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What's Your Watershed?

Folklore at the Intersection of Place, Culture, and the Environment

BY ELLEN MCHALE, PhD

From an airplane, the Mohawk River of New York State appears as a low ribbon of eastward flowing water, fed by the Catskill Mountains to the south and the Adirondack foothills to the north. Its role as waterway expanded when the Mohawk River's waters were diverted to become the

Erie Canal. Later renamed the Mohawk Barge Canal, it was enlarged to carry freight traffic and oil barges westward. In the 20th century, the canal lost this commercial function to the railroad and the highway.

The Mohawk Watershed, originally the homeland for the Mohawk Nation of the

Haudenosaunee, was settled by Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries and became home to numerous small villages, populated by European immigrant groups—the Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, Irish, and Germans—who came to work in the region's textile and leather industries. The industries



Students document Schenectady's historic water plant with video. All photos courtesy of the Schoharie River Center.



Darian Henry, Assistant Director of YouthFX, works with Lillian on camera techniques.

were situated on these streams to take advantage of the power accorded by rushing waters heading to the Mohawk River—creeks with place names such as the Chuctanunda, the Schoharie, the Otsquaga, and Canajoharie creeks, as well as the Alplaus Kill. European population groups were joined in the 20th century by Latino migrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and South America, who settled in Amsterdam and Gloversville to work during the twilight years of the regions' textile industries. By the 1980s, these industries had moved elsewhere to take advantage of other regions' and countries' lower labor costs and less stringent environmental oversight.

It is upon this backdrop that the Schoharie River Center, a nonprofit environmental and cultural organization, has been working with the New York Folklore Society to record and document the biotic communities of the Mohawk Watershed. The two organizations work closely with teens in the region in a model of collaborative learning, conducting hands-on scientific inquiry

focused on the ecology of the watershed—its plants, animals, insects, and geology—as well as its human habitation, to document the ecological and cultural records of the region. The Community Cultural Documentation Project of the Schoharie River Center's Environmental Study Team (EST) uses an outdoor-based model of inquiry in order to enable students in the watershed to become better stewards of our environment and advocates for its health. The program merges the scientific inquiry of watershed ecology, macroinvertebrate identification, and water quality monitoring with folklife documentation and oral history, drawing upon the local folkways and cultural activities of the Mohawk Watershed and cultural connections to the region's waters in an effort to encourage intimacy in community relationships with the environment. The program allies with the writing of aural historian Jack Loeffler, who posits that the watershed is a commons for the biotic community it cradles and sustains. Loeffler points to the folkways or “cultural

mores” that form the moral code for the utilization of the commons, with inhabitants working towards the common good in an implicit force of law that preferences the welfare of all, over the advantages of a few (Loeffler 2012, 13).

We believe, along with Loeffler and ecologist Laird Christensen, that when we are disconnected from the environment we lose a sense of concern for its well-being. The program encourages “watershed consciousness,” in that it encourages the practice of profound citizenship in both the natural and social worlds, drawing attention to ourselves as members of ecological communities. As Christensen points out, such positioning is a “radical act,” because “when we love the places we call home, ‘business as usual’ is no longer acceptable” (Christensen 2003, 126).

The work of Mary Hufford provides further support for this work. In “Deep Commoning: Public Folklore and Environmental Policy on a Resource Frontier,” Hufford draws upon the concept of the



Trout Unlimited member teaching fly tying techniques.

“commons,” as “that which gathers us together while granting each of us a place” (Hufford 2016, 639). To medieval Europe, the word “commons” had several meanings. The commons referred to the land, water, pasture, forest, and fishing zone that were available, by rights, to a local community to use. It was the rights to natural goods through which a local community could derive its subsistence (Ricoveri 2013, 30). The “commons” constitutes a social arrangement that is completely opposite to the one created by the market economy

espoused by capitalism. In the true sense of the “commons,” the commons belongs to no one and to everyone, provided by nature. The community is the steward (Ricoveri 2013, 32).

As Hufford examines the forests of West Virginia as a “commons” that informs and sustains the communities of West Virginia, so, too, does the Community Cultural Documentation Project explore watersheds as a “commons,” supported in our work by folklore and its connections to place. If one were to map the commons

that is the Mohawk Watershed, what would be our collective experience and our shared resources? The most apparent connection is to the waterways themselves, which Congressman Paul Tonko names “Mighty Waters”—a navigational highway and corridor of economic activity that defined the Mohawk Nation of the Haudenosaunee and spawned a 19th-century chain of small villages and Main Streets.

To delineate the watershed as a commons, today’s Mohawk Watershed is a site for boating and swimming, for cooling off on a hot day, and for seeking that teenage adrenaline rush that one receives by throwing oneself from the high bluffs that have been forged from the ravages of time and erosion. The waterways that are the Mohawk Watershed offer fishing and hunting grounds that still provide important food security for economically strapped households. The watershed provides berrying and foraging activities and bait collection for fishing. Its riparian zones are used for free-range poultry, garden plots, maple syrup-making, and large-scale vegetable farming. It provides the location for camping, bird watching, and hiking. Its forests provide firewood for heating homes or to be sold along roadsides for extra income.

In her examination of West Virginia’s mountains, Hufford speaks of “deep commoning,” as a study of the commons from within. Hufford writes, “The framework for the study of commons is what I call ‘deep commoning’: world-making from within that also reflects on those worlds, the rules for making them and the meanings for all participants.” She continues, “I read this as a clarion call for the phenomenological ethnographic approaches espoused by public folklorists and a number of heritage scholars as well” (Hufford 2016, 641). Hufford draws attention to folklore’s utility in providing a framework to understand reciprocity in the relationships between nature, ecology, and the land. The methodology of fieldwork provides a dialogic structure to examine culture and community within the construct of the “commons” (Hufford 2016, 639). Hufford points to folklore’s

inquiry as an important tool to answer questions of environmental degradation and a region's response to this degradation.

In our work together, the Schoharie River Center and the New York Folklore Society are encouraged by Hufford and other folklife scholars who work at the intersections of folklife and natural resource studies. Folklorists working on the Pinelands Folklife Project of the Library of Congress (1983–1984), directed by Mary Hufford, documented the rural folklife, ethnobotany, and occupational traditions that were intimately connected to the landscapes of the New Jersey Pine Barrens. The folklorists of this 1980s study used folklore methodology to identify and describe the connections between folklife, historic resources, and natural resources (Hufford 1988, 217).

We are similarly encouraged by the work of progressive educator, the late Norman

Studer, who was emboldened by the writings of John Dewey to begin an experimental and controversial summer program, Camp Woodland, in New York's Catskills Watershed. Studer, along with Herbert Haufrecht and Norman Cazden, founded a youth-focused educational model in which students became the folklore fieldworkers, collecting the folklife and oral traditions of the Catskill Mountains (Johnson 2002). The campers met tradition bearers, took field expeditions to community venues, and annually performed cantatas based upon local stories and local issues, composed by Herbert Haufrecht. In their work with youth in the Catskills, Studer and his staff at Camp Woodland merged a love for the environment with a respect for the local knowledge and folklife of the Catskills, while providing youth with the skills of tolerance and deep listening. Along the way, they inspired

a generation of folklorists and environmentalists. (personal communications with Camp Woodlanders, 2014).

Using the student-centered approaches pioneered by Norman Studer and Camp Woodland, the Community Cultural Program of the Environmental Study Team uses the watershed as its focus of study. It asks questions and seeks answers of the Mohawk Watershed: what is the human activity that is forged from and sustained by the watershed, and how do we, as residents of the Mohawk Watershed, interact with this environment? How can we, as stewards of this commons, draw attention to its condition over time? What tools are in our metaphorical "toolbox" that can help to tell its story?

The youth who make up the Environmental Study Team are residents of the Mohawk Watershed. Ranging in age from



Members of the Environmental Study Team use a kick-net to gather macroinvertebrates.

13 to 19, they come from a number of different Mohawk Watershed communities and from a wide range of backgrounds. In many cases, they have deeply ingrained knowledge of the watershed, having grown up as members of the bioregion, like their parents and grandparents before them. These students share a love for the region and its places. In many cases, they are already the experts who know intimately the commons that is the Mohawk/Schoharie Watershed. Mike is an expert noodler, able to snag a fish with his bare hands. Tyler knows every birdcall around, and Lillian can tell you the best swimming holes along the Schoharie. They can direct you to the clay deposits along the banks that have been used throughout time to fashion utilitarian ceramics. These youth possess expert knowledge that propels them towards further inquiry in the Environmental Study Team. Others of the Environmental Study Team come to the experiential learning situation for a love of outdoor activities, such as snowshoeing and hiking, or because they are allowed to handle authentic scientific equipment that is either withheld or absent in a public school environment. For whatever reason they participate, EST offers a framework for future success in school or in life.

The Community Cultural Documentation Program provides instruction in the skills and methodologies of history, folklore, and archaeology. Just as students learn the skills of kick-netting, macroinvertebrate identification, and bacterial analysis, youth learn to use video, audio, and interviewing skills to explore the diversity of human experiences in the watershed. Place-making for the Community Cultural Documentation project includes the recording of oral narratives by tradition bearers and local experts to explore differing perspectives within our watershed. Following the experientially based model of the Environmental Study Team, students pursue a hands-on approach to documentation. In 2015, a boat ride with Riverkeeper¹ to look at point source pollution² in the Mohawk River and to collect water samples was

followed by interview sessions with Richard Sullivan, a retired lock tender on the Mohawk Barge Canal and Tom Prindle, a retired boat captain. Lessons about macroinvertebrates in the streams exist side by side with fly-tying lessons by members of Trout Unlimited.³ Interviews with community elders, such as Eleanor Currie, entertain students with stories of the elders' own teen years while, at the same time, providing a lens to view the students' current interactions with place. In a 2013 interview, when students posed questions about the effects of Hurricane Irene and the devastation it caused in 2011, the mood turned somber as Eleanor laid bare her sadness at the state of the Schoharie Creek after the flood, and she related her own advocacy for the waterway and its protection. Students are able to draw upon their knowledge of ecology and environmental science to pose questions and to elicit oral narratives from experts. Through the Community Cultural Documentation Project, youth feel in control and empowered in their interactions with adult mentors who are eager to relate their experiences.

Currently, the Community Cultural Documentation Program has embarked on a filmmaking program, partnering with yet another organization, YouthFX, a youth development program focused on youth media productions. Over the course of the fall of 2016, the Schoharie River Center and the New York Folklore Society are working with YouthFX to examine the role of the Mohawk River within people's perceptions of "place" within the City of Amsterdam, a postindustrial city that is sharply divided between its Latino and non-Latino populations, and its northern and southern shores of the Mohawk River. Access to the Mohawk River in Amsterdam is blocked now by railroad tracks, a highway overpass and urban renewal projects of the 1970s that created a downtown mall, now shuttered. Through the efforts of local politicians and advocates, however, access to the Mohawk River has begun to open up, first with the building of an urban park along the riverfront, and most recently in September of

this year, with the completion of a pedestrian bridge across the Mohawk, linking the City of Amsterdam on its north shore with the historic Erie Canal Port Jackson on its south shore. This pedestrian bridge now also links Amsterdam's Latino residents with Port Jackson's Italian community, providing easy access to Amsterdam's two shores. Students of the Community Cultural Documentation project have set out to explore how the newly constructed bridge impacts community perceptions of the Mohawk River. They ask, "Once seen as a barrier to community interaction, how does the new pedestrian bridge change the community of Amsterdam?"

Mary Hufford proposes the concept of "deep commoning," the exploration of the commons from its interior to discover the networks and intricacies of the relationships between ecology, nature, and the land. Such explorations expose the connections between human emotion and the physical fabric of landscape, to discover those places that are centers of meaning to individuals and to groups. In folklorist Kent Ryden's words, the study of places are "fusions of landscape, experience, and locations, bound up with time and memory." (Ryden 1993, 39). Place, as described by humanistic geographers, includes a strong sense of rootedness to location, membership in a place-based community, and a common world view as a result of a common geographical experience. This coincides with the work of regional folklorists who "seek out instances where people share a body of folklore because they live in a certain geographical area and their geographical location is the primary basis for a shared identity" (Jones 1976).

The Schoharie River Center works with the New York Folklore Society to document "place," "storying" the landscapes of the Mohawk Watershed to understand the impacts and effects of our region's waters on its human inhabitants. Through the Community Cultural Documentation Project of the Environmental Study Team Program, students become familiar with their own bioregion, taking a cue from author

Robert Finch, who says, “Ultimately we can only care for and connect with that which we have come to love.... only by storying the earth do we come to love it, does it become the place where imagination chooses to reside.” (Christensen 2003, 125). ▼

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Notes

¹ Riverkeeper is a member-supported, watchdog organization dedicated to

PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS



The nonprofit **Schoharie River Center** has as its mission “to instill a love for learning, arts and science, promote the values of stewardship for our local environment, and encourage the positive and responsible involvement of youth in their communities.” Its core programs include the award-winning Environmental Study Team youth development program that works with youth throughout the Mohawk and Susquehanna Watersheds to monitor water quality and improve the local environment, enjoy the outdoors, and instill a sense of environmental awareness. Twice awarded the national Environmental Excellence Award by the Seaworld/Busch Garden Foundation, the EST program of the Schoharie River Center has also been recognized by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation with an Environmental Excellence Award in 2013. <<http://www.schoharierivercenter.org>>



Youth FX after-school and summer programs provide a team of experienced filmmakers and media arts educators to guide participants through the entire film production process from script to screen. Focusing on visual storytelling, narrative structure, performance, camera skills, and editing techniques, Youth FX gives participants a chance to express themselves by producing short films. Their programs provide a great opportunity for youth in the city of Albany—and in Amsterdam through partnering with organizations like the New York Folklore Society—to learn digital media skills, have fun, collaborate with peers, and experience all the excitement of filmmaking. A nonprofit organization, YouthFX was founded by Program Director Bhawin Suchak in 2008, to serve youth in Albany’s South End neighborhood. <<http://www.youthfx.org>>.

protecting the environmental, recreational, and commercial integrity of the Hudson River and its tributaries, and to safeguarding the drinking water of nine million New York City and Hudson Valley residents.

² Point source pollution has a single identifiable source, such as sewage discharge from a municipal water system. The source can be identified with little ambiguity.

³ Trout Unlimited was founded in 1959, with the mandate to ensure that wild and native trout populations were allowed to thrive, as nature intended. Founded in Michigan, within a few years chapters had opened in Illinois, Wisconsin,

New York, and Pennsylvania. To date, the organization has accomplished hundreds of conservation achievements nationwide.

Ellen McHale is the executive director of the New York Folklore Society, a position she’s held since 1999. A resident of the Schoharie Watershed, Ellen is also the cofounder of the Schoharie River Center, along with her husband John McKeely, and works closely with this organization to promote a bioregional consciousness through public programming and environmental advocacy.



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