

WATER KEEPERS



Chuck Donen, left and Dick Auber, volunteer at Westport-based nature center Earthplace, test Norwalk River water for bacteria. (Andrew Sullivan/Staff photos)

By Ryan Jockers
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NORWALK -- Below the busy bridge carrying Route 1 traffic over the Norwalk River, volunteers and a scientist collected water samples from the bottom of a slope covered with boulders and litter.

The river was cold and, due to recent rain, moved quickly past the graffiti coloring the underside of the bridge. These were signs of a healthy river. of the Westport nature center Earthplace, called the summertime levels of bacteria in the Norwalk River .

The temperature on Thursday, 41 degrees Fahrenheit, was too low for bacteria -- such as *E. coli*, which the environmental group Harbor Watch/River Watch is looking for -- to thrive. And the river's quickened pace caused the water to tumble over boulders, allowing it to gather oxygen from the air.

Betsy Burleson, a volunteer, and Peter Fraboni, associate director of Harbor Watch/River Watch, analyzed water for dissolved oxygen with a monitoring device, which indicated that the river had an oxygen level meeting state standards. "This is good. But it's December," said Burleson, a 31-

year-old international water attorney who has volunteered for the organization since she was a teenager. "It's July we have to worry about."

It is the high bacteria and low oxygen levels recorded in the Norwalk River in the summer that concern local groups such as Harbor Watch/River Watch.



Dick Harris, director of Harbor Watch/River Watch, a program of the Westport nature center Earth-place, called the summertime levels of bacteria in the Norwalk River "astronomical." The problem has prompted the Norwalk River Watershed Initiative, a regional advisory organization, to form a subcommittee to find the pollution sources.

In Harbor Watch/River Watch's 2004 report, samples collected from 10 sites along the Norwalk and Silvermine rivers -- both of which encompass the 64-square mile Norwalk River Watershed -- showed *E. coli* levels did not meet state standards a majority of the time. *E. coli* levels exceeded the state standard 87 percent of the time at two Norwalk sites -- the Route 1 bridge and the Glover Street bridge -- and eight of the 10 sites failed to meet *E. coli* standards at least half of the time.

"It means avoiding ingestion of water is a good idea," said Chris Malik, the DEP's western coastal basin watershed coordinator and a member of the watershed initiative's subcommittee to study the river's pollution sources.

"Activities like swimming," Malik said, "could lead you to get gastrointestinal illness, an upset stomach, diarrhea."

People swim in the deeper sections of the Norwalk River, Harris said. "I'm not trying to scare people," he said, "but I'm not getting much of a reception. Everyone feels comfortable."

At the November meeting of the Norwalk River Watershed Initiative, members suggested placing signs along the river warning people not to swim in or eat fish from the river. The group decided

to form the subcommittee before taking action.

"We need to raise public awareness about water quality (in the river)," said Todd Bobowick, a resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and a watershed initiative member.

Harbor Watch/River Watch has collected water samples from the length of the 23-mile Norwalk River and analyzed water quality in its state-certified lab for six years, an effort funded by a state grant.

It measures the concentration of *E. coli*, an indicator of human health risk from water contact. The group also measures levels of dissolved oxygen in the water.

Low oxygen levels in water, known as hypoxia, pose a problem in Long Island Sound and its presence in Norwalk Harbor prompted Harris, a retired scientist for Shell Oil Co., to form Harbor Watch and begin testing the harbor in 1986.

The nonprofit organization then began to study water quality at the Five Mile River in Norwalk and Darien, the Saugatuck River and Sasco Brook in Westport and Fairfield. The state Department of Environmental Protection requested the group to monitor the health of the Norwalk River.

While *E. coli* levels are high, the Harbor Watch/River Watch report shows the level of dissolved oxygen in the river met state standards a majority of the time. The only place where dissolved oxygen levels fell below state standards was at the river's origin, the Great Swamp in Ridgefield.

Watershed initiative members

said a variety of factors likely contribute to the high bacteria levels: failing septic systems; an abundance of geese; and non-point source pollution, which occurs when rain collects pollutants along its path toward a source of water.

Harris noted that a single goose releases 2.5 pounds of effluent into the watershed a day.

"We think geese are the big (polluters)," he said. "The flock needs to be controlled."

Malik said the watershed initiative's subcommittee would try to identify specific sources of pollution and "apply solutions to them." Those solutions might include pushing for enforcement of plans to manage wildlife, domestic animals -- such as horses -- and septic systems. He said municipalities would be asked to enforce sanitary regulations.

Walking from the Route 1 testing site on Thursday to a nearby parking lot on Wilton Avenue, Fraboni, who is Harbor Watch's associate director, noted the prevalence of litter -- plastics, glass, an overturned shopping cart -- along the steep river bank.

A big challenge, he said, is changing the ethic of a society that seemingly accepts the degradation of the aesthetics of its landscape. Until then, he said, there will not be strong concern about the level of *E. coli* in a river.

"If people don't get annoyed at the things they can see," Fraboni said, "why get annoyed at something they can't see?"

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