

# NATURALIST'S CORNER

## THE OLD MAN AND THE RIVER

“My father used to tell me stories about how this river turned colors and stank to high heaven,” one fisherman said to the other. The two were standing calf-high in waders casting shad darts into water teeming with American Shad. “No fish in its right mind wanted to be here,” he went on.

“Hey Grandpa, I got one!” the younger fisherman shouted excitedly.  
“Reel ‘er in easy there, son.”

“He’s really puttin’ up a fight.” The young boy worked the fish with a practiced hand, while his grandpa coached in a measured tone.

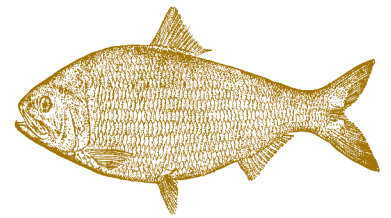
“It’s a big one,” the gleeful boy announced as the shiny fish jumped and fought the line. The old man, having reeled in his line to help his grandson, gently scooped up the shad with a net as the boy drew it near.

“That’s a beauty,” the old man said as they both admired the submerged fish, cradled within the net. “I bet that there’s a 4-pounder at least.”

“This is the biggest one today,” the boy exclaimed, beaming with pride. “Take my picture.”

With pictures accomplished, the old man said, “Okay now, time to cut ‘er loose.”

“I know, I know, the mouth is fragile and I’ll be careful,” the boy heard the instruction before. Carefully and oh so gently the boy freed the shad. “Bye-bye girl. Make some more babies for me to catch.”



It is springtime and the anadromous fish are coming up the Connecticut River as they have since time immemorial. Sea lampreys, blueback herring, gizzard shad, are all coming up, but the American shad far outnumber all the others. It is a beautiful May morning and the fishermen watch as four paddlers launch canoes and kayaks from the opposite bank. Grandpa goes back to his reminiscing.

“This ‘ole river has come a long ways from those old times when Holyoke and other cities were pumping out industry waste and sewage,” he said. “Ya know what they used to call it?”

“Oh, yeah, I heard this in school,” the fisher-boy responded, reaching back in his memory. “It’s a word from the Mohegan tribe... ‘next to the long tidal river’, or something like that.”

Grandpa chuckled. “Yes, that’s what the name Connecticut means, but I was talking about when it was so dirty. They called it the ‘best landscaped sewer in the U. S.’”

“Ewww.”

“Now they call this a ‘National Blueway.’ Do ya know why they call it a blueway son?”

“‘Cause the water’s blue?”

“That’s as good an answer as any. Now the river is good for swimming... boating... camping...”

“And fishing!” the boy interjected.

“And fishing.”

The Connecticut River was designated a “National Blueway” in May of 2012 as part of President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors initiative. This designation recognizes the grassroots collaboration of over 40 organizations involved in advocating for a healthy and enjoyable watershed. These organizations are involved in land and habitat protection, river restoration, environmental education and enhancing recreational opportunities throughout the Connecticut river watershed. Today our river is and will remain the first and only “National Blueway.” The program dissolved in January of 2014.

The Connecticut River today boasts an abundance of wildlife, a growing number of access points, numerous recreational opportunities such as swimming, boating, fishing and camping. A great example of these collaborative efforts is seen in the Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail – a loose collection of organizations that work to establish primitive campsites and improve river access for paddlers all along the river's 410 mile length. The Connecticut River Watershed Council (CRWC) is another organization making great strides in protecting the River. The group works to keep water clean, ensure safe passage for fish, protect endangered species, and provide education for neighbors throughout the watershed.

"I'm glad the water's a lot cleaner now," the boy said as he cast his line out.

"Me too. It a source of clean power too. The flowing water makes electricity at many dams across this river."

"But what about these fish that want to get by?"

"Oh, each dam where fish migrate has to provide a way for the fish to pass. This fishlift here upriver at the Holyoke Dam was the first on the Atlantic seaboard. Other dams further upriver have fish ladders.

"That's good. Hey I got another one!" The boy braces himself and tugs against the line.

"That ain't no Shad," the old fisherman announces as the boy brings the fish closer.

"This one feels different."

"Holy Smokes!" Grandpa exclaims.

"Wow! What is that? Is that a shark?"

The old man stoops down, gets the net underneath, and a long fish covered in bony plates comes into view. "Well I'll be. This 'eres a shortnose sturgeon."

"It looks bizarre. It looks like a dinosaur."

"These guys are ancient fish. It's also an endangered fish."

"Oh," the fisher-boy voices concern.

"We'll have to let it go and be real careful."

"After pictures."

After a very rewarding day, the two fishermen tromp out of the water, head up to the truck and peel off their waders.

"That was great Grandpa. Can we come again tomorrow?"

"Sure, but don't you have school?"

"Oh yeah. How about after school? I'm glad it's not stinky anymore."

"It's come a long ways, son, especially since 1972 when the Clean Water Act was passed." He takes both poles and lays them in the bed of the truck. "But there are still things to do. It still gets polluted sometimes when treatment plants overflow or rainwater washes stuff into it from land or the river banks erode. Sometimes even fishermen break the law and take sturgeon home."

"Aww man!" the boy shakes his head as he ties his dry shoes on. "I'd never do that. I'd never hurt this river."

"That's my boy."

The two fishermen hug. The fisher-boy hops into the passenger seat and the old man climbs in behind the wheel.

The Naturalists' Club has supported many organizations involved in conservation efforts in the Connecticut River Watershed, including donating to The CRWC's water testing lab. We should certainly be proud of how much progress has been made on the lifeblood of our valley, but must be diligent to ensure that improvements continue. As Liz Austin of the CRWC would say, "Happy River, Happy Valley."

~ Nancy Condon

From birth to death, anyone can fish. I just think it's fantastic to see old people going fishing with young people and teaching them things. I'm very, very critical. ~ Rex Hunt