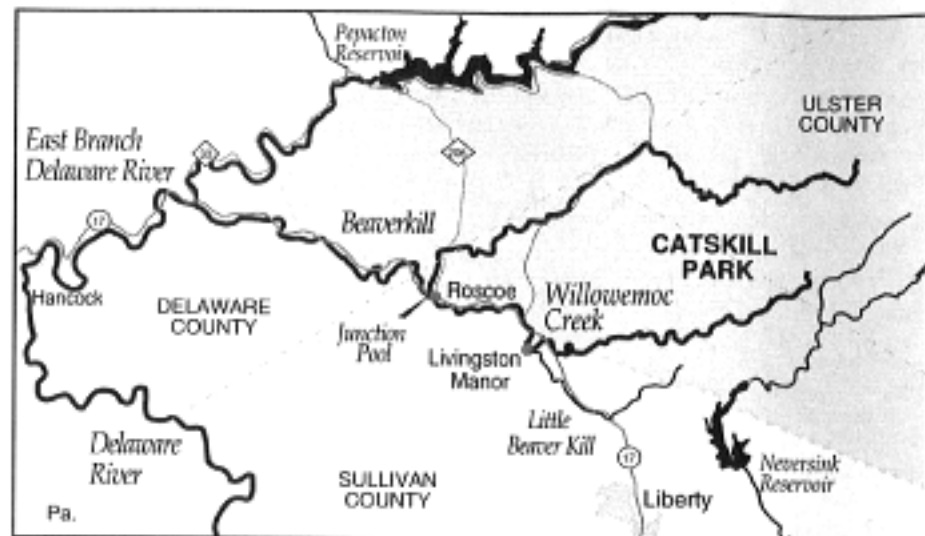


Story by  
Gloria Smith



# Of time and the river

Mary Dette spends a lot of her time caring for others. Still, like her parents before her, come the end of March she'll begin making her daily rounds to the Beaverkill River. She'll take its temperature and check its depths and rate of flow. She'll make a note of what insects are hatching and where the fish are feeding. Then she'll leave a message on a machine that the fishermen can call.

This year, Mary hopes she'll have better news to report than last. "The flooding and the bulldozing on the tributaries had a devastating effect on the river last year," says Mary. "The fish eggs were washed away, and the insect hatches were spotty or they came all together, not in an orderly progression."

Still, Dette has faith in the river. "Last summer was cool and the skies were cloudy," she says. Just the break that was needed after numerous recent summers of high temperatures and drought. "The floodwaters have receded and there were hatches on the water last fall. Nature has a way of healing herself."

The course of the Beaverkill has never run smooth. Spawned in a cradle of rock between the Graham and Double-top mountains in Ulster County, the river stretches 43 1/2 miles, running south and west until it reaches the Delaware River. Its upper section is steep and runs through the shade of the woods. The cool, fast-moving waters are oxygen-rich, making it an ideal habitat for trout.

The Beaverkill unites with the Willowemoc in Roscoe at Junction Pool, where it widens and produces what some say is the best place to catch trout on earth. For trout, the area known as "Beamoc" is a mecca. On the surface of the pools, nature serves up a plentiful array of insects - an ever-changing seasonal smorgasbord of all the delicacies trout are known to love. When conditions are right, the insects hatch with dependable regularity and dinner is served on schedule. When the ecosystem is disturbed, it's catch-as-catch-can for the trout.

Although there's a delicate balance to the ecosystem in the river, there's a strength to it that can endure abuses as well. In the 19th century, the tanning industry required tannic acid from the hemlocks shading the river, so tanners clear-cut the forests, then ran residues back into river, killing the native brook trout.

Route 17 stands over the river at Roscoe—an eternal symbol of man's insensitivity to nature. When it was built, rivers yielded to roadways, and engineers had plans to rechannel the river. But friends of the river won a landmark decision and the river was granted the right of way.

Jan. 19, 1996, saw one of the most destructive high-water events in recent memory - some say 200 years or more. A warm spell, accompanied by driving rains, interrupted an unusually hard winter of frequent snowfalls. The waters rose swiftly, broke over the banks in a frenzy and flooded a 300-mile area in the Upper Delaware and Beaverkill watershed. Homes were destroyed, businesses ruined, farmlands saturated. Trees, campers and trailers overturned and washed downstream. Eight people were killed in the flood.

The region was declared a disaster area. Close to \$8 million in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds were funneled into the area, and stream work commenced with a vengeance. Deluged by requests, New York state's Department of Environmental Conservation granted more than 1,000 stream work permits. From April to August, bulldozers and backhoes driven largely by local highway workers and contractors cleared out areas of some two dozen tributaries, even after the water had begun to recede on its own, according to Jock Conyngham, biologist with Trout Unlimited, a 95,000-member North American fishery conservation group.

Now in the fourth year of a four-year, 1.2 million study of the river, Trout Unlimited has discovered the tributaries play an even greater role in the aquatic life of the river than previously expected. Not only do they serve as spawning areas for the fish, they also provide protection for the trout during times of stress - for example during hot, dry spells in summer. The shade of the trees keeps the water cool and rich in oxygen. Groundwater from underground streams and aquifers collects in the tributaries and flows into the rivers in times of drought.

When tributaries are compromised, trout are denied access to a spawning area and a place of refuge. When trees are senselessly taken, the sun warms the waters and threatens oxygen depletion. Bulldozing the tributaries had a devastating effect on the river and on the downstream communities as well.

Rivers meander with a purpose, says Conyngham. The

twists and turns or "sinuosity" serve to slow down the flow of the water. So, too, does the friction caused by vegetation and rock in a natural river. The velocity of water in a scraped, straightened river is increased many times over. Right now, its force is aimed squarely at communities downstream.

Conyngham wasn't surprised at the severity of the flooding along the river that battered the region late in the fall. He predicts there could be more to come in the future. The floods cut new channels in the Beaverkill and deepened many that already existed. New gravel bars arose from the streams like sand drifts in a desert; dead trees and debris jutted out of the shore. These natural effects of a flood, when left unattended, can help the river restabilize. For example, a gravel bar that looks like it's choking a stream and causing flooding may actually be holding back the force of the current and thereby protecting areas below.

Even some high-ranking officials in the Army Corps of Engineers have done an about-face on the issue of flood management. In an article that appeared in *The New York Times* on Feb. 4, Dave Gore, a planner with the government agency, made a statement that rivers need to "do their own thing ... Rivers are going to flood and meander and shift their alignments as floods come and go ... If you use some sense and put a corridor of 100 feet on each side of the river and don't allow development there, in the long run you're saving a lot of money, headache and heartache."

After billions of dollars spent on attempts to control the nation's waters, the scientific community may be coming to the simple conclusion that the best, least-expensive solution may be to let nature take its course.

Conyngham says it will take three years to assess the impacts of the floods and subsequent rechannelization on the wild trout population. Norm McBride, biologist from the

DEC's Region 4, doubts that wild trout will ever return to the lower Beaverkill. "That section's a hatchery area," he maintains. Nor does he see sufficient scientific evidence to support Trout Unlimited's claim that the floods and bulldozing are to blame for the river's inability to support wild trout. He believes numerous droughts over the last decade sounded a death knell for the wild trout population.

Conyngham calls this thinking "circular logic. ... If you don't believe trout can come back, what motivation will you have to help them survive?" says Conyngham, who believes there are more than environmental concerns wrapped up in the issue. "Trout fishing brings millions into the region," he maintains. A study conducted in 1994 of the Town of Rockland revealed 8.9 million in revenue from fishing and related activities - and this on an off-year when only about half of the usual number of sports enthusiasts had visited.

Art Lee, author and environmentalist, is a man with a passion for the river. As he's traveled the world over, he's met many a fisherman who envies Lee's home near the river. He once met a man who said if he could move it, he'd buy it. "And he had the money to do it," says Lee. Maybe if it had a price tag, people would begin to recognize its worth.

Lee believes education will be the area's salvation. "The problem is, very few people fully understand the complexities of aquatic life," he says. "They don't realize that actions in one area have consequences in another."

Last year, in spite of the furor over the future of fishing, Paul Fillipone pulled on his waders and stood in the troubled waters. "There's a difference between fishing and catching a fish," he maintains. So come hell or high water, he went fishing in the wildest river. And though it didn't happen in an instant, he's got it on video to prove - in the worst of all possible years to go fishing - he landed an 18" trout. ☐

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