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Community effort helps stem tide of Sasco pollution

Geoff Steadman, Sasco Brook Pollution Abatement Committee

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An aerial photo of Sasco Brook.

We all have different ideas about what contributes to our quality of life or detracts from it, but we usually can agree that the natural environment, when it's free from pollution, provides some significant benefits.

In Westport, the Conservation Department, along with other agencies, residents and organizations, and with some remarkable help from [Staples High School](#) students, is working on a plan to keep pollution out of Sasco Brook. The Westport Weston Health District, state [Department of Environmental Protection](#) and the federal [Natural Resources Conservation](#)

Service also are participating, as are private organizations such as Earthplace and the **Fairfield** County Hunt Club. They're all working together voluntarily, as part of a group called the **Sasco Brook Pollution Abatement Committee**.

The committee's work is helping protect the quality of life enjoyed by residents in the brook's watershed, and it's having a positive effect on Long Island Sound.

This is the first in a series of articles about the Sasco Brook watershed plan and the committee's efforts to advance the concept of environmental stewardship, whereby residents and town agencies will act with respect for the natural environment and in a manner that will help sustain its values and benefits for the future. The watershed plan is a good example of how a voluntary, non-regulatory approach can contribute to achievement of a community's environmental goals, and it's become a model to be followed by other towns considering similar plans.

Sasco Brook is six miles long and forms part of the boundary between Westport and Fairfield before it flows into Long Island Sound. It's only one of the Sound's many tributaries and it's not very big compared to others, but it's important for many reasons. In addition to providing essential habitat for plants, fish and wildlife and adding to the beneficial character of the natural landscape, it has a direct effect on the Sound, which depends on clean water in all of its tributaries and watersheds.

It was Westport's idea to form the abatement committee almost 20 years ago. This was after high levels of fecal coliform bacteria were detected in the brook. As a consequence, it wasn't safe to eat clams harvested from Long Island Sound near the mouth of the brook, which was placed on a state list of impaired water bodies. The committee was, and still is, led by the **Westport Conservation Department**, which is appropriate given the town's long history of environmental initiatives. Establishment of Longshore Park 50 years ago, preservation of Cokenoe Island and creation of Connecticut's first public health district are past achievements that immediately come to mind.

The committee became the first community watershed group in Connecticut because it quickly realized that to identify and reduce sources of pollution in the brook it would be necessary to look at the brook's entire 10-square-mile watershed. This is all of the land area from which precipitation drains downhill off the land, into the brook and ultimately into Long

Island Sound. As the runoff flows, it can pick up dirt, debris, oil, road salt, animal waste, lawn fertilizer and other contaminants, transporting them into the brook and Sound.

Complicating matters is the fact that the watershed's natural boundaries don't conform to municipal boundaries. Much of the Sasco Brook watershed is actually in Fairfield, so whatever Westport might do to avoid pollution can be negated or enhanced by what Fairfield may or may not do. As a result, the committee includes a representative from Fairfield.

The amount of bacteria now detected in Sasco Brook is much less than when the committee started. In large part that's because the committee provided information to homeowners on how to avoid runoff pollution, identified and mapped storm-water catch basins and outfall pipes, helped correct problems with storage and handling of food waste at businesses along the Post Road and started a water quality monitoring program. In addition, the committee encouraged some new sanitary sewer connections and urged horse farms in the watershed to employ better practices to keep manure from being washed off their properties when it rains. In that regard, efforts by the Fairfield County Hunt Club are especially noteworthy, resulting in major water quality improvements in Sasco Brook, and the club's designation as a "Connecticut Horse Farm of Environmental Distinction."

Today, no one should think of Sasco Brook as a major pollution problem, but bacteria still end up in the water course, the shellfish beds remain closed, and the risk of fecal coliform contamination from septic systems, wildlife and domestic animals, such as dogs and horses, always is present. The committee recognizes this and understands that a basic principal of environmental stewardship is that it never ends. It's both an ongoing process and perpetual commitment to be maintained as conditions change, specific initiatives are completed and new issues arise. That's why Westport is preparing the watershed plan to formally establish the town's goals for protecting the environmental quality of the brook into the future.

One of the first steps in the planning process was to find out what people living in the watershed think about all of this, a seemingly overwhelming task at first because in Westport there are more than 800 residential properties in the watershed. But then some students from Staples High School learned about the committee's work and stepped forward. They volunteered to visit every home. The results of their survey, another first of its kind in Connecticut, were both encouraging and surprising. In our next article, we'll describe the

survey and how the information obtained by the students concerning the homeowners' environmental interests and concerns is being used to develop the watershed plan.

For more information on the Sasco Brook Watershed Plan, call the Westport Conservation Department at 203-341-1170.

Geoff Steadman is an environmental planning consultant for towns throughout the state and has maintained an office in Westport for more than 20 years. He is assisting the town with preparation of the Sasco Brook watershed plan and has written this article on behalf of the Sasco Brook Pollution Abatement Committee.

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