

THE ART AND PRACTICE OF LIVING IN PLACE: LESSONS FROM NEW ENGLAND REGIONALISM

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When Warren Viessman first suggested a water resources policy contribution from New England, all sorts of topical possibilities came to mind, for much is underway in the region. For example, the effort to remove PCB's from the Housatonic River, and to determine the remedial costs and penalties to be paid by General Electric, promises to break new ground in the field of environmental settlements. The new Silvio Conte National Wildlife Refuge in the Connecticut valley is pioneering a public/private partnership approach to natural resources conservation rather than the conventional program based on federal ownership. The controversy over a proposed water treatment plant for Boston's metropolitan water supply system, favored by EPA but opposed by environmentalists, has raised the larger question as to whether acquisition of watershed lands alone can offer proper protection. The Massachusetts' watershed initiative, led by a coalition of non-governmental watershed leaders, and featuring multi-interest, multi-stakeholder, watershed-wide, community councils has been cited by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as one of the ten top watershed experiments in the United States. And northern New England is currently rife with a series of water-based issues ranging from the relicensing of power dams to the use of streams for snow-making purposes.

But instead of these tempting pursuits, I have elected to exercise the privileges of a septuagenarian and reminisce a bit about water resources policy in the context of my own professional life. In so doing, I may tell you more than you care to know but, as you will see, there is a purpose. The lessons derived from my own experience in New England can be precursors to some important changes in national direction and policy. But first the context.

What was to become a life-long interest in water resources regionalism began in July of 1956 when I became the first staff member of the interagency Massachusetts Water Resources Commission, a vehicle for improved planning and coordination created by the legislature in the wake of the disastrous Hurricane Diane floods of 1955. My supervisor was one of the great New

England sanitary engineers of that time, Clarence I. Sterling, Jr., the chief engineer of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and a member of the Commission.

Michigan-trained in forestry and wildlife management, I was singularly ill-equipped for the assignment. But newly-married and jobless, my plight stirred the sympathies of the commissioner of natural resources, Francis W. Sargent, by law the chairman of the Commission, and I was hired as a consultant at the lordly rate of \$3.50 per hour. When asked what I should do, Sterling advised me to acquire a complete set of topographic maps and begin to get personally acquainted with the water resources of the Commonwealth.

And so for the summer months, freed from any other official duties, I traveled the length and breadth of the Commonwealth, poking my nose into all sorts of backroads and byways. I visited romantic places like BashBish Falls, factually-descriptive areas like No Bottom, Stumpy, Boot, and Snake Ponds; ominous water bodies like the Devils Dishful, Bad Luck, Dark Hollow, and Doleful; lakes long ago personalized for some now-forgotten reason (e.g., Aunt Betty, Sam Hill, Marm Johns and the Widow Wood); innumerable Factory and Sawmill Brooks; and, of course, the polysyllabically-challenged Chargoggagoggmanchaugagoggchaubunagungmaugg (Webster Lake).

In the course of my travels, I became struck by the intimate connections between people and water. Lakes, reservoirs, and groundwater were used extensively for drinking water; ponds produced fish and game for sportsmen; rivers furnished essential resources for power, navigation, industrial processing, agriculture, and waste disposal; and shorelines of all kinds formed the natural settings for homes and communities and contributed a growing measure of their economic value. Even the historic practice of bounding political jurisdictions at the "thread of the stream", at least in people terms seemed logical, if not hydrological, for it ensured that the waterways, as in Indian times, remained pathway "commons" and that the resource would be shared by all.

In a small state like Massachusetts, it also became evident that the key to many of its water resources lay in adjoining states.

In 1956, the League of Women Voters of the United States elected a national study item, "Know Your River Basin". The Massachusetts League turned to the Water Resources Commission for help. In my capacity as its sole employee, it befell my lot to arrange field trips for local League members, which I elected to organize on a watershed basis. These show-me, day-long expeditions, taken by chartered bus, would normally start high in the watershed and follow the course of the drainage downstream. The League ladies would be given first-hand exposure to water supply wells, sewage treatment plants, flood control facilities, cranberry bogs, and industrial facilities. The adventures encountered simply heightened their education and made it that much more memorable. For me, the experience further consolidated my growing view that water needs to be localized to gain popular and political credibility.

Three experienced water resources professionals thereupon became my mentors, further encouraging my growing sense of region. Elmer R. Foster (no relation), the executive director of the four-state Connecticut River Watershed Council, was the first to introduce me to the world of formal watershed organizations. Dr. Benjamin Isgur, the state conservationist for the then- U.S. Soil Conservation Service, worked closely with me in the advancement of P.L. 566 (small watersheds), a program for which the Water Resources Commission had collateral state responsibility. And Charles E. Knox, the district engineer of the U.S. Geological Survey's surface water division, became persuaded of the need to study the runoff from small, forested watersheds as a way to reduce flood damage and increase water yields in rural areas.

In 1959, my situation changed abruptly. Commissioner Francis W. Sargent left state service for a Washington assignment, the first step in a political career that would take him eventually to the governorship of the Commonwealth. The independent Board of Natural Resources selected me as his successor. Thus, overnight I went from employee of the Water Resources Commission to commissioner and chairman. In those capacities, I became the Commonwealth's representative on six interstate compact agencies - the three flood control commissions for the Merrimack, Connecticut, and Thames Rivers; the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission; the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission; and the Northeastern Forest Fire Protection Commission. And with Clarence Sterling's untimely death in 1963, I succeeded him as the primary Massachusetts spokesman for a proposed seventh

interstate compact agency, the Northeastern Resources Commission, a joint federal-state initiative that won the endorsement of a majority of the New England states but, unlike the later Delaware basin compact, failed to receive the consent of Congress. As chairman of the Northeastern Resources Committee, I was ultimately responsible for rallying support for the federal Water Resources Planning Act of 1965 and, in 1967, helping create New England's second best alternative, the Title II New England River Basins Commission.

The realities of regional practice became obvious during those early years. For example, my first initiative as commissioner was the convening of a tri-state conference of natural and water resources administrators in 1964 at the border of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. As the states compared notes, it was immediately evident that cooperation would advance many commonly-held objectives. But when the conference concluded, in typical agency fashion, the participants departed to continue doing their own thing their own way in their own places. From this, I learned lesson number one about regionalism - the ephemeral nature of the typical governmental commitment.

As a flood control commissioner for the Merrimack River, adjudicating the economic losses to be paid by the downstream state (Massachusetts) for the Hopkinton-Everett Corps of Engineers' reservoir in New Hampshire, I can still recall the parade of local people appearing before the commission to claim damages, but with the most reasonable of representations. From this experience, I learned lesson number two about regionalism. Met halfway, grass-roots New Englanders are apt to be honest and fair, and their judgement can usually be trusted.

The early struggles to classify interstate water quality through state and local participation, in the face of a growing national movement to simply federalize water quality decisions, presented me with a third valuable lesson - the inappropriateness of agency fiat or intervention without the concomitant involvement of those dependent upon the resource.

But there was clearly more to be learned about the kinds of regionalism that work. In 1969, as part of a doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins' Department of Geography & Environmental Engineering, I elected to look more closely at regional water resources in New England, encountering for the first time a new concept and social movement, bioregionalism, that had just had its genesis in the rich, intellectual environment of northern California. For frugal, suspicious, home-grown New England, this self-reliant, place-based concept seemed

just the ticket. For the past three decades, bioregionalism has been my primary research focus.

In 1986, for example, I convened one-day workshops of key regional leaders at four locations “portal” to the six New England states. The agenda was simple. Describe from experience what makes regional approaches succeed or fail. More than sixty people found the time to attend. The outpouring of practical advice was simply astounding, and a summary of the opinions offered was later assembled into a special report and published with the help of the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy. The document was aptly titled, *Cooperation To Live By*, the head contrived by the editorial writers at the Providence Journal-Bulletin for an OpEd column favoring bioregionalism in Rhode Island.

In 1991, I completed the last of a special four volume case study series, *Experiments in Bioregionalism*. Each book traces the course of a particularly significant New England regional institution: the New England River Basins Commission, the Cape Cod National Seashore, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, and the Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Commission. The examples were chosen purposely to reflect different scales and different resources. In addition to providing a documented history of each project, the series attempts to distill the essence of the regional experience.

In 1993, with a meager \$10,000 scrounged from a number of local philanthropic sources, I formed a New England Bioregional Roundtable to enlist others in an exploration of the conceptual basis for regionalism. The core of the group consisted of five academic-based regionalists representing a range of institutions and disciplines. At subsequent meetings sponsored by the Roundtable, the number of interested parties swelled more than ten-fold. Local case studies were undertaken in a six town, bi-state portion of the upper Connecticut valley, the multi-jurisdictional headwaters of the Sudbury River near metropolitan Boston, the Estabrook Woods area on the Concord/Carlisle border made famous by Henry David Thoreau, and the five town annex portion of the Fort Devens military reservation.

As the Roundtable proceeded with its deliberations, two priority aspects of regionalism rose to the fore: the human dimensions of achieving meaningful cooperation in practice, and the institutional impediments encountered in attempting actions of a transboundary nature. Before the Roundtable closed its doors in September of 1995, a guideline paper had been prepared on the importance of “place” in designing and advancing regional programs (*The Environmental Sense of Place: Precepts For The Practitioner*) and new legislation had been introduced

into the Massachusetts legislature facilitating the establishment

of regional institutions (*An Act Authorizing Joint Powers Agreements*).

By the close of the 1996 session, Chapter 491, Acts of 1996, had been enacted into law authorizing joint powers agreements among two or more federal, interstate, state, and/or local jurisdictions, for any environmental purpose, and for any geographic area the participants might elect. In place of the prior legislative approval normally required, each joint powers entity can now be chartered administratively. Given the provision in the law for the participation of adjoining states, and Massachusetts’ common boundary with four other New England states and the state of New York, a unique, new mechanism is now in place to advance regionalism throughout much of the Northeast.

From this final phase of my explorations, the fifth and most important lesson about regionalism in New England has emerged, and that is the crucial importance of scale. It is here that most efforts founder. Water resources planners and engineers seem overly preoccupied with the grand design in both geography and time. Bigness implies a commanding vision and earns pragmatic dividends to the proponent in terms of large and expensive authorizations and projects. Political leaders and policy makers find such schemes attractive and politically-rewarding. Awed by their sheer dimensions, the public tends to accept them at face value and pay the price. But more times than not, these grand schemes simply do not work. The result is the familiar midden of maps, plans, and project proposals left in heaps to be reinvented in succeeding reincarnations. The most modest, incremental, even marginal forms of water resources activities remain orphans.

And so what does all of this have to do with water resources policy? Several observations will conclude this admittedly personalized view of New England events and activities.

First, like many in the water resources business, I deplore the absence of a cohesive, coherent, national water resources policy. Such is also the case at the regional level. Compounding this difficulty is the dereliction many of us cannot understand - the abandonment of the one central policy mechanism we have ever had, the Title I Water Resources Council and the regional delivery mechanism represented by its Title II river basin commissions. Like many of you, I have implored one administration after another to remedy this national

disgrace, particularly since the mechanisms described above have never been repealed and are still on the statute books, but indifference at the least, and intransigence at the worst, continue to plague the national water scene.

In August of 1988, my Harvard colleague Peter Rogers and I wrote a white paper suggesting a logical set of remedies (*Federal Water Policy: Toward An Agenda For Action*). In reviewing that document, much of what we said then is still relevant today. However, the water resources business is now so complex and fraught with vested interests that doing nothing has become the preferred alternative. Those with long memories can recall wistfully other periods in policy history when leadership individuals of stature, such as those on the Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources and the National Water Commission, joined forces to do something about the problem. These benchmark efforts are described elsewhere in this special issue.

Second, in the event that national water resources policy is revisited, the role of regions should be accorded increased prominence, for in this era of diminished federal roles and devolved national responsibilities, getting something done is now the primary realm of state, local, and private jurisdictions. But the regionalism of tomorrow will have to be markedly different from the regionalism of yesteryear. Gone will be the inevitable comprehensive, basin plan, devised and carried out by a distant technical agency with only token input from non-governmental advisors. The new regionalism must be bottom-up, rooted in a sense of place, and composed of a series of modest, short-term steps. It is likely to begin with a single river reach or issue, coalesce around tangible problems and doable remedies, and only then grow to comprehensive watershed or basin proportions. The process will be open to all, participatory in its decision-making, and highly dependent upon power-sharing. In the new regionalism, the water resources specialist will be a

technical advisor, not the project principal - a pauper not the prince. The results will be messy, incomplete, and disappointing at times - a far cry from the grand designs that have graced our nation in the past - but they are the only approaches that can properly reflect the inherently parochial nature of most of our modern water problems.

But how can we get from here to there?

First, there should be a central national water presence and the capacity to stimulate and encourage regional water resources initiatives within acceptable problem-sheds, but these elements should be facilitative, not directive in nature. Taking a leaf from the New England experience, flexible mechanisms will be needed to put

together the right combinations of resources and talents. A means of support must be found that is not dependent upon an uncertain and episodic appropriations process. By doing so, the human, financial, and technical resources necessary to meet future water needs can be assembled and deployed successfully.

Put more specifically, we need a revived Water Resources Council but one with representation from state and non-governmental parties, not just federal administrators. We need a Council attached firmly to the White House policy apparatus, not stuck in the tarpit of interagency politics. We need the counterpart regional councils represented by the river basin commissions, but ones more deliberative than operational and with the capacity to pass on to properly scaled subregional entities the day-to-day responsibilities for water resources planning, coordination, and implementation. Most particularly, between now and the advent of the next administration, we need to convene the nation's principal water resources organizations around one topic only - how the existing provisions of the Water Resources Planning Act of 1965 can be used to provide the commitment necessary to meet the water resources needs of the coming millennium.

If all of this comes to pass, we might end up like that famous New Englander, Henry David Thoreau, in his journal entry for March 20, 1858. "The fishes are going up the brooks as they open," he wrote. "The water running down meets the fishes running up. They hear the latest news." The latest news could be very good, indeed.

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