

Interview

Edward Himlan, Director, NRWA

Part of the settlement money from Clean Water Action lawsuits often goes to fund environmental projects. Edward Himlan is the Executive Director of the Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA), an organization which benefitted from a settlement against a Nashua tributary polluter. N.E.L.C. Attorney Charles Caldart brought the suit against Polysar Chemical, for releasing toxic organics directly into Wass Brook. Polysar paid a \$240,000 penalty in 1988 with \$40,000 of the payment going to NRWA's program.

N.E.L.C.: When and why did NRWA begin?

Edward Himlan: Our organization was born around the first Earth Day back in the early 1970s in response to the highly polluted Nashua River.

N.E.L.C.: What do you mean by "highly polluted"? What physical state was the river in?

EH: The river was so polluted by paper and other companies that it would actually run different colors every day, depending on what these companies were discharging. And the appearance of the river wasn't the only problem. Few things were left living in the river. The fish and aquatic life had disappeared. Public health was also threatened. The fumes from the river used to peel paint off of houses, and warning signs were posted one half mile away from

the Nashua for residents to close their windows. Untreated sewage was discharged into the Nashua — the river was a dumping ground for everyone.

N.E.L.C.: How did the NRWA work to change the Nashua River?

EH: We first began by pulling all the garbage out of the river, and worked to get a series of wastewater treatment facilities built for five towns along the Nashua. Then we began concentrating on protecting the river corridors to keep the river front and banks protected. In the early 1970s only three percent of the corridor was protected in public or private conservation efforts. Today 45 percent is protected, equalling 7,500 acres.

N.E.L.C.: What is NRWA's major focus today?

EH: Through education and advocacy, NRWA works to have the watershed viewed by the public and government agencies as an integrated system that is dependent on all its parts. Our major focus is environmental protection and watershed management. We address a wide range of issues, from land-use preservation to taking whatever steps are needed to protect water supplies. Recently, we worked to stop plans for an airport to be built in the middle of the watershed. We also work to promote pollution prevention, through public education and community projects.



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N.E.L.C.: What's an example of a community project sponsored by NRWA?

EH: Most of the people who live around the Nashua watershed area use septic systems. Our septic system education campaign included information about how activities around the residents' homes could affect the watershed. We focused on awareness about what was going down these systems and promoted alternatives to home cleaning products, fertilizers and pesticides.

N.E.L.C.: How has the Nashua River changed over the last 20 years?

EH: The river has gone from a nuisance and an eyesore to one of the outstanding resources in this area. In the early 1970s it was rated a "U" for unsuitable for any use and today it has a contact recreation designation, meaning that it is not swimmable, but is widely used for contact sports. In fact, the river has become extremely popular. ♦

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For more information about NRWA, contact their office at 348 Lunenburg Street, Fitchburg, MA 01420.