

Dwelling with the Deerfield

Claire Graber Goodman Senior Capstone Project

Pablo Pineda Perez

Advisor: Professor Sienna Craig

Dartmouth College Department of Anthropology

Spring 2025

table of contents

introduction.....	4
finding community and belonging.....	12
industrial memories.....	39
risk.....	59
dwelling, memory, and love: concluding thoughts.....	78
 acknowledgements and list of figures.....	 82
notes.....	84
bibliography.....	86



Map of the Deerfield River Watershed.¹

INTRODUCTION

“This river taught me how to live,” Tom says, his voice softened by reflective memories of the old identities and meanders of a lifetime. Tom, a lifelong paddler of and advocate for the Deerfield River, has spent much of his adult life returning to its waters. He remembers the first time he came to the Deerfield, marked by youthful inexperience, overconfidence, and a captivation with what the river offered. It was the beginning of a relationship that spanned the rest of his life, built on care, community, and love.

Forty years later Tom returns to the Deerfield, standing on the banks of a river shaped by the same strokes that once transformed him. His story is entangled with the river’s, connected by the same temporal forces that carve people and watersheds alike, traced into one another. The inevitable aches of a life well lived have caught up to the former collegiate athlete, now sidelined from the excitement below. People pass by as they have for three decades: some pause to thank him—he was the reason the river ran—while most move by with a kind indifference, separated from this history by a generation or two. The passing on of friends and time enables the stories of struggle, progress, and protection to wash out, consumed into the beautifully inconspicuous features of this river increasingly taken for granted. “Time passes and people forget,” Tom says. Like friends before him, Tom’s ashes will, at some point, be spread here, dissolving into the current to be carried downstream to the Connecticut. As they go, they return to a river they love, a river that transformed their lives, and a river they transformed. How will they be remembered? The fight for the Deerfield was long and hard; the fight against forgetting is enduring, steeped in communities Tom once fought with and for.

Stories like Tom’s are carved by a particular river, in a particular place, with a particular history. To understand what the Deerfield makes possible, we have to start with the river itself. Tucked away on the Western edge of New England, the Deerfield descends from its headwaters in the Green Mountains in Southern Vermont to its confluence with

the Connecticut River in Western Massachusetts, running just 76 miles in its mainstem. Its watershed covers a much larger area of 655 square miles, while remaining deeply rural—home to fewer than fifty thousand residents.

Historian Tim McVaugh wrote the only known comprehensive study of the Deerfield's history in his thesis, "The Tragedy of the Deerfield River: Monopoly Capitalism and Ecological Change in Western Massachusetts." Well-researched and thorough, I rely upon it heavily for my understanding of the region's industrial, political, and ecological history. He outlines the Deerfield's history, focusing on the social and ecological implications of industrialization from 1850 until 1994, arguing "that the twentieth-century transformation of the Deerfield River into a single-use entity manipulated solely for the purpose of generating electricity diminished the economic diversity within the region and led to a biologically poorer riverine ecosystem."² In it, however, he also critiques romanticization of the river from outdoor recreators, noting:

"Bruce Lessels and Norman Sims offer a well-researched overview of the river's dynamics in the preface of their *Deerfield River Guidebook: Whitewater, Fishing, Kayaking*. However, their research is carried out in the context of presenting a romanticized roadmap of the many recreational opportunities provided by the Deerfield River to the general public."³

My inquiry, in many ways, begins where his ends, emphasizing the importance of that endpoint—1994 which marks the signing of the Deerfield Settlement Agreement, a monumental event that will be explored later—and pushing back against the idea that coming to know the Deerfield River through a lens of outdoor recreation presents a romanticized landscape. Instead, Lessels and Sims, both original members of the Board of Directors for New England FLOW—a coalition of boaters and activists that advocated for the Deerfield Settlement Agreement that will be detailed later—represent a different

kind of engagement with the river, one that is deeply entangled with political struggle, embodied practice, and environmental advocacy. Rather than seeing recreation as merely a leisure pursuit, my research explores how paddlers, fishers, activists, and locals relate to the river through repeated, affective, and at times contentious practices. Thus outdoor recreation becomes not a romantic escape from history, but a site through which histories of industrialization, regulation, and resistance continue to be lived and contested. Where McVaugh concludes with the institutional shifts of the late twentieth century, I take those shifts as a point of departure, asking what it means to dwell with a river whose flow is managed, whose access is negotiated, and whose meaning is continually remade by those who return to it again and again.

I argue that the meaning of the Deerfield River emerges not in spite of its regulation and industrial legacies, but through them. Through the steady cadence of release and return, personal identities and collective histories converge, and the river becomes not simply a natural or industrial landscape, but a lived, relational space simultaneously shaped by infrastructure, recreation, memory, and emotion. Its identity is co-constituted by these supposedly incongruent forces, becoming a place where affect, access, and attachment are structured by flows—of water, history, and care. People come to know, love, and belong to the Deerfield through sustained, embodied engagement mediated by rhythms of risk, routine, and return—through repeated presence that deepens over time and in community.

This project was informed by frameworks set forth in political ecology, geography and anthropology (environmental, economic, and cultural) which situate the Deerfield within broader systems of power, economy, environmental governance, and affect theory. Political ecology, with its roots in Marxist thought, foregrounds how capitalist logics shape human-nature relationships—transforming rivers into sites of extraction, regulation, and, perhaps, recreation. Scholars such as Worster and Neumann have demonstrated that the large scale manipulation of rivers and water are tied to recent conceptions

of nature as a resource capable of being owned, exploited, and preserved.⁴ These logics persist today in neoliberal conservation efforts that rely on commodifying nature in order to protect it. On the Deerfield, these dynamics surface in tensions between recreation—and its many goals that can be at odds—conservation, and monetization. These tensions continue to shape how people relate to the river today. I also utilize theories of nature set forth by scholars Richard White and William Cronon who show how ideas of wilderness are bound up with privilege, nostalgia, and power.⁵ I have also been inspired by scholarship on affect theory, particularly from Kathleen Stewart, that attends to the textures of everyday life that often escape formal representation.⁶ Finally, I engage Tim Ingold's notion of dwelling to explore how place is made and remade through embodied, iterative practices and meaning making.⁷ All together, the theoretical backbone that grounds this work positions the Deerfield at a crossroads of infrastructure, memory, emotion, politics, affect, and theory—a space where capitalist histories, regulatory structures, sensory experience, and personal transformation are all woven together.

I argue that meaning emerges in the everyday practices of being and dwelling with the river—paddling its rapids, casting into its eddies, teaching on its banks, gathering around it to tell stories, returning season after season, and calling it home. It's a form of place-making grounded in repetition, intimacy, and movement where infrastructure doesn't obstruct connection but enables it. Dwelling is an active, evolving relation linking people to the river and to one another. Four key themes structure my understanding of what it means to dwell with the Deerfield.

First, community and belonging which emerge not simply from proximity, but from shared rhythm made possible by dam-regulated flows that bring people together and allow relationships to accumulate across seasons and years. Over time these rhythms make strangers familiar, and that familiarity deepens into belonging. Next, industrial memory signals that this landscape is not “natural” in a pristine nor divine sense. The river is dammed, regulated, named, and managed—but still very much alive. My research argues

that industrial infrastructure doesn't erase nature, but co-produces it. Dwelling requires reckoning with that co-production. Further, risk, which is often associated with outdoor recreation, is a relational force that deepens connection between people and place. It is shaped by skill, context, and care, becoming a medium for presence. I argue that risk is a temporally discrete nexus of social and spatial encounter—one that becomes embodied. Finally, love emerged as the most enduring thread through all of the experiences that form this work. Not the romantic kind, but the practiced kind—offering safety, holding space, and returning. It's a love that lives in routines, in maintenance, and in presence. Often ineffable, it connects those around the river and held me throughout this project.

Another key theme that appeared throughout was identity which forms not in abstraction, but through repeated motion—lines carved by paddles, stories retold around the same spaces, and decisions made while in its current. For many I spoke to, the river didn't just witness who they were becoming—it helped make them. Through repeated, embodied engagement with the Deerfield, the river acts as teacher and mirror, shaping identity over time through practice, challenge and return.

These themes did not emerge in isolation. They were shaped through long conversations, shared river days, and my own embodied learning in this place. As someone who first came to the Deerfield not as a local, but as a student and paddler, my understanding of the river is necessarily partial, shaped by the dual position of both recreator and researcher.

I arrived at the Deerfield as a college student drawn first by its current and rapids, only later by the questions it asked from me. I am not from this region, nor do I share the decades of accumulated experience and commitment many of my interlocutors hold. My presence here was largely seasonal, temporary, and facilitated by an access to gear, transportation, and community networks that made access possible. As a cis-gendered, Latino paddler in a space often dominated by white, cis male participants, I am also aware of the ways in which my racial and gendered positioning shaped how I was seen and how I saw.

This research was also informed by my years of experience being on and around rivers around the world. Guiding, paddling, and teaching taught me not only technical skill, but also how rivers become sites inseparable from their social history, irreducible to their ecological and geological constituent parts. Many of these rivers have indelibly touched my life: my first, the Mohican taught me what a river is and of family; the Yukon taught me of my love for the outdoors; the Ashuapmushuan taught me skill and friendship; the Rio Grande taught me leadership, reflection, and the importance of water itself in geopolitical borders and struggles; the Whanganui taught me of indigenous epistemologies and resilience; the Murray taught me slowed movement, companionship, personal exploration, and the banality of a river's, at times, troubling histories in its contemporary landscape; the Ottawa taught me mentorship and desire; the Colorado taught me confidence, humility, and how to move with uncertainty; and the Connecticut taught me home and responsibility. Together, these rivers and these lessons shape how I understand the Deerfield. My own story and history, braided into these currents, inform how I listen, write, and dwell with this river.

Methodology

My fieldwork on the Deerfield was guided by a methodology rooted in attentiveness, relationality, and return. I employed a multimethod approach drawing on three qualitative research methods: in depth interviews, participant observation, and archival research.

I conducted nine formal, semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders including signatories of the Deerfield Settlement Agreement, activists, paddlers, fishers, instructors, professionals, business owners, and locals. These interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed with online software, and analyzed through thematic qualitative coding. I conducted many more informal, casual interviews with those I would encounter in the field, recording these interactions through detailed fieldnotes.

I engaged in participant observation on and around the river to capture differentiated understandings of the river spatially, ecologically, economically, and culturally. This included kayaking, creating flies for fly fishing, helping in a local shop, walking around key sites with interlocutors, and attending hearings on dam relicensing. As this research was conducted in the winter, the cold temperatures that characterize New England throughout these months limited the amount of time spent outside. However, this restriction elucidated what was felt in the river's absence, prompting reflection on seasons past. These experiences were captured through jottings and fieldnotes, and again analyzed through thematic qualitative coding.

Finally, I used archives as a resource to trace the river's story and history. This included online archives, resources through the Dartmouth College Library, and the Deerfield Historical Society and Museum. Increasingly, the digital world has also become a mechanism for connection between outdoor recreators and many of these archives existed online. I engaged with online forums—mostly focused on whitewater use and adventure tourism—as ethnographic material. These included databases such as American Whitewater, discussion boards such as Reddit, blog posts and articles, and commercial platforms. These digital spaces offered a unique opportunity to understand novel connections to place—one that didn't necessitate a physical connection.

This research received IRB approval from the Dartmouth College Center for the Protection of Human Subjects in December of 2024, and took place over the course of five months from January to May 2025. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, where possible, to protect the identity of participants.

My fieldwork often blurred lines between friend and researcher, teacher and student, guest and participant. That messiness, in many ways, was the point. I do not claim authority over this place, comprehensivity in my accounts of it, or privilege over its knowledge. I endeavor to claim care. This work is an offering shaped by that care.

What emerged through these encounters were not only narratives of recreation,

but stories that elucidate the ways in which communities exist and interact within landscapes shaped by regulation, memory, and labor. At stake in this research is how we understand connection to place as ecological systems become increasingly mediated by infrastructure, market logic, and climate change. As access to natural spaces becomes more managed, commodified, and stratified, the Deerfield reveals how love, risk, and memory persist within and through these structures.

These questions are not abstract. They live in the stories of people like Tom who have given decades of care to a river shaped by infrastructure, policy, and life. When he says “this river taught me how to live,” he offers a way of being with place that resists erasure. In returning to Tom, I return to the emotional and ethical heart of this work: to understand how rivers hold water, histories, and lives.

FINDING COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

In Charlemont, a local outfitter has brought eager customers to the Deerfield for over 50 years. Laura found not only personal clarity but also professional calling and familial anchoring in the Deerfield. The river became not just a place she moved through, but one she lived with. Her story, like Tom's, reveals how recreation made possible through dam regulated flows can quietly become life, place become home, and river root.

I pull into the outfitter, seeing a sign that reads "Tag Sale today." The parking lot, plowed by hand, boasts three snow-covered repurposed school buses—remnants of warmer months when they shuttled eager tourists to the river. Icicles hang over tables labeled "free" and "50 cents". Inside is a maze more reminiscent of a flea market than a rafting outfitter—rows of mismatched tables stacked with jewelry, trinkets, china, records, tableware, antiques, bottles, and clothes. Near the back, a pile of deflated rafts props up a makeshift CD stand where storage bins are draped in checkered tablecloths. Above them, a sign declares, "Wicked Awesome Rafting since 1983." Framed photos of adventures past line the walls, watching over the cluttered stillness below.

It's a striking juxtaposition: images captured from a high intensity adventure set against decades of static collector's items below. Tony Bennett live at Carnegie Hall whispering from an old speaker now serves as a quiet backdrop to the vessels that hurl people through whitewater. Yet, all of this stuff doesn't feel out of place; free coffee and donuts make the place feel homey, a cozy refuge from the winter outside. The building sits above the Deerfield, snowy and slow in its winter form.

Open twice a month in the off season, this repurposed storefront is a passion of Laura's, a collector who enjoys attending swaps and markets around the region, returning with interesting objects of unknown origins and histories that would otherwise be thrown out. It's only for a few weeks every winter, but it gives her joy and keeps her busy during the slow months. But before the tag sales and snowbound school buses, before the piles of

antiques softened the space, these banks were a training ground. She came here chasing slalom gates. The Deerfield was her proving ground, but it didn't send her elsewhere—it gave her a reason to stay. “Water shapes people,” she tells me.

“What a steal!” a lone shopper exclaims, eagerly testing out a surprisingly functional yet worn iron she found on the free table. She returns to her perusal of the store; she's looking for candlesticks.

As a competitive slalom racer, the Deerfield was Laura's training ground, made remarkable by its seclusion and quiet. She lived out of her RV with her soon-to-be husband with whom she founded her outfitter. “The river has changed,” she tells me.

When the River Returned

When Laura first came to the Deerfield, the river visibly bore the weight of nearly two centuries of damming and industrial use. The river ran only sporadically, with water impounded behind ten hydroelectric dams that dictate its daily flow. For nearly fifty years, the New England Power Company held near-total control of the river's flow, operating this system of dams that reengineered the river away from a volatile, flooding, seasonally defined watershed into a highly regulated hydraulic utility, timed not for ecosystems or communities but for profit and peak-hour electricity demand. At times it was “lifeless” with its water diverted through different veins—canals, reservoirs, generators.

Laura was drawn to Fife Brook—the Deerfield's longest free-flowing section—known for its more reliable flows and the slalom gates that marked it a natural training ground for slalom racing. In a river environment at that time largely controlled by hydroelectric infrastructure, Fife brook offered a rare stretch where paddlers could count on water with some regularity. Still, the larger flows of the Deerfield were unpredictable and erratic. For Laura and her soon-to-be husband, the irregularity of the river's flow made for a rough start to the business they hoped to create.

Everything changed in the summer of 1987. Once every decade, the New England

Power Company shut down its turbines at Dam No. 5 for scheduled maintenance, in this case to make repairs in preparation for the dam's impending relicensing. For nearly ten weeks, the river returned to its natural bed, flowing freely through a section left empty by diversion transforming the steep "Dryway" into a roaring, continuous stretch of whitewater. What had been a dry, rocky riverbed turned suddenly into one of the most thrilling runs in New England. Word spread quickly. For those ten weeks, crowds from throughout New England, to Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and down from Canada flocked to the town of Monroe Bridge and the newly "discovered" Deerfield. Described as a "Pandora's Box," the release revealed what the river once had been—and what it could be again. Laura, Tom, and hundreds more paddlers glimpsed the possibilities buried beneath decades of diversion, behind concrete dams. It became impossible to accept the terms of the river's captivity.



Figure 1

The effect reached further than the riverbanks. At the very site of the release, perched above the massive concrete wall of Dam No. 5, sat the town of Monroe, then population of only 140. Tucked away in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts, well removed from frequently travelled highways, Monroe was quiet. It was home to a number of well-kept single-family homes, one restaurant, a Teutonic main office building, a small post office, a town hall, and grade school. The well kept lawns, maintained streets, and pristinely white columns of the school showed its residents' pride for their village. The mill was closed in 1985, and with only fourteen students and a town birth rate near zero, its only school closed in 1989. The blue-collar town that lacked a formal doctor, lawyer, or businessman faced a declining population base of machinists and tradesmen residing in the Mill's shadow, literally and figuratively.

With the town outlook uncertain, the Deerfield became the center of Monroe's hope for a future:

"If Monroe is to have a prosperous future, the river will play a key role. Somehow the town must strive to regain a degree of control over its use. But what is the likelihood of this occurring? With no full-time professional staff, few financial resources, virtually no legal aid, and a lack of understanding of federal and state rules, the town is unlikely even to begin the process of assuring that its needs are addressed. The river is in Monroe but not of Monroe, controlled by the people who use Monroe but don't know Monroe, and governed for the public good, but somehow not for the good of Monroe."⁸

The town's hopes for the river coincided with the rare window of opportunity provided by the maintenance on Dam No. 5. As a steady, energetic stream of kayakers flowed into the town, Monroe's dam approached a pivotal moment. Its license, issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), was nearing expiration. Across the country,



Figure 2

non-federal dams require these licenses to operate, typically granted for 30 to 50 years. Given its age, Dam No. 5 was one of the earliest to come up for relicensing.

Serendipitously brought together by the events of summer of 1987, a group of boaters, including Tom and Laura, returned the following year with a clear ask of New England Power: eight or ten annual releases as a part of the new operating license. Tom recalls this interaction: “At the offices of Monroe Bridge, owned by New England Power, we met with some of their staff to argue our case. What they said to us was, look, this is our dam, our water, our river. Basically they told us to go pound sand,” in effect, to get lost. In response the boaters, united by a common care for New England whitewater, ignited by this indignation, and led by soon-to-be President Tom, formed New England FLOW: Friends for the Liberation of Whitewater.

At the time, challenges to FERC licenses were extraordinarily rare, if not unheard

of. Relicensing was a formality. Nevertheless, the group formally organized, and attracted diverse directors and affiliations. FLOW became the first coalition of boating interests in the country. In their constitution, they sought to:

- “A. Encourage the exploration, enjoyment, and preservation of New England recreational waterways for man powered craft;
- B. Preserve protect and enhance the wilderness character of waterways through conservation of water, forests, parks, wildlife, and related resources;
- C. Promote safety and proficiency in all aspects of whitewater activities such as the navigation of moving water, teaching, teamwork leadership, and equipment design, by pushing and demonstrating developments in these and related fields;
- D. Encourage and ensure public access to waterway throughout New England and,
- E. Promote appreciation for the recreational value of wilderness cruising and of whitewater sports.”⁹

Many of these principles, first articulated by FLOW—the Deerfield’s earliest formal community organization centered around outdoor recreation—continue to shape the values and practices of the communities that have since grown around the same waters, and that have become a site of belonging.

It took several years for NEP to take FLOW seriously, skirting substantive negotiation on water, land, or money. For a time, NEP treated FLOW as a fringe group of hobbyists rather than the organized coalition they became, backed by increasing financial and legal support. Years of unsuccessful negotiations led to FLOW filing an intervention in the relicensing process. It wasn’t until 1992, when NEP agreed to perform a “boating usability study” to gauge interest—and backing—for FLOW’s goals that the group was finally given a true seat at the table. In agreeing to this, NEP likely expected modest participation given the river’s seclusion, Monroe’s population, and what they perceived as local engagement.

Instead, over six days, more than three thousand boaters, local and beyond, young and old, descended on the Deerfield in a stunning testament to interest in the Deerfield. The river's great potential for recreation now stood not on the margins but had become the core of a powerful and growing movement—one that has remained ever since.¹⁰

Several other groups with an interest on the river became involved in the relicensing process: fishing groups such as Trout Unlimited; local interest groups such as the Deerfield River Watershed Association and Deerfield River Compact; conservation groups such as the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Vermont Natural Resources Council, American Whitewater, American Rivers, and the Conservation Law Foundation; state government agencies such as the MA Department of Environmental Management and Environmental Protection, and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources; and Federal groups including the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Park Service. Such an expansive and diverse set of stakeholders meant that negotiations were not only contentious between these groups and NEP, but also marked by competing priorities and occasional conflict among these groups themselves. Along a single river, each stakeholder held different dreams of what the Deerfield could become. Importantly, these groups shared a common, slightly unintuitive perspective: few advocated for the removal of the dams. That sentiment—favoring coexistence and reworking over elimination—persists today within local communities. Thus, the dams became the scaffolding through which each group built its own dream for the river's future.

FLOW's efforts culminated in the 1994 Deerfield Settlement Agreement, signed by thirteen stakeholder groups with wide interests, that: provided dam releases from two dams at regular, designated dates; installed passages at various locations; instituted minimum flow requirements; and mandated wildlife protection and rehabilitation measures. This historic settlement was the first of its kind ever developed in New England, and became a catalyst for similar negotiations on rivers across the country. In short, the settlement and the process that brought it about entirely transformed the Deerfield, allowing it



Figure 3

to become what it is today. The settlement also held massive implications for the ecology, fishing, and boating in and around the river, reshaping nearly the entire river's watershed.

The Deerfield Settlement Agreement solidified both the infrastructure and water access necessary for whitewater paddling. It provided 32 scheduled releases from Dam No. 5 and established boater access points just below the dam, ensuring consistent, predictable flows on the Dryway. Additionally, 106 annual releases from Fife Brook brought reliable water to the longer, more accessible stretch of river. The agreement was equally important in improving fishing conditions on the Deerfield. It established higher minimum flows, enabling year-round fish passage and supporting cold water fisheries. Additional efforts aimed to mimic the river's natural flow, further enhancing aquatic and nearby habitats. Encompassing nearly the entire river, the agreement also reshaped how and where recreators engaged with the Deerfield, structuring access and use across its various reaches.

Where Water Makes a Life

The legacy of the agreement lives on today. The infrastructure didn't just provide water, it enabled lives to be built around it. "I just wanted water to kayak," Tom tells me. With that water came community and a deeper sense of belonging. What began as a simple ask unfolded into something far larger than any one person imagined. It was, in many ways, a matter of being in the right place at the right time: a rare dam shutdown, a convergence of boaters, advocates, and residents who saw what the river could be. That moment of serendipity catalyzed a movement, and the network that formed within and beyond FLOW grew not just from shared values, but from shared rhythms—of place, of return, and of recreation made possible by community based activism.

The effects of the agreement extended beyond just recreation. For Laura, they marked a turning point. She had been on the Deerfield long before the water was predictable—training slalom on intermittent flows, living out of an RV, and chasing Olympic dreams. When injuries eventually ended her competitive career, the river's newfound dependability opened a different path. With scheduled releases came stability, and with the stability came the possibility of guiding, teaching, and building a life on the same waters she once raced through. As a co-founder and co-director of FLOW, she fought for agency over the space that had shaped her. The fight—and the flows it secured—allowed her to introduce others to a place she continues to love, even as it's changed.

When I visited Laura in her shop during one of the winter tag sales, she reflected on her staff, sipping on coffee. She told me a story of one of her guides that came to her outfitter in that typical mold of a young, adrenaline chasing soul. Over the years he matured thanks entirely to their "river family" by which she means not only her family but also the physical location. The Deerfield is not only a site around which community forms and thrives, but also a place that occupies an active role in creating that community. In the yearly return of seasonal staff, in the trust built between guide and guest, and in the shared experience that turns strangers to friends, and friends to family, the river shapes

a social world.

One such person who found community around the Deerfield is Mira, a kayak instructor who returned to the Deerfield after college seeking both whitewater and community. At Zoar Outdoor, one of the outfitters on the Deerfield, Mira built her place on the river not only on the water of the Fife Brook and Dryway but also in a chosen community of accepting and diverse paddlers, weekend regulars, and fellow guides. Her story reveals how belonging on the Deerfield is made through shared vulnerability, felt in mutual care, and located spatially. Mira's story, like many skilled paddlers in the region, is entangled with Zoar Outdoor. Its founder Bruce Lessels, a member of the US Whitewater team, joined FLOW with the goal of scheduling regular releases for the benefit of Zoar—the first rafting outfitter on the Deerfield. Today it's a hub for rafters, kayakers, and teachers, some staying year after year, some only for a summer.

Mira first came to the Deerfield as a student hoping for a fun day on the water—a much needed relief from the stress of classes. She returned continually for several years before ultimately deciding that what motivated her most was a drive to work on a river and teach kayaking. She immediately connected with one of Zoar's managers, a queer woman equally passionate about inclusion in whitewater. The season that followed was one of learning, teaching, and slowly laying claim to the river as a space of safety and belonging. "It feels like where I'm supposed to be," she says. "It forces me to be present." While not always sure of her place in the broader paddling world often dominated by groups of "river bros," she found connection in the Deerfield's smaller circles. Belonging emerged not only from shared skill but also from emotional resonance from trust, respect, and time spent playing and teaching on the same stretch of water. The community around the Deerfield— all of its familiar faces—became the locus of that feeling. "It's become less of an escape and more of a place that I belong—working and playing on the river," she tells me, noting how her place has changed.

That sense of belonging was not automatic, nor is it ubiquitous among paddling

communities. The broader paddling world, often dominated by white, cis-males often feels exclusionary to many who don't fit the mold of a prototypical adrenaline junkie. On the Deerfield, connection emerges not just from similarity, but from proximity and intimacy. "River people I tend to get along with more because we're all in love with the same thing," Mira explains. "We go out on the river and we have fun and it doesn't really matter what our identities are. Like it can be a part of getting connected to people, but I feel like once you have someone that really feels like your buddy in your own home river, you're just playing around with them. It can be a really great way to knock down the wall." That intimacy isn't instant; rather it's created within a close knit network of people who constantly run in the same spaces. "I feel like a lot of these dudes I probably wouldn't be such good friends with if we didn't all love the river." Spatially, the Deerfield acts as a container and catalyst in which it holds and generates community through repetition, presence, and immediacy. Belonging, then, is not just social but geographic, made possible by the intimacy created in Monroe's isolation, shared history, and collective care.

Mira's perspective demonstrates another way of coming to the community on the Deerfield—one created not through sameness of identity, but through shared passion and proximity. The sense of shared love for the river, as she describes it, acts as an equalizer, softens difference. The homogenization of river people she posits is not without tension. It risks flattening the very dynamics that made the Deerfield feel more welcoming to her than other paddling spaces. Mira's sense of belonging was not only built on mutual enthusiasm, but also on the presence of others who made space for her vulnerability, identity, and emotional safety. The river did not erase identity; rather it held it. It offered a space where difference could be expressed without alienation, where trust could grow through presence, return, and shared risk.

For Mira, this core component of belonging—care and rehabilitation for and from herself, those around her, and the river—felt somewhat unique to the Deerfield. Past experiences in other paddling circles left her feeling unseen and unrecognized, pressured

to prove herself in ways that strained her confidence and well being. On the Deerfield, by contrast, she found room to breathe and challenge herself while being supported and recognized not just for her skill, but for who she was. The Deerfield became a part of that care, allowing her a space where she felt capable in paddling, teaching, and being. Her relationship with the river extended beyond recreation as it became a place, presence, and friend to return to.

The Cadence of Belonging

Belonging is further structured geographically, in and through the river's cadence, created by the 1994 agreement. The scheduled releases that resulted provide consistency—a temporal scaffolding around which community forms and belonging is made possible. Paddlers know when to gather, companies know when to teach, and friends know when and where to return to. In that predictability, strangers become regulars, regulars become friends, and community is born. Jane, now a professional kayaker, described it best: “[going to the Dryway is] like going to church.”

Jane first came to the Deerfield in 2002 for what she imagined to be a fun birthday weekend. Her brother presented her a choice of adventure-filled activity—rock climbing or whitewater kayaking—and, remembering the kayakers she'd once seen as a kid, chose the river. After a couple of weeks paddling on a pond with the Boston Appalachian Mountain Club, she and her brother headed out for their first river trip: a weekend on the Fife Brook section of the Deerfield, just downstream from the Dryway. A nearby paddler opened his land and kitchen to the group, forming a close community of friends. That first day on the river was full of frustration—swims, mistakes, and disorientation disheartened her, and nothing clicked. But on Sunday, something shifted. Muscles started learning, currents looked familiar, and she became hooked, joined by her brother and future husband. “That was my first weekend on the Deerfield,” she told me. “It totally changed my life.”



Figure 4

What started as a physical challenge and a gift became an emotional anchor—a place to return and to develop. Moving from New Bedford to Readsboro, the place became home, the river a key component. In this shift from the active, urban coast to the quiet, wooded, Deerfield Valley, she found space to rebuild who she was and how she moved through the world.

Passion as well as aptitude allowed Jane to become exceptionally skilled. The Deerfield is unique in Western Massachusetts for its exceptional and constant whitewater. Fife Brook and the Dryway promise varying levels of challenge on scheduled releases not available as routine anywhere else. The West Branch offered an extreme challenge, only pursued by exceptional boaters with years of experience. These waters became a proving ground and sanctuary for Jane.

She started paddling constantly, improving her skill and technique on the Fife

Brook and Dryway, challenging herself on the West Branch, and exploring other tributaries of the Deerfield. She recalls spending countless hours turned into days working on the subtle challenges of eddylines, practicing tricks in flatwater, constantly seeking every opportunity for improvement. The river gave her a space to build competency, confidence, and ambition.

When she first entered a freestyle competition, almost on a whim, she placed third surprising herself by outcompeting some of the sport's most well known women. That competition became a pivotal moment, marking the change of kayaking in her life from passion to path. Within a year, it emboldened her to quit her job and pursue kayaking full time. Throwing herself into this new world, she gathered sponsors and dedicated her life to paddling the world's rivers, always returning "home." In a budding professional kayaking career, the Deerfield became a pulse of recognition and return. It kept teaching her. provided consistency, teaching, and comfortability.

While competitions offered the thrill of external validation, recognition, and compensation, it was the internal transformations and relationships that stuck. The river wasn't a backdrop to this journey; it was her teacher in kayaking and beyond. "There's always something to learn on the Deerfield," she told me. The river constantly challenged her to evolve, and, like Tom, spoke of the river not as terrain to be mastered, but as a co-participant in her becoming: always present, always shifting, always teaching. Even as her career took her to rivers around the world, the Deerfield remained the one that felt like home. She tells me "I've paddled all over the US and Canada, I've paddled in Switzerland, in Germany, and in Slovenia. Those places are all amazing, of course, but none of those rivers will ever give me the feeling that I get when I get on the Deerfield." That feeling, she explained, wasn't just the water itself, but the home she'd built around it, and everything the Deerfield held: memory, growth, return, and the people who had shaped her along its banks.

Still, even on her home river, Jane's journey wasn't untouched by the broader cur-

rents of gender and visibility that often run concurrently with whitewater. Whitewater kayaking, like many other adrenaline sports, has historically been dominated by white, thrill-seeking men. As one of the only women in her paddling group, her presence carried weight. She spoke with gratitude about her closest friend on the water, Sarah. “It’s just nice to be with another badass kayaker that’s not a guy,” she smiled, capturing the subtle comfort of gendered solidarity in a space where women are often outnumbered. At the same time she emphasized the inclusivity of her crew: “There’s no ageism, no one cares about your gender, you’re just kayakers.” Belonging on the river, for Jane, involved not only developing skill and confidence, but also navigating the quiet realities of who is seen and supported.

Recently she began to take up fly fishing—an opportunity for her to be a beginner again and to see the river in a new light. Fly fishing offered her a different rhythm—one not defined by adrenaline, but by stillness, patience, and precision. Unlike the intensity of whitewater, fly fishing invites slowness: a quiet study of current, insect, and instinct. Fly fishing offered a different way of being with the river, one focused on solitude, patience, and a slowed pace. It became a form of listening—a contemplative engagement with the Deerfield’s calmer eddies and deeper pools, where the lessons came more slowly, but with no less meaning.

These days, Jane’s schedule orbits the Deerfield. On summer mornings she paddles the Dryway; at midday she returns home for a quick lunch, then heads back out with her fly rod in the afternoon. This rhythm structures her time and way of being. “My life is built around being on the Deerfield River,” she tells me. “Everything now revolves around it. It totally changed my life from pretty much a city girl to now a full-on, outdoorsy, whitewater kayaker, paddler, fly fisher. I just love the place.”

So when Jane said the Dryway is like Church, it is more than romanticization. Connection on the Deerfield is forged spatially—the return of water, excited conversations at the put-in, reflective stories at the take out. Every Saturday and Sunday, May through

October, the sirens sound at Dam No. 5, water is released, the river wakes up, and people gather. Not out of obligation—but from habit, desire, and something that feels like faith. “That’s church,” she told me. “It’s where I return to feel whole again.” The Deerfield offers her a scaffolding that anchors her week after week. Her life is built around being on the Deerfield, and she loves it for that. The Deerfield offers her a landscape through which she can express herself fully, where identity is not fixed, but felt in motion, rooted in place, and created in activity. The Deerfield exists as beyond a site of transformation for her—it’s the structure on which she’s built her life. Relationship, profession, and identity all continually grow, watered by the Deerfield. When Jane said the Dryway is like church, she was naming something deeply felt: that belonging happens not just in identity, but in rhythm, in return, and in the intimacy of a river.

And at the heart of this is the rhythm provided the 1994 Agreement that gave this river a cadence—scheduled releases that turned wild water into ritual time. It created a temporal framework around which community could coalesce. And in that predictability, strangers become regulars, regulars become friends. And yet this structure doesn’t diminish nature; it enables intimacy with it, a topic that will be explored in the next section. It creates room for awe, for routine, and for belonging. Jane’s story makes visible the quieter structures that sustain so many lives along the Deerfield. It clarified what I had been circling throughout this project—that the meaning of this place emerges not despite its regulation, but through it: through the steady pulse of release and return, where personal and collective histories converge.

What Brings us Back

The Deerfield is not the only thread bringing recreators together. Sometimes, it’s not the river at all but the rituals it inspires and the opportunities it gives rise to. I experienced this one winter evening attending a fly tying night hosted by the local Trout Unlimited. I walk into the Polish American Citizens Club, through the sparsely populated bar

in the front, and into the back convention room. It's a large room with oak planks lining the walls, an array of books about fishing, fly fishing, trout, and tackle covering the nearby counters, and tables labeled by experience level. Aware of my inexperience, the "beginner Fly Tying," offers a space apt to my comfort level.

Inside, the focused gaze of a master fly-tyer held the quiet attention of those around him. The soft clink of beer bottles echoed through the room, mingling with the warm smell of pizza wafting in from the hallway. Conversation drifted easily into stories—shared between friends and strangers, tangled in memory and laughter. I had corresponded with a club member, Jack, who greeted me warmly. He seemed genuinely glad I had found them. I was a stranger there, and yet I felt welcomed—not by credentials or introductions, but by a shared desire to fish and spend time together, perhaps on the Deerfield.

Jack introduces me to many of the people in the room. They're all members of the Trout Unlimited, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of fresh, cold water rivers like the Deerfield. They proudly "bring people who care about coldwater fisheries together," by sponsoring chapters along important waterways. The Deerfield River Watershed Chapter specifically "includes the mainstem of the Deerfield River and her major tributaries." The chapter has been active in conservation efforts surrounding the Deerfield, dating back to the early 1970's when the group helped to craft "enlightened fishing regulations" below Fife Brook. As a signatory of the Deerfield Settlement Agreement, the organization participated in shaping the river into what many insist is the best fishing in the northeast.

Jack leads me to a man setting up his vise—a clamping tool used to hold an angler's hook still while they craft their flies—at the table next to the books. This man, Joel, is soft spoken with a long white beard dusted with crumbs from his morning donuts. At Jack's request, Joel agrees to show me the ropes and motions for me to sit beside him. Jack brings me my own vise, light, and set of papers—fly tying instructions, maps of two sections of the Deerfield they often fish, and information about the chapter. Joel and I look at

these maps for a while, talking about the sections he frequents: Carbis Bend and Diamond Drill pool in particular. These sections, just below the Fife Brook dam, have been kind to him, offering shelter from swift current, ample fish, and slower water. He warns me not to take fishing advice—either on location or on practice—from just anybody. “Look at what they say, but don’t trust it,” he cautions. At Diamond Drill pool, he tells me of the saying “[Drill] gets the living shit pounded out of it” as a result of its easy access and the “macho” mentality of some who frequent it. Nevertheless it’s in these pools that Joel finds his community in fishing. People are the reason he fishes.

Joel tells me about some of his favorite flies and some of the most useful flies. Two in particular are apt for beginners: the Pheasant Tail and the Olive Woolly Bug. We’ll start with the former. He explains the process to me and begins working. We start with the hook, as he laments the increasing production of low quality, international hooks. The ones he’s using won’t so easily snap when bit, nor do they barb the fish. He tells me a story of hooking a barb in his own thumb—a fate he wouldn’t wish on the fish he catches. On the hook, he strings on a black twine, some variation with which he starts every fly. After covering the hook with this twine, he removes a pheasant feather from his kit—a black, somewhat disorganized toolbox that sits between us. I ask where he acquires all of these materials and he answers that he finds stuff in various places, including shops that sell fly tying supplies, but he tries to source as much as he can locally and in his backyard.

He’s also a hunter. This pheasant skin we’re now using was a product of that activity. He carefully wraps the feather around the hook, then pulls a peacock feather from a bag. Cinching it down, he repeats the same step with the new feather. He moves slowly, but he’s made a mistake. He was supposed to add the gold wire before wrapping the peacock feather. “It’s all about progression,” he says, referring to the order in which he affixes the components. Retracing his steps he attaches the gold wire, winds the feather, wraps the wire around, and explains to me how this has created segmentation. We’re mimicking the anatomy of a fly because you “have to know what it takes to know flies” that will be ef-

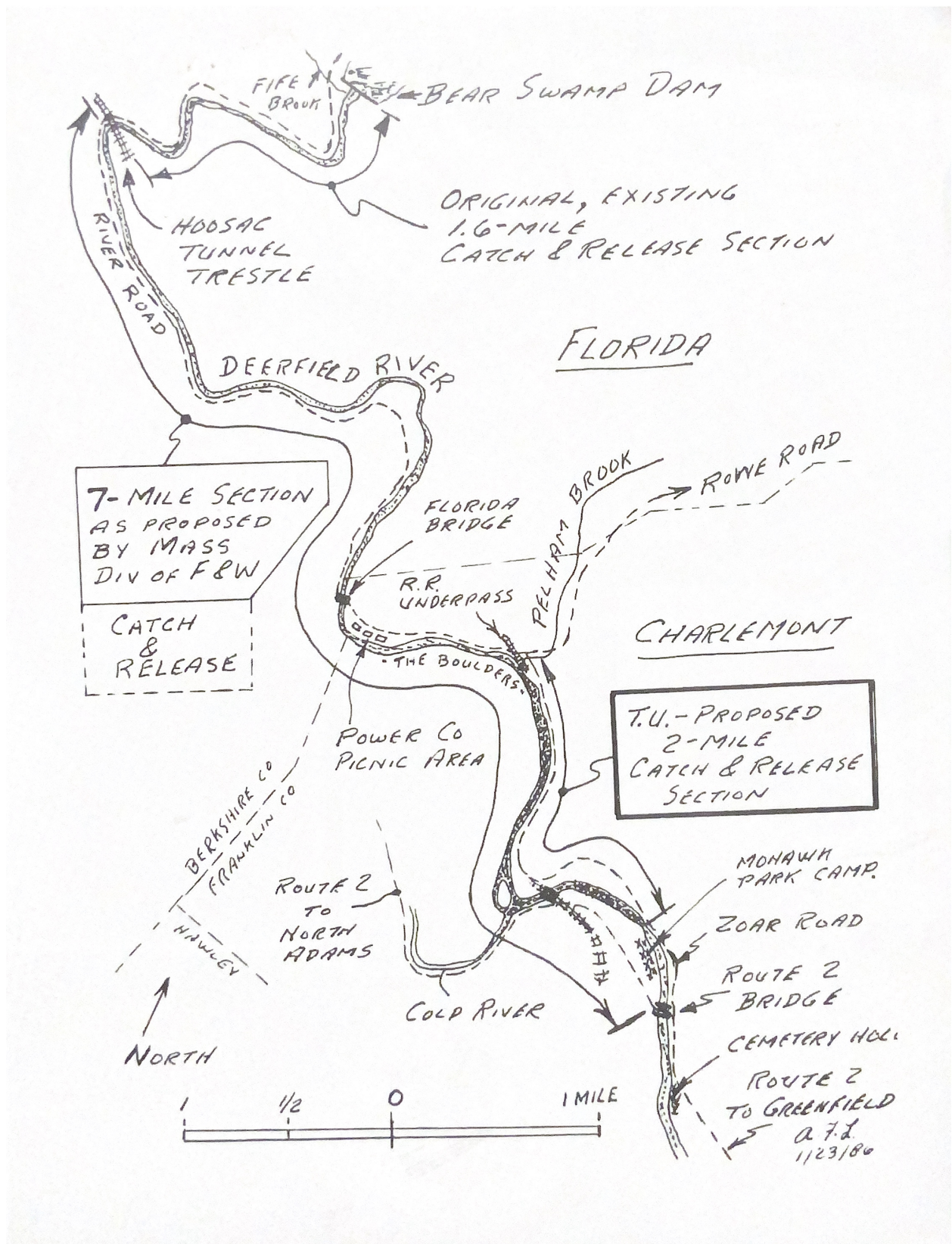


Figure 5

factive. He knots off and cuts the twine, pulling out nail polish from his box. He, laughing, tells me the story of how he got it. “I went into this section at CVS and they instantly knew what I was there for,” because he obviously wouldn’t actually be buying nail polish. “And this is yours,” he kindly says, sticking the new fly into my cork holder.

A large man, Paul, walks over to our table and sits down to chat. He offers us both a beer to which I decline but Joel accepts. He tells me how connected alcohol and fishing are—look at my cork. I notice it’s the cork from a bottle of whiskey. “I do the alcohol, I do the hors d’oeuvres,” he says—just as important as the fishing instruments themselves, in his eyes. He’s only somewhat of a fisher. “Last year was my busiest season ever... I went four times!” I tell him about myself and he offers insight in the form of a joke. “What’s the difference between bait fishermen and fly fishermen? You ask a bait fisherman what they’re using, they tell you to eff off. You ask a fly fisherman what they’re using, they’ll stop fishing, show you, teach you how to make it, and offer you one of their own flies.” That’s why he’s here: for the community. He loves to fish the Cape, and takes a yearly trip down there with many of his friends here. But, he’s happy “sitting on the rocks” while others fish. He rarely fishes on the Deerfield, despite living a quarter mile away from it. That’s not what interests him. He’s been a part of this club for 30 years, but it’s the club-ness of it that brings him back, rather than the fishing itself. He joins us for the rest of my time there.

Joel made the process look easy. Now it’s my turn. Under the watchful eyes of my two teachers, I attempt to retrace Joel’s steps. He’s helpful, constantly adjusting and critiquing my movements. “You’re a natural,” Paul tells me, but I think he’s just trying to encourage me. My real teacher, Joel, is less enthusiastic about my fly. Eventually I produce an object that barely resembles the item Joel gave me. “Not bad for a first attempt,” he says. I laugh, saying I have great room for improvement.

We pause to talk about the Deerfield, and Joel tells me how, through fishing, he’s come to understand the space better, through detailed, thoughtful interactions with the

river, the fish, and the people. Paul, also a hunter, draws a striking contrast between the solitude of the woods and the social atmosphere of the water. “When I’m hunting,” he says “I want to be alone in the woods, but when I’m fishing I want to hear my buddies laughing downriver.” It’s less about safety, and more about skill—he’s a confident hunter, but not so much a fisher. To him, the river is a less comfortable place than the woods.

We drift into conversation about rifles and fly rods. Paul prefers his single shot rifle over his AR-15. “Everyone has an AR,” he shrugs. “But that single shot? That’s where the fun is.” Joel picks up the comparison: fly fishing, like single shot hunting, is deliberate, careful, and methodical. Fishing, for them, focuses on precision over volume.

The conversation continually pulls away from the Deerfield as a body of water; instead, they speak more of the craft, the gear, the trips, the club, and the camaraderie. For Paul, it’s the people. For Joel, the practice. The Deerfield, it seems, is more setting than subject. They occupy the space almost incidentally, by happenstance. The river is not the reason they’re here, even though it’s their main fishing grounds.

We make a second fly, the wooly bug. It’s flashier than the first, fuller bodied and more grand. As I watch him craft it, our conversation drifts to adventures beyond the Deerfield. Paul hadn’t left the Northeast his entire life until he met his second wife. Now, the two of them spontaneously travel the country, and it’s changed his outlook, he tells me. But he’s still returned here, in this small New England Town. “Why?” I ask. He smiles. “My friends. My people.”

By the time lunch arrives, the room has filled, mostly with older men, and no one close to my age. It doesn’t seem to matter. The air is warm with laughter and a sweet sensibility provided by the continual retelling of stories at tables like the one I occupy with Joel and Paul. Joel wanders over to the book table and returns with a worn copy of Art Flick’s *Master Fly Tying Guide*. “This one’s for you,” he says, peeling off a five-dollar bill and slipping the book into my hands. They want me to stick around—join the club, fish with them this summer. Jack, still bustling between tables, swings by me to offer a

membership discount. He thanks everyone for coming, voice loud and genuine. Winter, they tell me, is the quiet season. This—Flies, Lies, and Pies—is what brings them back to the sunshine of the summer. Joel hands me his number, and Jack gives me his card. They want to see me again, and I feel the same.

The Deerfield may have brought together Paul, Joel, Jack, and the other anglers in the room, but it's the community they've built around it that keeps them together. Community is not necessarily defined by presence on the water, but with a constancy over time created by a shared passion. It perseveres when thin ice renders fishing impossible. The river becomes a stage, holding the possibility for connection, skill sharing, and return.

Anchors of Community

Laura's journey on the Deerfield revealed a life centered around place, community, and care through business and return. Her story overlapped with Tom in the founding and organizing of FLOW as a coalition that enabled lasting communities to form around the river's steadied, temporal rhythms. In Monroe, the river represented hope for renewal, a resource around which the town's identity and future might coalesce. Mira's story illustrates how belonging is made not just through skill but through safety, care, and emotional resonance found within a diverse community. Jane's weekly return to the Dryway, "church," in her words shows how shared ritual and repeated presence foster routines of connection. Meanwhile, the stories of Joel, Paul, and Trout Unlimited exemplify how community persists off the water, sustained by shared stories, meticulous craft, and laughter. Combined, these stories reveal that the river is not just a site of recreation, but a space through which people anchor themselves to each other across time, memory, and practice in and out of shared activity and place. Further, they reveal how relationships with the river are formed through ongoing, embodied engagement. They illuminate what Tim Ingold calls a dwelling perspective—a way of understanding landscape not only as a stage for action but as a taskscape: a lived, temporally unfolding world shaped by a mesh

of ongoing activities.¹¹ These activities are structured by the river's rhythms. Seasonal and weekly patterns are not merely scheduled activities; they are constitutive of dwelling. To dwell is to be embedded in the temporality of the world. Belonging, then, is not only spatial but also temporal: a sense of attachment formed through return, familiarity, and attunement to the cycles of the river that give structure to communal life. In this sense, the Deerfield becomes not only a river to paddle and fish, but also a clock to live by, through which people come to know time, place, and create community. The river, in other words, is not simply where these stories happen—it is part of how they happen, continually remade. These practices don't just occur in place; they sediment into it, creating a world shaped as much by movement as by memory. It is through this lens that the Deerfield becomes legible not as an external place to be used or interpreted, but as an active participant in shaping belonging and communal life.

Ingold defines this perspective:

The landscape as a whole must likewise be understood as the taskscape in its embodied form: a pattern of activities 'collapsed' into an array of features...activities that comprise the taskscape are unending, the landscape is never complete: neither 'built' nor 'unbuilt', it is perpetually under construction...But the forms of the landscape are not pre-prepared for people to live in — not by nature nor by human hands — for it is in the very process of dwelling that these forms are constituted... my conclusion that the landscape is the congealed form of the taskscape does enable us to explain why, intuitively, the landscape seems to be what we see around us, whereas the taskscape is what we hear."¹²

Ingold's framework offers a lens through which to understand and detangle the stories heard on the Deerfield. The river is not only a backdrop for action but also an environment constituted through ongoing engagement—what Ingold calls both landscape

and taskscape. As a landscape, it is physically, visibly composed of steep banks, swift water, tall dams, and many buildings. But these features are inseparable from the taskscape, which he understands as all of the interrelated activities that give something life—in this case, paddling, fishing, guiding, tying, teaching, talking. The dwelling perspective dissolves the boundary between environment and activity, allowing physical space to be the context for meaning making. It is through this continual co-creation of place and practice that community forms and through which the Deerfield becomes not just a river, but a lived world. Belonging is thus forged through shared tasks repeated over time. Community is the sedimentary accumulation of this repetition, layered through cycles and generations of return, resulting in relational knowledge that emerges from being in place together. Over time, these accumulated practices both reflect and produce community, embedding itself into the substance that lines the vessel and that holds the water.

This dynamic of dwelling—of sedimentation and accrual—is perhaps most clearly embodied in Laura’s story. What began as a relationship rooted in individual athletic pursuit grew into a life anchored by seasonal rhythms, shared labor and an enduring connection to a place that captured her. Her presence on the Deerfield, season by season, year after year, not only reflects the river’s evolving affordances but also helped shape the social and physical infrastructure through which others would come to belong and find community. As she began guiding and mentoring guides, her tasks became embedded into the routines of others—families experiencing whitewater for the first time, seasonal guides returning, and a family, literal and chosen, that grew on the river. “They have no idea of what was right in front of them,” she tells me, reflecting on newcomers’ first encounters with the river. She thus feels responsible for how these people interact and perceive the space—their experience, this transaction, she says, defines their perception of the river. Every year the experience captivates people, and they enlist as staff at her outfitter, carving their place in the river’s social landscape. Through repetition and shared activity, Laura both found her place on the river and made the river a place where others

could participate. “Water shapes people,” she reminds me.

All rivers, however dammed, hold some sort of seasonal and life cycles. The Deerfield is no different: spring time snowmelt floods its beds, periods of dryness and drought empty them. The yearly flux of rain, perhaps reflecting the pains of climate change, changes the river, year to year. Hurricane Irene had profound effects on the river’s rapids and form. The force of water that shapes a river over millennia is not resting, however unobservable in the short time frame of humanity on the Deerfield. What makes the Deerfield unique from many of its neighboring rivers are the ways in which dams mediate interactions with the river, and how, in turn, the river—dwelling with it—shapes time.

Jane’s comparison of the Dryway to “church” elucidates this. Every Saturday and Sunday, from the first weekend of May through the first weekend of October, water erupts from Dam No. 5. Similar, though more frequent, patterns regulate Fife Brook. In this engineered rhythm, the river takes on liturgical quality—scheduled, anticipated, sacred. This temporality enables predictable return where paddlers, like parishioners, arrive at the same time, greet familiar faces, and participate in ritual together. Seasonality is important in this; the river shapes a year. In the winter, Jane often migrates to warmer climates to fish and kayak, returning home in time to take advantage of the Deerfield paddling season. Fly fishers, like Joel, while they can fish year round, often take the winter to tie flies for the year to come. The overturn of Laura’s outfitter, from an active rafting hub to a quaint New England thrift store, follows the same seasonally defined river-time. The dwelling perspective further posits that people don’t intrinsically build relationships to land by projecting meaning onto it; rather, meaning and belonging emerge through dwelling—by living in, engaging with, and being shaped by the land. It is through inhabiting a world together—fishing beside someone, returning to the same rapids, teaching the same river—that we build relationships to the land and each other. Thus, belonging doesn’t emerge abstractly; it is intensely rooted in embodied presence.

It is important to draw a distinction between belonging and acceptance. I have

spent many weekends on the Deerfield, kayaking, hiking, and talking. While I may be accepted by the communities in which I've shared space and experience with, I don't possess the temporal longevity and domestic attachments that often characterize belonging. Belonging is cultivated. It requires an accumulation of memory, routine, and investment—an ongoing dwelling in place that roots one's presence in both the landscape and the community that inhabits it. In and before this work, I have been kindly treated with generosity and welcome, but I am careful not to mistake that acceptance for belonging.

While the dwelling perspective is a powerful framework for understanding how people come to know and inhabit place through practice and temporality, I argue we must further account for the historical, societal, and infrastructural conditions that shape who gets to dwell. Within the Deerfield, the capacity to engage in the shared practices that constitute dwelling can be mediated by factors that can restrict or complicate access—gender, race, wealth, and recognition.

Mira's experience on the Deerfield and beyond shows how belonging can, at times, be shaped by the emotional labor of navigating a paddling world that has historically been dominated by "river bros" and normative masculinity. While the Deerfield more often offered her a space where she could be vulnerable and capable, these dynamics are often mentally exhausting. Her story reveals how people inhabit different positions of visibility and acceptance within paddling communities. Belonging in her case emerged not simply through repetition and shared space, but also through the forging of relational spaces of care where mutual trust and communal safety make it possible to dwell more fully. And through that dwelling, skills were not only performed, but patiently built. Mira's story shows that dwelling and belonging requires movement not only habitual, but recognized and supported.

The conditions under which people come to dwell may thus be uneven. Belonging here is not simply a matter of repetition, but of being recognized, supported, and safe enough to return. For Laura and Jane, the Deerfield offered affirmation in addition to

access—spaces to lead, teach, and grow. For those navigating race, gender, or class based marginalization, that sense of belonging may be more precarious. Dwelling then is not a neutral or universal process; rather, it unfolds differently depending on who you are and how you are seen. If, as Ingold argues, we come to know place through the tasks we perform within it, we must also ask who gets to perform those tasks freely, and who must first carve out space for their own presence to be legible.

The Deerfield is a dwelt-in world. It is a river that gathers meaning through ritual, repetition, and return. It is a landscape continually reanimated by those who paddle its rapids, cast into its eddies, teach on its banks, gather around it to tell stories, and call it home. Belonging is made in cycles, community accrued through sedimentation shared presence and practice, memory and return. In this mutual, co-constituted process of dwelling, the Deerfield becomes more than a site of recreation—a world continually remade and remembered through perpetual motion, impregnated with the past, straddling the present, and prepared for a future.

INDUSTRIAL MEMORIES

The history that underpins this Deerfield story renders the river's present form deceptively unified—a body of water where bridges and dams seem part of the banks, and regulated releases replicate rainfall. Outdoor recreation on the Deerfield is entirely mediated by the industrial legacies that shape its present form. The Deerfield is not a natural landscape disrupted by visible industry, but rather one co-constituted by ongoing ecological processes and past and present industrial infrastructure that are entangled in ways that define how the river is known, used, and valued today.

The origins of the canyons and rocky riverbed of the Deerfield region date back to the early Paleozoic, where collisions between pieces of crust created hard, erosion resistant rock that rose into the mountains and hills of the Berkshires. The retreat of the Laurentide Ice sheet and draining of glacial Lake Hitchcock allowed the Deerfield to erode its channel down to bedrock. Softer sedimentary rock in the farmland that characterizes the lower Deerfield region carved wider floodplains where the Deerfield now empties into the Connecticut River. These two disparate geologies gave rise to two distinct sections of river influencing much of its character and story. Although this research focuses primarily on the upper sections of the river, known for its powerful flows, the river's geologically divided segments cannot be understood separately. This geologic history sets the basis for understanding not only the river's physical landscape, but the cultural, economic, and recreational patterns that have emerged around it.

The Deerfield River and its watershed were inhabited, primarily clustered in the lowland regions, around 12,000 years ago with significant communities established as early as 7,500 years ago. The Pocumtuc and Mohawk tribes have deep historical and cultural roots in and around the river, primarily relying upon the river for fishing and sustenance. They established extensive trails along the river's banks and around the region, the main route becoming known as the "Mohawk Trail" where the scenic byway, Route 2,

now runs. European colonization, combined with disease and war between the tribes, led to a sharp decline in indigenous populations of the region in the 17th century. The river served as a path into Southern Vermont, a means of transportation, and a source of water for agriculture and livestock. In 1673 the English incorporated the first European settlement within the Deerfield River Valley, Pocumtuck, which would later be reorganized and renamed to Deerfield.¹³

As settlers increasingly relied on the river, its utility as an economic resource became more apparent, especially for farmland and grazing. The river, then uncontrolled, would flood seasonally, depositing valuable silt on farmland, increasing the region's productivity. However, this same erratic flow made expansion of English settlement difficult. The construction of the first mill on the river in 1800 marked the start of industrialization along the river, a dynamic that dictated—and perhaps still dictates—the river's utility and meaning.

As the settler colonial population expanded, increasingly frequent and severe flooding proved both obstacle and opportunity. Dams and reservoirs were created to generate electricity and reduce the impact of natural cycles. Newfound abilities to accomplish this enabled an extraordinary economic boom in the region's industry. Construction of what was then the largest railroad project in the nation, piercing the upper mountains, made the upper Deerfield more accessible. However, this largely failed due to a lack of viable mineral deposits settlers hoped to monetize. Instead, economic attention shifted to wood and water. Both necessitated the construction of massive dams to serve as both a source of power and a holding area for logs. However, increasing interest in hydropower at the end of the 19th century laid the foundation for a different future for the Deerfield.

Construction of the first hydroelectric dam began at Gardners Falls, near Shelburne, in 1902, taking two years to complete. Once operational, the dam generated massive amounts of electricity and proved immensely profitable — profit that, at least initially, the residents of Greenfield and Deerfield shared in. But as the success of this model



Figure 6

garnered wider attention, the river's future began to shift. The upper Deerfield river became the centerpiece of a more ambitious hydroelectric development plan. New England Power, a Boston based company, began constructing a network of dams upstream. Unlike the initial projects, this expansion prioritized corporate profits and the export of electricity over the needs of local communities. Despite the scale of industrial development, local residents saw little return. Instead, profits were shipped out, leaving locals with little control over their river and its possibilities. The dams did offer flood protection but also compromised water quality and destroyed local logging and paper industries, in effect, stripping Deerfield residents of control over their river.

Beyond the material history of dams and development, the Deerfield's transformation also reflects deeper patterns of ecological stewardship and the commodification

of nature. Rivers have long been a source of socio-political power and control. The large-scale manipulation of the Deerfield throughout the 19th and 20th centuries fits within what political ecologists describe as a capitalist logic of nature — one where rivers are valued only for their monetary potential.¹⁴ This logic required infrastructural control to remake the river into something predictable, schedulable, and profitable.

A reliable and regulated flow of water was essential to New England Power's business model, but such consistency was incongruent with the river's natural, seasonal variability. To overcome this, the company built the massive Somerset Reservoir near the river's source. Completed in 1913, it became one of the largest infrastructure projects in the region, enabling year-round water storage and energy generation. They quickly built a series of dams along the river to further capture its energy, including Dam No. 5 in 1913. There, the force of the water was so great that the engineers diverted the river through a canal to protect the powerhouse, leaving the riverbed completely dry. This is how the Dryway came to be.

This industrial transformation of the river continued. An experimental nuclear power plant, the second of its kind in the nation, was built in 1951, continuing the river's role as a resource from which electricity could be extracted. The power plant further altered the river's ecology, drastically increasing water temperature. "The water used to be so warm," Jane recalls. "The old nuclear plant made winter paddling enjoyable!" Jane's memory adds an intimate, bodily register to an impersonal industrial logic. Paradoxically, industrialization — and resulting thermal pollution — could expand access and recreation. In turn, recreation could be reimagined within the confines of an industrialized river.

The final major development came with the approval of the Bear Swamp project in 1970. Unlike earlier projects, it was the first of its kind to include a minimum flow agreement, important to local fishing groups. It also proposed restoring native fish populations devastated by dam construction and used project revenues to create the Monroe State

forest, which is today a public recreation area. As historian McVaugh notes, “No longer was the river an exclusive tool for the New England Power Company, but increasingly the river was seen as economically advantageous for both its ability to generate electricity and the recreational opportunities it provided.”

The shift became especially visible in the fight to prevent a new dam at the section of the river known as Stillwater in 1980. A coalition of recreation groups, including paddlers, fishers, and conservationists, staged a “canoe-in” protest that ultimately helped shut down the project. The moment marked a turning point where the river was no longer seen as a resource to be controlled and harvested but rather a space for recreation.

It is at this point, in the 1980s, that Tom and Laura first encountered the Deerfield — a river shaped by over a century of industrial control and on the cusp of further transformation. The legacies of dam construction, corporate ownership, and environmental degradation narrowed the scope of what the river was. But as a new generation of recreators began to see the Deerfield not just as utility but as a place to live with, fight for, and dwell in, the foundations for a future took root. The 1994 Deerfield Settlement Agreement did not erase this industrial past, but built upon it, forging a hybrid landscape where recreation, ecology, and industrial legacies coexist.

The Deerfield Settlement Agreement made the river predictable in ways it had never been before, setting it apart as a unique case in the region. That predictability allowed the Deerfield to become a destination for outdoor recreation. Recreators arrive from all over the northeast—from New York to Boston, Maine to Canada—to fish and kayak the Deerfield’s waters. When a schedule is released every year, people from all over can plan around days where they have assurance there will be water to paddle or fish. Operating on a schedule, the Deerfield is predictable and constant. The Deerfield was no longer just a tool of industry; it became a managed landscape with multiple, at times competing, values layered into its flow.

Where Concrete Makes the River Wild

When the Deerfield Settlement Agreement established regular releases from the river's dams and minimum flows for its fish, it shaped the future of recreation on a river that was now segmented into discrete chunks, each accumulating their own characteristics through the river's physical and ecological features, people's experiences, perceptions of risk, types of activities, and the infrastructure that mediates these interactions. These dynamics were readily apparent during my visit to the Deerfield Fly Shop.

During a visit to the Deerfield Fly Shop, the only one of its kind in the small town of Deerfield, I find myself across the street, looking at its faded yellow and green exterior. Various pieces of gear and signage clutter the windows and paper the outside of this building—a faded yellow and green exterior made more dull by a surprising lack of light inside. And yet despite the quiet, the shop hums with a soft energy—narrow aisles lined with neatly packed gear, every surface full but meticulously arranged and sorted. In the middle are several white display cases of colorful flies whose price tags indicate costs ranging from a few cents to several dollars. Hundreds of flies populate the display in small, open boxes — made to appeal to a curious fisherperson. To the left are hangers of fly fishing gear — waders, neoprene clothing, boots, outerwear. A stack of magazines rests directly to the left of the entrance, all of which look like they have been forgotten in a pile of other mail. A large window, obscured by yellow signage, holds an enclave where a small beagle sits, sleeping. To the right in the doorway is a large map of Northern Massachusetts. The Deerfield and several of its dams and well known spots are pinpointed, contextualized within a large map of New England. Directly in front of the door is a glass display case of many reels, on top of which stands signage for the Deerfield River chapter of Trout Unlimited as well as several business cards, a statement of purpose, and many stickers. In the back of the shop are more shelves and hooks of gear, clothing, and accessories. For such a small shop, there's so much to peruse. The owner, James, is huddled in the back, working through boxes of new inventory. I offer my help, which he declines.

Instead, we pour over the map of the Deerfield. I ask James how he defines the “upper” and “lower” river. He traces an informal boundary near Charlemont, but admits it’s not exact. “Honestly,” he says, “there should be a middle too — somewhere between Fife and Charlemont.” These river sections, he explains, are shaped by what fish live there, what dams regulate them, and who shows up to use them. “You’ve got brook trout, stocked rainbows, browns, walleyes, all in different amounts in different zones for the most part. Mostly because of the dams.” The dams, rather than natural geology, shape how James experiences and divides the river—organizing it into segments defined by infrastructure, ecology, and activity.

James and others in the Deerfield River Watershed Trout Unlimited chapter have pushed for years to stop the state from stocking rainbow trout in the upper watershed. These hatchery-raised fish were introduced to make angling easier for visitors and beginners. “We knew the browns were there...People have been asking them to stop [stocking rainbows] for years,” he tells me. Eventually, they convinced a state biologist to run shock tests. What they found was an incredible 90/10 split between wild browns and stocked rainbows. “Even I was surprised,” he says, reflecting on how different the results were from everyday experience. Although shock tests showed that 90% of the trout in that section were wild browns, most of the fish people actually caught were stocked rainbows. “It feels the opposite when you’re fishing,” he explains. The data confirmed what many local anglers had been saying and feeling for years. That validation led to the end of rainbow stocking, though it will take several years for the effect to fully take shape.

The shift won’t come without tension. “Rainbows are stupid,” James laughs. “They’ve been fed their whole lives. They’re easy to catch.” That makes them perfect for guiding clients: more fish, less skill. But that same ease, he says, disrupts the ecology and devalues the experience. “There’s the sport, it’s a different feeling catching a natural wild brown trout. It takes far more skill. They were born on the river; they know it.” The segmentation of the river reflects these layered differences, between wild and stocked,



Figure 7

beginner and expert, commercial and personal.

Shawn, a younger angler, joins us. He spends a good bit of time looking at the fly rack, picking out several and putting them on a tray. Shawn has many tattoos, including “GREY” spelled out on his knuckles. He’s an enthusiastic person with a kinder voice than his appearance might suggest. “I learned most of what I know from this guy,” Shawn tells me, gesturing to James. “That’s how these things go,” referring to the communal passing down of knowledge. James agrees, noting how his “mentors” instructed him in “beta”—insider knowledge about where and how to fish successfully—and how he continues to pass that on. It’s what he enjoys the most: “Sitting here, talking about the river, about fishing.” The conversation is a verbal map of place built from mentorship and memory within the confines of both river ecology and built infrastructure. In this way, the river’s segmentation—produced by infrastructure—has in turn shaped how people relate to the river and to each other, structuring both ecological dynamics and social relationships. “I can’t imagine the river without the dams.” James says. The statement is honest. For him, the river as he knows it — where fish live, where guides take clients, where flows can be anticipated — is inseparable from its manmade infrastructure. The river is not just divided by the dams, it is defined by them. Each stretch carries its own rhythms, risks, and expectations carved in concrete and lived through community.

These kinds of informal divisions—shaped by species, skill, and infrastructure—are echoed in other river communities. For paddlers, the segmentation takes on a different logic, one formalized through classification systems that assess each section’s difficulty. All whitewater is rated on a scale of I to VI, with Class I signaling moving water with a few ripples and Class VI indicating a section with a reasonable expectation that one might lose their life. These ratings are attached to every section of the Deerfield through general consensus. From generally north to south: The East Branch, II; Northern West Branch, II; Searsburg Dryway, III; North Branch, II; Harriman Gorge, IV; West Branch, V; Monroe Bridge Dryway, IV; Fife Brook, II; Zoar Gap, III; Cold, IV; Chickley, II; and below

Dam No. 2 to the Connecticut, I. Not only informing on difficulty, these ratings segment the river for paddlers—who can go where, when, and with who. Dams form the boundary between sections, signaling start and end, allowing classification.

These boundaries—drawn by dams, reinforced by fish and flow patterns, and inhabited through use—reshape how the river is known and lived. They challenge the notion of a singular, continuous Deerfield. Instead, what emerges is a fragmented river where meaning and memory accumulate in segments. Each stretch is not just hydrologically distinct, but socially and politically charged—known differently by anglers, paddlers, and planners, and made real through their movements and stories. Ontologically, the river does not exist as a single natural object, but as a constellation of relational encounters—its being shaped through infrastructure, regulation, and human interaction.

This type of river has become known as “dam fed.” This language, while plain on first reading, holds within it a more complex tension. The dams “feed” and give life to the river. This is paradoxical in that it is the river’s own waters that fill the dams and reservoirs. Flow is no longer solely governed by the natural forces of snowmelt or storm, but by contractual agreement, turbine schedule, and engineered release. In this system, nature is experienced through infrastructure; paddlers come not despite the dams, but because of them. The Deerfield experience—combining nature and adventure—arrives in predictable ways, at regularly scheduled intervals. And yet, in the eyes of many paddlers, it’s no less “real” or “natural.”

That new predictability set in motion by the Deerfield Settlement Agreement transformed the Deerfield into a regional destination for outdoor recreation. Annual release schedules let paddlers and anglers plan visits with confidence, knowing when the river will run. Over time, this rhythm becomes ritual. More than accessible, the Deerfield becomes a commodity—no longer connected to older versions of industry but now monetized by companies formed around outdoor recreation. Rafting outfitters, kayak schools, gear shops, and guiding services now organize entire seasons around these managed re-

leases, turning regulated nature into a dependable product.

This is especially true for whitewater kayaking. On release days, the flow of the river becomes ritual. Cars arrive at Dam No. 5 well before the sirens sound. Paddlers unload boats, check, hear, and mingle. Then, almost theatrically, the horns blare, the lights flash, and the water rises. “It’s still kind of magic,” Mira tells me. “Like watching the river wake up.”

Laura’s company benefited from the newly formalized recreational schedule—a shift brought about by the Deerfield Settlement Agreement. “It’s been great for the region,” she tells me, describing how tourism has brought new life to local economies. Her trips became especially attractive to families from Boston, Albany, and New York seeking both an escape from the city and an adventure. “They have no idea what was right in front of them,” she says. For many, her guided trip is their only interaction with the Deerfield. That transaction — the lines she takes, the words she chooses — becomes the experience. She thus feels a sense of responsibility for how her guests come to see the river and region. The river is a dependable product where nature is made accessible and adventure becomes something reservable in advance. “There’s something for everyone,” she says, and in this commodified model, there is.

But for many, this transactional structure doesn’t preclude deeper forms of connection. The very infrastructure that enables tourism also makes room for attachment, ritual, and care. Belonging, in this sense, can emerge through systems designed for profit, even as it resists being reduced to them.

In both of these experiences—private and commercial—people find “nature.” Mira tells me, “It forces me to be present,” describing how her experience outside is grounding. “I want to get people outside on the Deerfield and teach them to enjoy life,” she says. Likewise, while attending a fly tying event in the dead of winter, Joel talks longingly about “being out on the water.” Tom puts it more simply: “It’s just good to be outside.” Another paddler adds, “I think it is useful to show people that these rivers are living, breathing



Figure 8

things that have really helped me grow.” Jane tells me, “The Deerfield totally changed the way I look at everything. Once I got into the outdoors and into kayaking, everything changed.”

The Deerfield’s dams make room for encounters with nature; they provide a predictable structure that paradoxically enables spontaneity, presence, and emotional depth. Even when flow is governed by turbines and schedules, the river still offers surprise and joy. This is where the enchantment lies—not in escaping structure, but in experiencing something wonderly profound moving within it.¹⁵ Such moments often elude full explanation; their meaning is felt rather than articulated—an ineffable quality that reinforces the sense of wonder people describe. As a kayaker, I’ve felt this too: the quiet, visceral recognition of a grounding joy that arrives in the flow of a river—difficult to explain, but deeply known in the body.

Therein lies the paradox: industrial control enables encounters with nature. The very infrastructure built to harness, regulate, and monetize the river's power now facilitates moments of immersion, reflection, and joy. Releases coordinated by owners are the reasons paddlers can show up week after week, year after year, knowing the river will rise and what it has to offer. What emerges is a river that blurs the boundaries between natural and artificial.

This perspective was one I was not prepared to encounter. Inspired by work around the world on dam removal, I expected to find those who echoed a similar sentiment on the Deerfield. In every single conversation, encounter, and experience throughout this work, this idea was either absent, discarded, or rejected. The dams, far from being framed as ecological villains, were seen as enablers of recreation, economic opportunity, and access to the outdoors.

One activist working to secure future funding for a local public works improvement project on the Deerfield made this distinction unmistakably clear: "We still need Congressional support so that we can get future National Park Service funding for project work on the Deerfield—things like dam removals. Not active dams. We have some tributaries that have dams that are inactive. I want to be real clear about that. I don't want the nine dam owners to get concerned." The politics of restoration here did not follow my expected script. Rather, the river and its dams became inseparable. The river's future is unimaginable outside of its dams, a commingling of concrete and rock.

In this sense, we should see the Deerfield not as a natural landscape disrupted by industry, but rather a place co-constituted by ecological processes and industrial infrastructure entangled in ways that define how the river is known, used, and valued. Drawing on William Cronon's foundational critique of wilderness—the pristine realm outside human influence he argues is a romantic ideal built atop erasures of history, labor, and exclusion—I can now see that the Deerfield river emerges as a working landscape whose wildness is produced through infrastructure, regulation, and memory.¹⁶ On the Deerfield,

the seeming wildness of a roaring rapid or thriving fishery is the product of coordinated dam releases and negotiated flows. The enchantment of nature is real, but it is made possible by engineered predictability. Understanding the Deerfield through this lens unsettles easy distinction between ecological and industrial, natural and cultural. Capital and power have come to co-constitute the river in its present form. In this relational ontology, nature is recomposed with industry.

This tension between human and natural control as well as industrial infrastructure and outdoor experience echoes the arguments of Richard White, who states that the effects of human infrastructure cannot be meaningfully separated from the river itself: they are part of the same system. He encourages us to look for the natural in the dams.¹⁷ The Deerfield river, regulated and structured, is no less natural to those who traverse its waters. The Deerfield is carefully timed and produced, but that doesn't diminish its emotional power or symbolic resonance.

However, where Cronon warns that romanticizing wilderness distances us from real environmental responsibilities, the stories I've learned along the Deerfield here complicate this binary. My interlocutors on the Deerfield do not depend on romantic wilderness ideals to value the river, rather they are enchanted not by its infrastructure but within the spaces that this infrastructure creates. That siren blaring, that light flashing, that rise of water at the same time every week are not reminders of absence, but of presence. For them, nature is not diminished by regulation; it is made knowable, liveable, and shared. They dwell through engineered flows forming relationships with the river that are recursive, situated, and profoundly felt.

If the Deerfield's present reveals how infrastructure and regulation can enable relationship with nature, it also makes visible the stories we continue to tell about rivers—stories of control, of reverence, of place. The meanings ascribed to the Deerfield today are layered atop older inscriptions, literal and figurative, that mark its banks with competing claims—some poetic, some institutional, all constructed. A visit to Dam No. 5 captures

that layered narrative—a convergence of industrial memory, romantic imagination, and quiet dwelling.

Mohawk Trail, the scenic byway also known as Vermont Route 2, gradually becomes more treacherous the further I get away from I-91 in Deerfield, MA. From its confluence with the Connecticut River, the trail, the road, and the river follow each other until the former two diverge from the river near Zoar. A right turn sets me on a road the snow plows have evidently neglected. It's clear why: the homes have become more sparsely populated and show greater signs of wear, the shops fewer and farther between. The new road bisects the river, connecting two of the smallest towns in Massachusetts: Zoar and Monroe, with populations of 500 and 100 respectively. Driving up and down the hilly, snow laden roads, I can feel this human sparseness.

I cross Dam No. 5. The familiar bustle of people, cars, and releasing water characteristic of a usual day on the Dryway is subdued, leaving only the gentle sound of a smaller flow through a gate. This dam fed stretch is not feeding. The abandoned paper factory that has overlooked this spot for over a century remains lifeless as ever. Its decrepit consistency is perhaps the most familiar feature of this landscape. It is a part of the scenery just as much a bank as the snowy slopes that oppose it. Its busted windows and faded bricks might have seen more than many of the neighboring young spruce trees — descendents, or survivors, of those used for pulp. The dam, the bridge, the factory, the trees, and the river are intertwined.

This “park” was established by both the town of Monroe and Great River Hydro, preserving and curating the industrial memory of the site, highlighting the economic importance of the dam, bridge, factory, trees, and river. In it, inscribed on a sign, it also offers a way of seeing the river, set in ink. A poem written by Oscar Ely in 1922 reads:

Praises to thee, Monroe Bridge,
Fenced by peak and wooded ridge

On the mountain's savage breast
 Resting like an eagle's nest.
 O'er the dam and past the mill,
 Working out the owner's mill,
 Deerfield River's waters pour.

The poem's reverence for the bridge contrasts sharply with its treatment of the river which appears only as a force of labor: something that pours past the mill to do its work. This imbalance reveals a symbolic hierarchy: industry over nature, economy over ecology, town over landscape. The bridge is elevated as a triumph of human engineering, integrated into the landscape even as it asserts control over it. The river, by contrast, is rendered passive and utilitarian, its value measured solely in its capacity to serve, only acknowledged for its pour — its economic utility. Enshrined in this poem is not the vitality of the river, but the infrastructure that tames it.

This presentation sharply contrasts with the romantic sensibilities of the mid 19th century where writers found themselves enchanted by the sublime grandeur of untouched landscapes — mountaintops, waterfalls, deep forests—as sacred spaces removed from human influence. One such writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, encountered the Deerfield River Valley in awe. His words describe this landscape:

“Descending, we by and by got a view of the Deerfield River ... peaks one or two thousand feet high rash up on either bank of the river in ranges, thrusting out their shoulders side by side. They are almost precipitous, clothed in woods, through which the naked rock pushes itself forth to view. Sometimes the peak is bald, while the forest wraps the body of the hill, and the baldness gives it an indescribably stern effect. Sometimes the precipice rises with abruptness from the immediate side of the river; sometimes there is a cultivated valley on either side—cultivated long, and with all the smoothness and antique rurality of a farm near cities—this gentle pic-

ture strongly set off by the wild mountain-frame around it... The river was a brawling stream, shallow and roughened by rocks; now we drove on a plane with it; now there was a sheer descent down from the roadside upon it, often unguarded by any kind of fence, except by the trees that contrived to grow on the headlong interval. Between the mountains there were gorges, that led the imagination away into new scenes of wildness. I have never driven through such romantic scenery, where there was such a variety and boldness of mountain shapes as this; and though it was a broad sunny day, the mountains diversified the view with sunshine and shadow, and glory and gloom... Clambering down the bank, we found it a complete arch, hollowed out of the solid rock, and as high as the arched entrance of an ancient church, which it might be taken to be, though considerably dilapidated and weather-worn. The water flows through it ... It was really like the archway of an enchanted palace, all of which has vanished except the entrance—now only into nothingness and empty space. We climbed to the top of the arch, in which the traces of water having eddied are very perceptible. This curiosity occurs in a wild part of the river's course, and in a solitude of mountains."¹⁸

Hawthorne's reverent description casts the Deerfield as a site of aesthetic and spiritual encounter — a romantic wilderness cathedral imbued with mystery and a sense of the sublime. Yet, as Cronon argues, this mode of seeing depends on the erasure of the people, histories, and labor that have continually shaped the landscape. He flattens the complexities of the valley into a spectacle, ignoring its long indigenous presence, agricultural histories, and early industrial manipulations in favor of a romantic desire to find the untouched.

The two apparently disparate representations reveal a tension—or perhaps an historical shift—in how value is ascribed to the river. In the industrial frame, the river is only considered for its utility within a mill, constricted by a dam. Its power is valuable only insofar as it can be controlled. Here, progress, industrialization, and ecological mar-

ginalization are synonymous. In contrast, the romantic vision venerates the river for its untouched wilderness. The river doesn't work; it "brawls." These views demonstrate the apparent competing logics of domination and reverence that have long shaped relationships with rivers and natural spaces like the Deerfield.

Yet this tension reveals how the Deerfield has been continuously reimagined through shifting lenses. Both visions are cultural constructs—products of particular historical moments that reflect human desires projected onto nature. The brawling river and the dammed river are not different rivers. They are parallel fantasies shaped by the same impulse to define nature in human terms. The Deerfield's landscape has thus been continually redefined throughout its history; the present is no different.

This park, built by Great River Hydro, reflects a continuity of the river's past. Though now a site of recreation and appreciation, its existence remains ontologically rooted in the logic of utility: the river is still managed, scheduled, and structured. The space invites affective engagement, yet it does so through infrastructure designed for control. In this way, the romantic and industrial visions of the river converge at Dam No. 5 not as opposites, but as coexisting, co-constituting expressions of how the Deerfield is continually reshaped and reimagined. These entanglements of industry, control, reverence, and history extend into the everyday ways people experience the river.

Ray

Just down the road at the Dunbar Brook Picnic Area, I come across a scene removed from the spectacle of dam releases, but no less shaped by the river's layered history. I'm surprised to see a red Toyota sitting in the parking lot. An older man reclines in the front seat, the car's windows slightly rolled down. I wander for a while through the snow, reaching a fence that separates the river from the parking area — likely a safety measure as the bank steeply descends where the river narrows in the "Labyrinth" section. Paths I remember to the left are snowed in, the drive to the right is cleared, but definitely not for

me. I can feel the man's eyes watching me as I curiously trudge along the fence. Returning to our cars, I strike up a conversation about the unpassable trails we both remember. He's here to "escape from the house," for the tranquility of winter, for the peace, and for the river. A resident of a nearby town, he's been coming to this same place for the same reasons for fifty years; he, like me, loves it here. Throughout those years, he notes how the river has changed incredibly little although he prefers to be around the river, not on or in it, maybe affecting his experience. Most notable, he says, was the decommissioning of the nuclear power plant in the nearby, small town of Rowe. How it impacted the river, he's not explicitly sure, but he's sure that since its decommission the space has changed. It's quieter, somewhat intangibly. Ray and I sit in the quiet of the snow and peace of the space together in appreciation for and love of this space. Words are not needed.



Figure 9

In sitting with Ray, I came to understand a different value of the river. It's certainly neither the economic value of Ely, nor quite the romantic wilderness of Hawthorne. Neither writer was particularly seeking an escape in the same way Ray does. Neither felt the same sense of peace either. Quite the opposite: it's precisely the wildness of the river that draws both's attention. For Ely, the river is a force to be harnessed. For Hawthorne, the river is a spectacle to be inspired by. For Ray, the river is neither a resource to exploit nor landscape to be marvelled, rather it is a familiar, steady presence. His connection is rooted in routine and connection, not power or grandeur. It's based on lived, local experience, not romanticization or exploitation.

Ray's quiet reverence resists the dominant narratives that have historically defined the river—neither Ely's triumphant ode to industrial conquest nor Hawthorne's awe-struck romanticism captures his perspective. His Deerfield is a place of return, of rhythm, of peace. The layered stories on the banks, in the depictions, and within the people of the Deerfield reveal its multiple ontologies: infrastructure and nature, spectacle and subtlety, power and quiet. To dwell in the Deerfield is to move through all of these. That paradox that animates the Deerfield: that a river so structured, so controlled, can still feel wild, present, and alive.

RISK

Understanding how infrastructure shapes the emotional and symbolic contours of the Deerfield, I now turn to how the river shapes the body—how people come to know themselves, one another, and the water through risk. Dwelling on the Deerfield often incorporates movement, adrenaline, fear, and joy through experiences of risk. Risk is not incidental to the experience of this river; it is central to how people engage with it, measure themselves against it, and are changed by it.

Tom captures this vividly. His relationship to the Deerfield began not in reverence, but in defiance—drawn by its opportunity, shaped by its force, and transformed through repeated encounters. For the river and the experiences of risk he encountered became a structure through which he could rethink strength, failure, and care.

Tom's careful words and reflective outlook were produced by decades of maturation mediated by the Deerfield River. Sitting in his living room, we reflect on how it all began. "I don't like bullies," he says. Born with a severe disease that often leaves children severely stunted, Tom was placed in a race by his biology to keep up from the start. He considers himself lucky—the disease left him with a large birthmark across part of his face, blind in one eye, but spared him of other complications. Still, those visible markers made him a target. He remembers the taunts, isolation, and the feeling of always being seen before being known. The need to be strong and appear strong—to defend himself—became central to who he was, internally and externally. His hardened identity taught him to chase toughness. As a kid, this presented itself in sport: lacrosse and hockey presented ways for him to demonstrate his strength. This persona permeated other parts of his life—punches thrown, bar fights, verbal sparring. Exuding strength translated well to prowess in these sports, progressing greatly as an athlete being recruited to play in college. He "majored in hockey and lacrosse," at the expense of his studies. Flunking out, he spent his early adult years as a tree logger. Strength and violence went hand in hand, intertwined in his life. It's

what drew him to whitewater.

Whitewater appealed to the same instincts of confidence, adrenaline, and strength he had developed. At its face value, this is easy to see. Whitewater kayaking is often described as both sport and state of being—an interplay between body, boat, and water that requires presence, precision, and adaptability. At its core, the discipline involved navigating a kayak through moving water, often downriver, across features like waves, holes, and drops that each present their own set of challenges. The real complexity lies in how paddlers read and respond to constantly changing conditions. The line between play and real danger is often thin, only known by crossing it, and the learning curve is incredibly steep. For many, therein lies the appeal.

Eventually Tom had built enough skill to set his sights on an upper section of the Deerfield: the Dryway. Named for its typical diversion through a canal from Dam No. 5 to the reservoir behind Fife Brook, the advanced section enticed him. After gathering intel from a friend, he set out to test his skills—alone. What followed was a scarily humbling run, culminating in a long stare down the tongue of Dragon’s Tooth, one of the river’s most infamous rapids. The line was simple in theory—start right, moving leftward to avoid the retentive, hungry “tooth,” then drive back right to dodge—or survive—the “rodeo,” a greedy depression in the river. He missed it. Alone, every mistake was amplified: foam, stone, and powerful currents collapsing into a whirlwind of fear and failure. He laughs now, but the edge of the memory lingers. “It was one of the most foolish things I ever did,” he remarks. It was a brutal lesson of the river’s strength and humility it demands.

Tom’s metamorphosis wasn’t incidental; it was directly shaped and mediated by the river, this being experiencing its own transformation. The Deerfield offered more than a place to kayak and recreate: it provided a structure for personal reflection, challenge, and change. Rapids, in testing his technical skill, exposed emotional habits, ego, and assumptions that existed beyond kayaking. The act of returning, again and again, to the same stretch of water with more skill, more patience, and more humility became a ritual

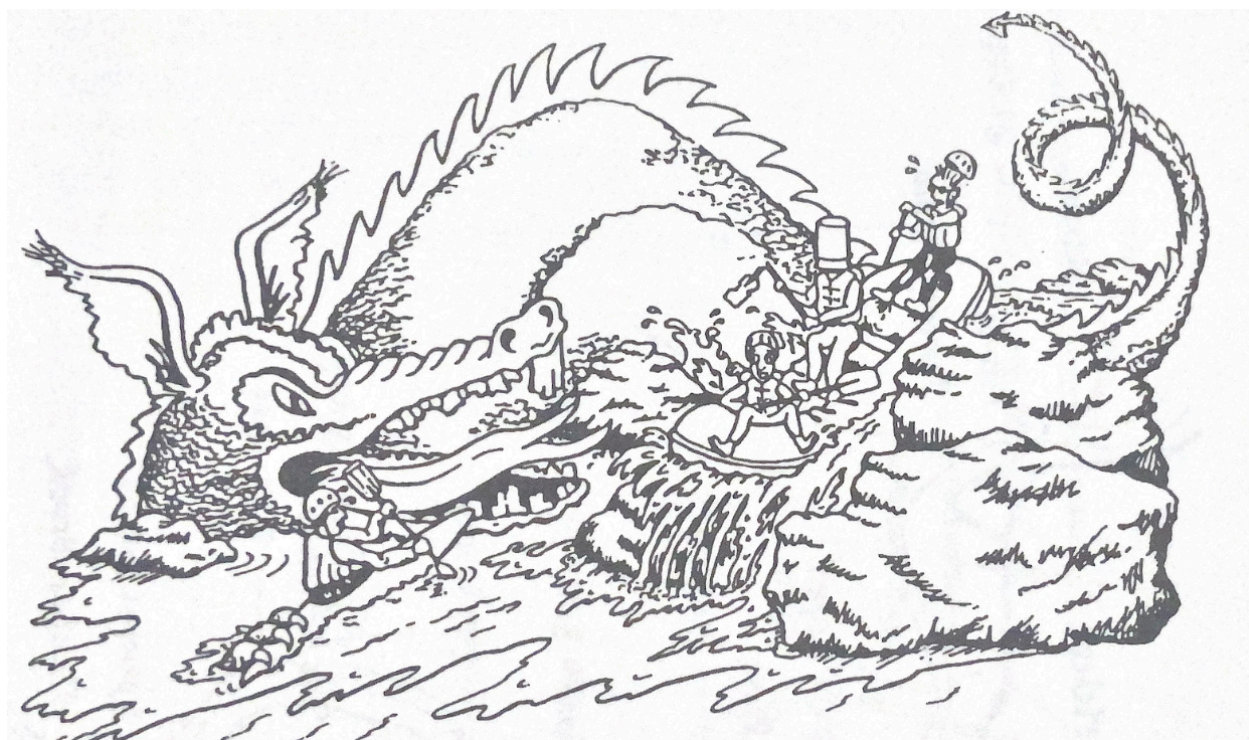


Figure 10

of self making in which the Deerfield was a teacher, a mentor. Kayaking became a practice in recalibrating how to move through the world. It became an embodied way of knowing that encapsulated and matured his values, relationships, and sense of self. Though Tom's paddling days have been closed via a torn ligament in his arm several years ago, the river continues to shape how he relates to the world around him. As he watches from the banks, his life story and identity remains tethered to the water, the bed on which it flows, and the people who, like him, find identity in its midst.

Tom's initial desire for the same adrenaline and display of strength he once found in hockey, lacrosse, and life, was quickly challenged by what kayaking required of him. He learned that he "can't beat up the river" and "couldn't be violent with the water." He had to work with it—and understand it. Drawn by the thrill his friends described, he instead fell in love with what he calls the "peaceful joy" of working in concert with the current. That's not to say that the adrenaline rush wasn't still part of it; he acknowledges its pull and capacity to satisfy a deep seated need for risk. But over time his relationship with



Figure 11

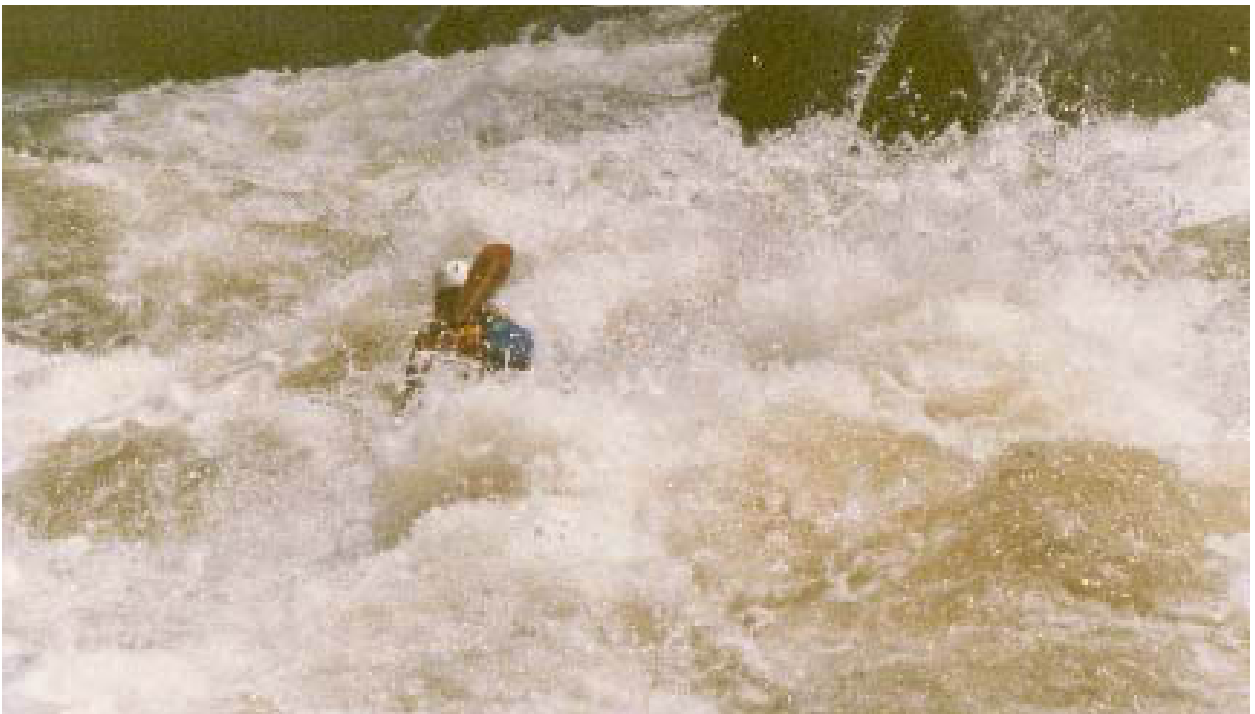


Figure 12

the sport, to the river, and with himself changed. Progression in whitewater mirrored a personal development: to work with rather than against, to slow down, to think logically and carefully, to care. Predictably, developed skill and experience shifted his place on the spectrum between fear and joy, and with every day on the Deerfield his experience continually changed and developed: fear gave way to confidence and risk became less about danger and more about balance. “The sport changed my life.”

Like Tom, I too came to the river drawn by stories of thrill, challenge, and the promise of something just out of reach. Tom’s story speaks to a transformation born from repeated risk—an evolution in how one meets the river. My own story begins at the other end of that spectrum: untested, inexperienced, and unsure, drawn to the Dryway without yet knowing what it demanded.

I first came to the Deerfield in 2022, as a 19-year-old college student, excited by stories about the Dryway told to me by friends. After a two hour car ride, we arrived at Dam No. 5, greeted by the roar of the water releasing from its gates. The then unfamiliar action of the put-in was intimidating: blue rafts boasting “Zoar” in a lightning like font, paddlers donning sleek dry suits and small boats, a row of cars lining the windy road up to the bridge in anticipation, and flashing lights and blaring sirens that signaled the rapidly rising water. It is indeed “truly one of the nicest put-ins in the Northeast,” but at the moment that wasn’t relieving any of my fears.

That first run on the Dryway was the most challenging run I had attempted up until that time. My training on other easier rivers had emboldened my fellow student and kayaking mentor, Richard Lytle, to take me on this run. We were joined by several other Dartmouth students of varying skill levels, but I was deeply aware that I was the least experienced of the bunch.

The view from the put-in was intimidating. The old, abandoned paper factory of Monroe Bridge overlooks the first rapid of the Dryway, aptly named “Factory Rapid.” It’s a shallow, rocky stretch of river marked by a large boulder at the bottom left. On the

morning of that first put-in, it was filled with paddlers riding waves, dodging rafts, and warming up. From my high vantage point, the faces below were bare, playing around in a place that I'm nervous about even entering. Their bright, multi-colored boats sharply contrast with the dark brown water underneath, black rocks beside, and green canopy of leaves above. I remember imagining that the other paddlers were dancing on those white crested waves, their movement synchronized effortlessly with the water in a tempo I could only appreciate, not mimic. The blue port-a-potties next to me were a retreat to gather myself in my anxiousness.

I pick up my Dagger Mamba, a burly pink and blue boat. I had borrowed it from Dartmouth's Ledyard Boathouse, and it showed the wear of generations of college students before me. Deep scratches cover its hull and dents disfigure its bow, both signs of a boat well loved. Together, the group of eight or so descend the long staircase at the doorstep of the dam to the concrete platform below. We finalize our preparations and push off into the big eddy across the river, protected by large boulders from the gushing, escaping water less than a hundred feet away.

I followed Richard downriver, second in a line of eight, as the most inexperienced often is—it's supposed to be the safest spot to be within our cluster. Richard tells me this is a "warm up rapid," perhaps in an effort to calm my visible fear. To Richard, this rapid is even less.

Although Richard is only a year older than me, his experience is impressive. Born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, Richard has embraced paddling as an integral part of his life for a long time. The Southeast is one of the largest hubs for whitewater paddling in the world, and he's blessed to have grown up with strong mentors who shaped him into the wickedly talented kayaker he is today. A soft spoken, faithful young man, you wouldn't hear it from Richard, but he's the best paddler I've ever spent time with. He radiates protective energy.

The supposedly easy rapid picks up in intensity towards the bottom, culminating

in what is called a “hole”: a powerful and at times dangerous river feature where water recirculates back on top of itself like a washing machine. The goal is usually to avoid it, especially for less experienced paddlers like me. But I got off line—pulled by the current, or maybe just now paddling quickly enough—and entered the hole head-on. It flipped me immediately. I rolled back up, but I was shaken. Holes can be deadly, potentially trapping an unprepared paddler for long periods of time. This technique involves re-righting a kayak and was originally practiced by the Inuit people of present day Greenland, allowing them to hunt in harsh ocean conditions. Once righted, I was still unnerved by the proximity of my head to the rocks below and annoyed at myself for allowing myself to flip over in the first place.

Perhaps that was a sign of more risk to come. We approach a rapid called either “Split Hair” or “Governor’s Rapid,” depending on who you ask. Regardless of the name, it’s marked by a prominent boulder splitting the river in two, sending water down a steep series of ledges. Guides often warn of a hazardous pour-over at the bottom left—a feature where water forcefully cascades over a rock or ledge creating a strong, concentrated backwashing current. I recalled Richard’s advice: “Look where you want to go.” This is a common mantra among paddlers. But as the drop neared, I could not take my eyes off the churning drop I was approaching. True to form, I went where I looked and ended up upside down yet again, this time thrown around by the swirling current. Unable to roll, I swam out of my boat, bouncing off rocks as I was flushed downstream.

The gorge that contains the Dryway made escape onto land impossible. The river was my only path to the safety of solid ground. Nervous about holding up the group, I hastily emptied my boat—recovered by my paddling companions before it could drift downstream—of water and hopped back in, rattled. We continued down, stopping just before “Dragon’s Tooth,” the most anticipated rapid on the entire river.

Despite the fear I carried into it, my descent of Dragon’s Tooth was surprisingly clean, much to the relief of my group. But there was little time to celebrate. The final rap-

id of the stretch, “Labyrinth,” quickly approached. Known for its technical complexity, Labyrinth holds two notorious features: a powerful hole and a dangerous sieve. The hole is known as the “Terminator” or “Le Petit Mort” — the little death — a spot that demands very quick decision-making to skirt. The sieve is a deadly feature where water rushes through a narrow crack in the rock, wide enough to allow the passage of water, but not a boat — or a body. Buoyed by my recent success at Dragon’s Tooth, I threaded my way cleanly through both hazards. But in my excitement afterwards my focus slipped and I flipped, again finding myself out of my boat, bruised in skin and confidence. When we finally reached the takeout, it was a welcome relief to this eventful day.

That day on the river captured the volatility and unpredictability that makes risk not just a condition of whitewater, but one of its most defining features. Likewise, this experience highlighted the precision one must muster to mitigate risk — a skill that requires both body and mind. Risk in this context was not purely physical. Rather, it was cognitive, emotional, social, and unfolding in response to environment and confidence. Encounters with risk are central to how paddlers come to know themselves, each other, and the water. Risk is not something to be conquered, but rather a relational force that is learned, shared, and situated. It is also formative. The river might teach people “how to live,” as Tom described, but risk is a formative element of this teaching. Throughout the Deerfield, risk is practiced and made meaningful across different bodies, identities, temporalities, and communities. I have come to conceptualize “risk” as a temporally discrete nexus of social and spatial encounter — one that becomes embodied by individuals and integral to how paddlers dwell in and with the river.

That day on the river taught me that risk was cognitive, emotional, and social. This realization echoed scholarly debates about how risk operates beyond mere calculation. Economic anthropology highlights how risk is not only a technical or probabilistic concept, but also one deeply embedded and mediated by cultures and institutions.¹⁹ Risk is also framed as a calculated, managed, and mitigated uncertainty. Risk is a “relational

order constituting the connections between people, things and outcomes.”²⁰ Risk, in this sense, raises further questions about play — an affective and embodied state of being that, at times, is inclusive of risk and, at other times, seen at odds with it. This discussion has been a topic of interest to environmental historians as well as anthropologists. As Richard White argues, the separation of work from nature has intensified over time, with nature increasingly imagined as a space for leisure. Risk transforms recreation into something more structured, calculated, and physically demanding—more labor than pure leisure.²¹ These perspectives illustrate how risk is shaped by cultural, economic, and recreational structures, but they also raise questions about how risk is conceptualized and governed at broader societal levels. To fully situate the stakes of risk on the Deerfield, it is helpful to consider how social theorists have framed risk as a product of modernity itself.

Ulrich Beck’s theorization of the “risk society” helps frame this the broader dynamics at play. He argues risk is a manufactured uncertainty, not an objective threat, that becomes central to how societies organize themselves.²² Michel Foucault’s work on governmentality laid the groundwork for understanding risk not as an intrinsic property, but as a technique for managing populations—something imagined, assessed, and addressed through statistical reasoning.²³ Pat O’Malley builds on this view, arguing, “What is specific to risk, in their view, is that risk is a statistical and probabilistic technique.”²⁴ While much of the literature on risk focuses on how states and institutions manage uncertainty at the population level, I focus on the intimate, affective dimensions of risk: how it is lived, shared, and interpreted by small communities navigating accountability and care in real time in a space where mistakes can be immediately fatal. On the Deerfield, risk was not merely a probability to be managed, but a force to be negotiated in community. On the Deerfield, risk is felt intimately.

This intimacy of risk can be seen through Jane’s story. Earlier I described how her connection to the Deerfield began with a birthday trip but that this initial exposure eventually deepened into a lifestyle, a profession, and, ultimately, a sense of home. Now, I

return to her story to explore how risk was central to this transformation - how moments of risk on the river became a medium for growth.

When Jane speaks about the river, she evokes both risk and reverence. “The river is always going to win,” she told me, describing the delicate balance between control and humility that defines whitewater. Even now, more than two decades since she first came to the Deerfield, she still pauses before difficult rapids, takes deep breaths before committing to the West Branch, and stops a river run when something doesn’t feel right. “I’ve walked off the river quite a few times,” she admits. “Because I just wasn’t feeling it and don’t want to have a bad moment out there. It can ruin it for you.” Risk is something to listen for, to respect, and to negotiate in real time, whether alone or with others.

Learning from the West Branch of the Deerfield

The Deerfield’s West Branch is a steep Class V creek where mistakes can turn fatal. Dropping over 300 feet per mile from Prospect Mountain, down Readsboro falls to its confluence with the main stem in Readsboro, VT, the run is infamous for its intensity. Its centerpiece, Tunnel Vision, is one of New England’s most notorious and feared rapids. It begins with a 12-foot plunge followed by a harrowing 70-foot drop over just 100 yards — roughly the same gradient the Dryway loses over an entire mile. The rapid culminates in a pitch-black concrete tunnel beneath Route 100, where paddlers must navigate massive hydraulics with limited visibility. All agree: a swim on the Deerfield’s West Branch could be terminal. As Bruce Lessels and Norman Sims, pioneering expert boaters in the region, recount:

“The West Branch of the Deerfield is a free-flowing, steep creek that contains technical whitewater from Class III to Class VI. Words often fail to describe the difference, or serve as a guide to others. Let’s just say that many expert boaters have run the West Branch of the Deerfield. All of its major drops have been successfully

navigated. But on any given day, groups of expert boaters have grown smaller as someone broke a paddle, sprained an ankle during a nose pin, took a nasty swim, or decided that this wasn't their day. Everyone has walked around drops that on other days they ran successfully. Many of those competent boaters have taken swims even though they were capable of running the hardest drops of the river. At the end of a West Branch run at a good water level, most boaters can honestly look at each other, contemplate the experience, and agree that it was a Class V river. Our advice: scout everything, take nothing for granted, take safety precautions, and have fun.”²⁵

Jane first ran the West Branch in 2004. Fear in anticipation and exhilaration in completion defined the day for her. She felt like she had “accomplished something really big in my life, something I had worked toward and dreamt of for years. I had faced something that scared me and gave it my all because I knew that I belonged there.” To this day, she approaches the West Branch with the utmost caution. “I know the West Branch so so well, but I still know that any moment something bad can happen and there's a big risk to it,” she tells me. The risk she associates with the section entirely transforms the experience.

Unlike the Dryway, where hundreds gather at the put-in to socialize, laugh, and linger, the West Branch draws a small, focused crew — usually fewer than eight paddlers with extensive experience — who meet with quiet intention. “We definitely are all in our heads and thinking,” Jane says, describing the atmosphere before a run. The tone is serious, reflective. “You can't be out there loosey-goosey,” she adds. “I've had friends that have gotten hurt on the West Branch. I'm always going to take a couple deep breaths. That doesn't happen on the Dryway.” Her pause captures what's understood in this space: the West Branch demands a different awareness, composure, and respect for the consequences.



Figure 13

Clearly the experience of risk does not solely arise from physical space; it is constructed in community through the ways space is talked about, interpreted, and, and remembered. It is as much social and discursive as it is material—shaped through conversations, stories, and shared narratives, much like any other social norm. For Jane and her paddling partners, the West Branch is not merely dangerous because of its features and their firsthand experience, but because it has been narrated as such within their communities. Each retelling of a close call, each decision to walk around Tunnel Vision, and each moment of collective focus at the put-in reinforces the river's identity within that community as high consequence terrain. As Mary Douglas argues, perceptions of risk are not merely probabilistic; they reflect the moral and cultural structures of a community.²⁶ In this way, risk on the West Branch becomes a relational force produced before any pad-

dle need touch water: both socially and physically formidable. Risk is felt socially—in the unspoken atmosphere of a put-in, the silence between a group of friends, or the nervous looks from onlookers. It can't simply be understood by looking.

This reveals a productive tension: that risk is not naturally inherent, yet it has very real physical consequences. While risk is socially constructed, it is rooted in embodied, physical histories. The social meanings attached to the West Branch do not emerge in abstraction; they accumulate through real encounters and individual experiences, layered and built over time with every rapid, every story, every encounter. Risk, then, is both lived and told, grounded in physical engagement and reinforced and transmitted through social interaction.

Consider how Jane describes this dynamic: “Every time you finish a rapid on the West Branch everyone has some little story to tell about what happened or what went well. You're high-fiving. We all have some quick story to tell and we're stoked and happy and we can laugh and point at each other if someone does make a mistake. You move on like that. It's a different experience of how you feel on the West Branch than how you feel on the Dryway.” Risk is then not a property but a process. To know the West Branch is to know a risk that is both material and discursive, intimate and shared. Ontologically, it is not simply encountered but co-constituted, remade each time someone stands at the put-in and remembers—or is told—what happened last time.

Further, as we learn from Jane stories, risk is not necessarily—or even primarily—negative. Perhaps this is intuitive. If risk were purely undesirable, risk-laden activities like whitewater kayaking might not be pursued with such passion. Instead, risk functions as a catalyst for “stoke” as Jane describes it — an affective register that signals a combination of exhilaration, happiness, and joy. Risk creates the conditions necessary for shared experience, bonding, and storytelling — foundations upon which friendship and community are always built. From this perspective, risk animates and deepens life.

Of course, this viewpoint necessitates that risk not exceed skill. Ingold encourages

us to understand skill as something beyond a mechanical force: “Skill, in short, is a property not of the individual human body as a biophysical entity, a thing-in-itself, but of the total field of relations constituted by the presence of the organism-person, indissolubly body and mind, in a richly structured environment.”²⁷ Thus, skill is relational, not internal. Perhaps nowhere better is this exemplified than in paddling: in the constant negotiation of currents, adjusting lines, and improvisation, cultivated overtime, skill is found. Skill isn’t an automatic, summon-able knowledge. It is being able to feel, respond to, and move with the river. When risk and skill meet in balance, what emerges is not recklessness but possibility: the potential for mastery and positive experience shared within a skilled group. For paddlers like Jane, risk is not the opposite of safety, but a medium through which presence is heightened and relationships—between people, and between person and river—are deepened. Risk, balanced with skill, again allows for connection and friendship.

Thus, risk cannot be understood outside a consideration of skill and navigating risk requires utilizing one’s skill. Even as a professional kayaker, risk remained a constant companion to Jane. One’s experience with a particular stretch of whitewater and its associated risk is entirely mediated by a paddler’s skill and is also contextualized socially. This is something that Jane continually navigates within her paddling communities, from overconfidence — often emergent through youthful and often masculine energy — to the aches of aging bodies, her communities constantly assess their own and each other’s skill. Having paddled the West Branch for over two decades, Jane has seen friends come and go, but she has also seen them age in and out of the stretch. “For some of my friends that have stopped paddling the West Branch, you might get to a certain point in your life where you find it’s not even worth it. They’ll just stick to the Dryway which is totally fine. Some people just do Fife Brook and they’re super happy with that. That’s the great thing about living on the Deerfield.” This graduated approach to risk reflects not just a shift in preference but also an iterative (re)calibration of skill in relation to age, confidence, and

familiarity with the river. As bodies and priorities change, so too does the shape of risk and the conditions for participation in life on the Deerfield. Dwelling on the river, then, encompasses sustaining attentiveness to the evolving balance between one's own capabilities and the risk inherent in the space. "Hopefully I'll still be able to paddle the West Branch for many many more years, but I'm about to turn forty five," she tells me. "I don't think I'll ever stop paddling the Dryway."

Unlike the Dryway, the West Branch is not dam-fed. Its flow is entirely governed by rainfall, snowmelt, and natural hydrology meaning that paddlers can't count on predictable conditions. This unpredictability amplifies the perceived risk, its rarity adding to its mystique and seriousness. There are no scheduled releases, no dependable rhythms—only the present moment and what the river is offering any given day. This stands in stark contrast with the regulated stretches of the Deerfield where risk is embedded in routine. On the West Branch, risk feels more elemental—more wild.

While risk and skill are inseparable, experiences with risk are also temporally discrete. A common adage among paddlers riffs off an old Heraclitus quote: "No man ever paddles in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man." Each descent is shaped by both the river's intrinsic, ever-changing nature and the paddler's evolving body, confidence, skill, and mental state. What once felt playful may later feel precarious; what once seemed terrifying may, with time and repetition, feel familiar. Jane confesses: "I haven't run Tunnel Vision in quite a few years because I feel like the risks on it are... I just don't want to take that chance anymore... Sometimes it's just not worth taking the risk to injure yourself and then put yourself and the group in a position where someone else could get injured." To dwell with such a river is to engage in ongoing negotiation where return is always a reckoning.

While Jane's story shows how risk transforms across time within one person, teaching reveals how risk moves between people. It is felt not only in one's own body, but in the bodies one is responsible for. Mira's experience as a kayaking instructor highlights

this relational dynamic. “If I’m going down the Dryway with friends of mine, I think less about whether I’m doing something safe or not because I’ve been on it so much. I can mess around a little bit more, do a little more risky stuff because I feel very safe. Fun is on my mind more than safety,” she notes. This is markedly different from when she takes beginners or customers down the same stretch. She finds herself constantly asking the questions: “Where are my people? What are they doing? Are they okay? Do they feel safe? How can I be in a position of maximal efficiency?”

There’s also a productive tension here: her sense of safety makes space for risk. Familiarity, rather than caution, invites play. Comfort with the river, earned through repetition and embodied knowledge, becomes the very condition that allows her to test its limits. Risk, then, is not the opposite of safety, but something that emerges differently depending on one’s relation to place, people, skill, and past experience.

Familiarity further deepens responsibility. As Mira shifts from paddling with friends to guiding beginners, her relationship to risk changes again: risk becomes distributed. It is no longer only about her body in the water, but about the bodies she’s responsible for. Her familiarity with the river doesn’t eliminate risk; instead, it is reframed through care, authority, and pedagogical responsibility, expanding risk from an individual experience to a social one. Experiences of risk move from conscious assessment to embodied knowledge. In this way, risk is also an evolving relational field that is taught and felt, internalized and inhabited. This point constantly is reiterated among paddlers. Experiences with risk become second nature as skill develops and time progresses. The experience constantly changes, for better or for worse, in a web of connection between people and place.

When Risk Doesn’t Translate

This is not to say that the web we become enmeshed in within experiences of risk are felt equally. Quite the opposite: experiences with risk are often incredibly intimate.

A recent story of my own illuminates this dynamic. This story takes place not on the Deerfield but instead in northern Vermont at Texas Falls. As we unloaded our boats, a few nearby hikers stopped to ask if we planned to run the series of waterfalls just below. “Hopefully,” we responded, grinning. A local family, who lived just around the corner, seemed thrilled at the prospect and staked out a spot on the bridge above to watch.

As we adjusted our gear and prepared to scout the drops, a young woman—about my age—approached us with a different tone. “Are you going to kayak over the waterfalls?” she asked. “We’ll see. That’s the plan,” I responded. Her face tightened. “You can’t,” she said sharply. “It’s too dangerous.” Her voice cracked slightly “My dad works for the park. People die here. My dad responds to the reports.”

We tried to reassure her. We were well trained, had all of the necessary safety equipment, and would be incredibly cautious. We explained our plan to scout every drop and proceed conservatively. “I’m just trying to warn you,” she concluded, before walking away and driving off.

None of us had run this stretch of the river before. A friend of a friend had recommended it, describing it as an exciting sequence of drops, seemingly clean and runnable. Still, the young woman’s warning lingered. Later we learned she may have been referencing a suicide in the area, the death of a local. Her voice echoed in our minds, but so did the excitement of the family of the bridge above, eager to watch us. We proceeded, taking our time, meticulously scouting each drop for potential hazards, and eventually deciding we were capable of navigating the falls. Our excitement returned, now inflected by the knowledge that our presence here meant something different to each observer.

One by one, without major incident, the three of us descended the drops, to the applause of each other and our onlookers. A photographer who had eagerly documented our descent approached us afterward, offering congratulations and a few excited words about the photos he’d captured. But even in that rush of exhilaration, the woman’s warning echoed, her fear still hanging in the air, complicating our celebration. The moment was

simultaneously triumphant and uneasy, shaped as much by our success as by the memory of her caution.

We had no shared history, no common ground through which to interpret the river. As a result, we couldn't understand what the water meant to each other—what stories, fears, or memories it carried. For us, it was what we could observe and what we'd been told—a sequence of runnable drops recommended by someone we trusted. For the concerned local woman, it was something else entirely: a site layered with loss and personal history. Both perspectives were real, and yet they existed in tension. Risk defined both. For us, it was a challenge we could manage, mapped onto our training, assessed through what we could see, and negotiated with precision. For her, it was a memory already inscribed in the landscape, shaped by personal grief and communal experiences. Risk was not a fixed measure of danger readily intelligible to either of us. Rather, it was contingent on experience, skill, and the social and temporal depth through which we came to know the river. In reflecting on this moment, I read this encounter as a collision of temporalities and truths: what the river is now, what it has been, and how it accrues meaning for someone else. Our experiences with risk differed greatly from each other's, and neither were more valid than the other's. Both were responses to the same water, routed through different relational maps. Risk is a temporally discrete nexus of social and spatial encounter, unfolding through affect. Risk, when navigated relationally and attentively, becomes a way of dwelling—a practice that demands, presence, care, and attunement to place and people. It draws individuals into deeper engagement with the river and one another, forging connection through shared vulnerability and embodied learning. It becomes a catalyst of connection to each other, and to the river.

What these stories reveal is that risk does not interrupt the Deerfield's meaning—it sustains it. Paddlers come to know the river through immersion: in risk, in repetition, and in shared attention to the water and one another. In this way, risk becomes a medium through which people grow close. Perceptions of risk are not fixed in the physical spaces

that characterize the river; they permeate memory, community, and discourse making possible a form of presence that is felt in the body long after leaving the water. To dwell here is to move with that risk—to navigate its shifting presence as it is shaped by the same forces of regulation, unpredictability, and memory that define the Deerfield itself.

DWELLING, MEMORY, AND LOVE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Woven through the conversations and encounters that populate this project was a persistent thread: love. Love emerged as an enduring force linking people to each other and each other to the river. Love was felt and shared in everyday encounters. It was created over time and affirmed in mutual sentiment. Love was something that connected me to those I interviewed, walked alongside, and learned from. Whether rapport or an understanding of shared interest garnered through the conversations in which we found ourselves in with each other, I'm unsure. Nevertheless, I certainly felt, as Mira expressed, that "river people tend to get along because we're all in love with the same thing."

This kind of love isn't a lustful glance between romantic interests—the kind that plagues young adults not unlike myself. Nor is it the anchoring commitment found in our blood or in enduring interpersonal relationships we choose. Nor is it the mystery that requires a selfless love to connect with higher powers through faith. Nor is it that which bonds friends who find themselves knotted in the present.

The love I encountered in this work is not necessarily grand or declarative; it is quiet, practiced, and enduring. It lives in the repetition of people enjoying shared activities, the passing down of knowledge under a bright vise, the laughter of stories reigniting vibrant memories, the spreading of ashes in eddies that gave life meaning, the promise of return. Far from abstract, it lived in that knot of people, place, and time. To dwell is to navigate those knots, learning place through everyday actions, movements, and relationships. Dwelling is how we come to know and be in the world around us; love is what sometimes arises from that knowing and being. To love a place is to dwell with care, allowing its affect to wash over you, absorbing the ineffable attunement that arises from listening, feeling, and caring.

This love emerged through intersubjectivity. Throughout this work I came to understand and appreciate the river not as an object that can be studied in a vacuum, but

as something continually created and revealed through relationships: with those I interviewed, with the places they brought me, with the shared silences and mutual attentiveness that built some semblance of trust. Sitting across from Paul as he carefully crafted his flies, standing quietly with Tom in the hush of the snow, listening to the introspective voices of Tom and Jane describing their past selves—these moments taught me to study this river by seeing it through the eyes of another, to be momentarily invited into their dwelling. Intersubjectivity made space for love to permeate in all of its proximity, vulnerability, and presence. The river became a mode of connection between those who encountered its waters. I was held by this connection—this love.

“How do you process beauty alone?” poet-anthropologist Adrie Kusserow recently asked my Senior Anthropology Seminar. Her question, without totally foreclosing the possibility of beauty in solitude, gestures towards the way such experiences often insist on company—that it expands in the presence of others, and that we come to know it more fully through the mutual act of witnessing and dwelling. And yet, the Deerfield also revealed how these moments of presence can be deeply personal: sitting alone in appreciation in a car, walking snowy banks with only the sound of trickling water as accompaniment, casting from an eddy filled only with personal thoughts and the splashes of released fish. To dwell is to be attuned, whether in community or solitude. What emerges is a love that is simultaneously shared and singular, expanded by community and nurtured in the intimate moments we might experience the river in solitude.

It was this duality that allowed me to find personal reflection in the mirror of the water and its community. Alone the river offered clarity and a place to feel, listen, and be shaped intangibly. In company, it became a more traditional field site where stories were exchanged and conversations decoded with the tools given to me by my education. These different modes of understanding helped me weave a deeper understanding of place that validated both introspection and interconnection as method. Informed by my past few years of experience being on and around rivers across the world, I came to see the Deer-

field through this practice of loving and dwelling, where knowing came as much from slowed movement and vulnerability as from theory or text. The easy friendship and connection that arose throughout my work originated in this shared love for rivers.

But love and presence alone do not guarantee continuity. “Time passes and people forget,” Tom tells me. Now thirty years removed from the Deerfield Settlement Agreement, many of its signatories have passed on. With them passes the stories of the fight for the Deerfield and the memories of a river past. Water is taken for granted. Scheduled releases are mistaken for seasonal regularity rather than infrastructural negotiation. The river that flows when it should is experienced as a given. Death flattens history. The fight becomes footnote, and the engineered becomes the innate.

This is what’s at stake. In the friction of generations, we must not let the status quo silence the enduring struggle to protect our waterways. Particularly, as the current federal administration continues to roll back environmental protections, there is a growing risk that rivers like the Deerfield will only be seen through their lens of easy economic utility — divorced from histories of activism, sacrifice, negotiation, and collaboration that made the river accessible in the first place.

The Deerfield has historically served as a model for watershed agreements throughout New England and beyond. As we move forward in a world where climate change is accelerating, infrastructure aging, and federal protections weakening, the lessons of the Deerfield are increasingly urgent. We must focus not on returning to an imagined, idyllic past, but on reckoning with the entangled present in which we dwell. In dwelling with the Deerfield, communities live meaningfully within landscapes shaped by regulation, memory, and labor. This mode of being resists both romantic nostalgia and hubristic control, instead embracing the river as both ecological and political, natural and scheduled. It is through this entanglement that the next generation come to know, care for, and fight for rivers in New England and beyond.

And still, even amid forgetting, even as policy shifts and time thins memory, the

river endures; people return to the Deerfield. They cast lines, paddle, teach, and listen. The river continues to shape those who move with it. To love the Deerfield is to not only remember, but to remain present—to be attuned to its flows, its histories, and its futures. Such presence—embodied, practiced, felt—is the foundation of this work. The ethnography that I have striven to craft here is one grounded in presence: one that honors the affective truth of what water, place, and people do to one another.



Figure 14

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the paddlers, fishers, anglers, guides, activists, enthusiasts, historians, and locals who participated in this project and taught me so much. Thank you to my advisor Sienna Craig for your mentorship and guidance, academic and otherwise throughout the four years. You have made me a better writer, thinker, and person. Thank you to Claire Garber Goodman and the Claire Garber Goodman Fund for funding this research. Thank you to the Dartmouth College Department of Anthropology and all of its Professors and administrators, particularly Professors Jeremy DeSilva, Petra Creamer, Maron Greenleaf, Kevin Peterson, Anne Sosin, as well as Julie Gilman and Emily Harrington, who've challenged me and allowed me space to grow. Thank you to all of my friends who've touched my life indelibly. Finally, thank you to my family for all your love.

I owe deep thanks to the Deerfield River itself. For everything.

LIST OF FIGURES

Map of the Deerfield Watershed: From Deerfield River Watershed Association

Figure 1. Early release from Dam No. 5. Photo provided by Tom Christopher.

Figure 2. House in Monroe Bridge. Photo by Pablo Pineda.

Figure 3. Deerfield signatories. Photo provided by Tom Christopher.

Figure 4. Downstream from Dam No. 5: paper mill and river. Photo by Pablo Pineda.

Figure 5. Map of Fife Brook fishing areas. Provided by Deerfield River Trout Unlimited.

Figure 6. Gardner Falls 100 years post completion. Photo from Massachussets Paddler.

Figure 7. Brown trout. Photo from Deerfield Fly Shop.

Figure 8. Put in below Dam. No. 5. Photo from American Whitewater.

Figure 9. Dunbar Brook Picnic Area sign, near Dryway takeout. Photo by Pablo Pineda.

Figure 10. Dragon's Tooth depiction. From *Deerfield River Guidebook*.

Figure 11. Ragonese and Tom at Sumner Falls. Photo provided by Tom Christopher.

Figure 12. Tom on Dragon's Tooth at 3,000 CFS. Photo provided by Tom Christopher.

Figure 13. Kayaker on Tunnel Vision. Photo from NRS: Duct Tape Diaries.

Figure 14. Deerfield River Sunset. Photo by Deerfield River Watershed Association.

NOTES

- 1 Map via the Deerfield River Watershed Association
- 2 p. iii: McVaugh, Tim. "The Tragedy of the Deerfield River: Monopoly Capitalism and Ecological Change in Western Massachusetts ," 2019.
- 3 ibid. p. 6
- 4 Neumann, Roderick P. Making political ecology. London: Routledge, 2016. & Worster, Donald. Rivers of empire: Water, aridity, and the growth of the American west. New York: Oxford, 2010.
- 5 Cronon, William. Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. & White, Richard. The Organic Machine: The remaking of the Columbia River. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- 6 Stewart, Kathleen. Ordinary Affects. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007.
- 7 Ingold, Tim. The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and Skill. London: Routledge, 2011.
- 8 Armstrong, Jeanne H, and John R Mullin. "The Problems of Rural Reindustrialization: A Case Study of Monroe, Massachusetts ." New England Journal of Public Policy 5, no. 2 (June 21, 1989).
- 9 From "New England Flow Constitution"
- 10 Christopher, Tom. "Requiem: New England FLOW Dissolves Organization." River Management Society 36, no. 4 (Winter 2023).
- 11 Ingold, Tim. The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and Skill. London: Routledge, 2011
- 12 ibid. p. 199
- 13 Much of this relies upon McVaugh, Tim. "The Tragedy of the Deerfield River: Monopoly Capitalism and Ecological Change in Western Massachusetts,"
- 14 Worster, Donald. Rivers of empire: Water, aridity, and the growth of the Ameri-

can west. New York: Oxford, 2010.

15 Stainova, Yana. *Sonorous worlds: Musical enchantment in Venezuela*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2023.

16 Cronon, William. *Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature*. New York: W.W. Norton

17 White, Richard. *The Organic Machine: The remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

18 p 52: Milder, Robert, and Randall Fuller. *The Business of Reflection: Hawthorne in His Notebooks*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27811>.

19 Tucker, Bram, and Donald R. Nelson. "What Does Economic Anthropology Have to Contribute to Studies of Risk and Resilience?" *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (June 2017): 161–72. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12085>.

20 p. 87: Boholm, Åsa. *Anthropology and risk*, April 24, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797793>.

21 Cronon, William. *Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

22 Beck, Ulrich. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

23 Foucault, Michel. *Governmentality*. Lecture, February 1978. Transcribed by Pasquale Pasquino, December 1978.

24 p. 5: O'Malley, Pat. (2009). *Governmentality and Risk*.

25 Lessels, Bruce, and Norman Sims. *The Deerfield River Guidebook: Whitewater, fishing, recreation*. North Amherst, Massachusetts: New England Cartographics, 1993.

26 Douglas, Mary. *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory*. London: Routledge, 1992.

27 p. 353: Ingold, Tim. *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge, 2011

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Jeanne H, and John R Mullin. "The Problems of Rural Reindustrialization: A Case Study of Monroe, Massachusetts ." *New England Journal of Public Policy* 5, no. 2 (June 21, 1989).
- Beck, Ulrich. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.
- Boholm, Åsa. *Anthropology and risk*, April 24, 2015.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797793>.
- Burke, John. "Deerfield River." *Estuary Magazine*. Accessed May 28, 2025. <https://www.estuarymagazine.com/2021/09/deerfield-river/>.
- Christopher, Tom. "Requiem: New England FLOW Dissolves Organization." *River Management Society* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2023).
- Cronon, William. *Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.
- Douglas, Mary. *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory*. London: Roudledge, 1992.
- Haenn, Nora, Richard R. Wilk, and Allison Harnish. *The environment in anthropology: A reader in ecology, culture, and Sustainable Living*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. *Governmentality*. Lecture, February 1978. Transcribed by Pasquale Pasquino, December 1978.
- Ingold, Tim. *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Lessels, Bruce, and Norman Sims. *The Deerfield River Guidebook: Whitewater, fishing, recreation*. North Amherst, Massachusetts: New England Cartographics, 1993.
- McVaugh, Tim. "The Tragedy of the Deerfield River: Monopoly Capitalism and Ecological Change in Western Massachusetts ," 2019.
- Milder, Robert, and Randall Fuller. *The Business of Reflection: Hawthorne in His*

- Notebooks. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27811>.
- Neumann, Roderick P. *Making political ecology*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- O'Malley, Pat. (2009). *Governmentality and Risk*.
- Stainova, Yana. *Sonorous worlds: Musical enchantment in Venezuela*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2023.
- Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Tucker, Bram, and Donald R. Nelson. "What Does Economic Anthropology Have to Contribute to Studies of Risk and Resilience?" *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (June 2017): 161–72. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12085>.
- White, Richard. *The Organic Machine: The remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- Worster, Donald. *Rivers of empire: Water, aridity, and the growth of the American west*. New York: Oxford, 2010.

