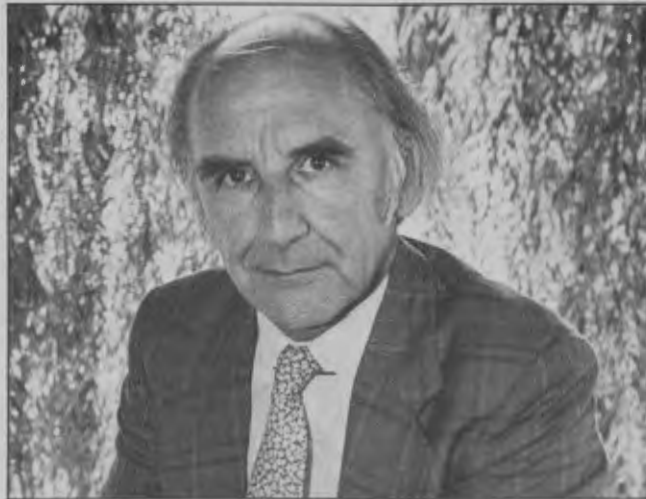


The Water Watcher



One warm May morning in South Hadley, Massachusetts, a young zoology teacher noticed that his high school class was paying scant attention to his lecture. "I looked out the window and saw two ponds next to the classroom. So I said to hell with this, and I picked up the class and we went outdoors and started fooling around with those ponds, trying to figure out what was there."

Robie Hubley then began leading high school field trips to bodies of water and, in 1964, became caretaker at the Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary, where he lived until 1981. As a result, Hubley came to know the Connecticut River intimately—and his life has been mixed up with water ever since.

Now Mass. Audubon's main lobbyist on water, wetlands, and agricultural issues, Hubley's first river battle was the removal of Northampton's city dump from Arcadia's wetlands. In the early seventies he successfully fought attempts by the Army Corps of Engineers to put a series of new dams on the Connecticut River.

In 1976, when the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) of Boston started reviving plans to divert water from the river into the Quabbin Reservoir, he became embroiled in metropolitan Boston's water supply controversies. As a co-director of a group called the Water Supply Citizens' Advisory Committee, Hubley is now advising the MDC on a draft environmental impact report that covers Boston's water supply plans until the year 2020.

His interest in water also

got him into the movie business, which began when a friend asked him to help make a film "to show that flooding is a natural cycle on rivers which, at the time, was an extremely revolutionary idea." Hubley, with three partners, has since started his own company, Sunnyside Films, and has made more than a dozen environmental films on topics as diverse as Thoreau in Maine and wildlife on the Mobile, Alabama, river delta.

Hubley is amused when others call him a "radical" which, he says, "has pejorative overtones of confrontation or bomb-throwing. The word really doesn't mean anything more than 'roots.' I'm a radical in the sense that I believe the best solution to a problem is to go back to the roots of the problem. That's why I think education is a radical activity."

He considers the nursery school program he initiated at Arcadia "radical because we're getting really young kids and teaching them to see the woods, the wetlands, and the rivers, and to understand how they function. If you condition people that young they never shake it. Time flies so fast that if you have nursery school kids today, and you turn around three times, they're voters."

As a lobbyist, he says, "I

think of myself principally as an educator. Lobbying is providing the right information to the right person at the right time, and that's an educational activity." Hubley finds the state legislature "absolutely fascinating. I think that, contrary to the public image, the legislature represents the public of Massachusetts, if anything, embarrassingly well."

One of the major bills he and other Audubon lobbyists are currently pushing is a Water Management Act (see page 13), which would license major water withdrawals, allowing the state to begin to collect information on those withdrawals, calculate safe yields for each watershed, and put together a comprehensive water management policy. "Right now we don't know how much we have; we don't know who's using it or how much they're using; and so it's possible that some rivers and groundwater supplies are already over-allocated."

Hubley is also concerned about the contamination of water supplies by road salt, pesticides, and leaks from hazardous waste dumps. "Water is abundant in Massachusetts, and much of it is high-quality water, yet it's also a high water-demand state. Our economy has a lot to do with the quality and quantity of our water. We're

being forced by the level of consumption to move toward overall public management of this resource."

The only way that can work effectively, says Hubley, is if the public "gets involved and stays involved. The gift of democracy is freedom, the cost of democracy is involvement. I'm always shocked when I meet people who don't know where their water comes from, but I know that if you go out in the street and stop people randomly and ask them where they get their water, most haven't the foggiest notion." Citizens should realize that "if legislators receive a half-dozen letters on some issue, they think it must be a social movement."

Hubley sees an encouraging evolution toward a new concept of water management in Massachusetts that "recognizes the reality that surface water and groundwater are interconnected and takes into account the physiogeographic nature of water. A lot of this legislation intellectually arose from Mass. Audubon and other environmental organizations, and now we're a model for many other states."

Although his lobbying work means he spends much of his time in downtown Boston rather than near rivers, Hubley isn't complaining. He wants to be wherever he can be most effective in influencing water issues. Besides, he says, "I like cities—I see them as an ecosystem. It's a little like being a termite in the middle of a termite colony." △

Gale Warner

Gale Warner is a freelance writer and known river maniac.