

Families to the River- *blending science and stories to learn about the Wild & Scenic Westfield River*

Twenty five years ago the Westfield River became the first river in Massachusetts to be designated Wild & Scenic. To celebrate the dual anniversaries, 50 years of Wild and Scenic program and 25 years for the Westfield River designation, the Wild & Scenic Westfield River Committee used the generous funding received from **River Network** and **Patagonia** to do what we most like to do- bring people to the river to enjoy, learn and celebrate.

The Wild & Scenic Westfield River Committee has been working for 25 year to uphold the conservation



goals established when the Westfield River was designated. The Committee is comprised of appointed representatives from the 10 Wild & Scenic communities plus representatives from the regional planning authorities, NGOs and the state. The Committee has been able to offer a great many outreach events, host trail repairs and clean-ups, undertake research with local students and help fund beneficial ecological projects in the Wild & Scenic towns. Each year we host an amazing watershed Blitz where experts lead citizen scientists on an exploration of a different river tributary. We work with our many dedicated partners on projects and strive to protect the outstandingly remarkable values that made the Westfield River worthy of the Wild and Scenic title.

Exploring who else loves our streams.

The Committee has several children's programs through the year but for Families to the River we invited both parents and children to come out to play and learn. For this project we also branched out and teamed up with two local libraries, Becket and Huntington, in the rural hilltowns of Western Massachusetts. Working with the libraries was a great partnership and allowed us to provide a unique two part adventure for families- part outdoor exploration and part creative arts and storytelling.



No batteries required- two young explorers learn how river bugs help tell the story of stream health.

Families to the River kicked-off with a short stroll from the library to the river. With the fast flowing river (it has been an unusually wet season) as our classroom, nets dropped into the river and magnifying boxes were passed around. In no time at all a diverse collection of aquatic insects had been collected from the underside of rocks- more than enough bugs to fuel a raucous remake of 'head, shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes' (Meredyth's version- head, thorax, abdomen, abdomen) and lots of curious questions as we identified our haul and learned about the dual lives of so many aquatic insects. We

learned which river bugs really like cool, clean water and those who are more tolerant. We also learned patience; a few quiet minutes staring at a clumps of twigs was rewarded with a few of the 'twigs' moving and giving us a chance to marvel at the intricate 'homes' some of these simple river bugs can build to protect themselves. Our little stream was just brimming with life and wonderful stories about living in a river.

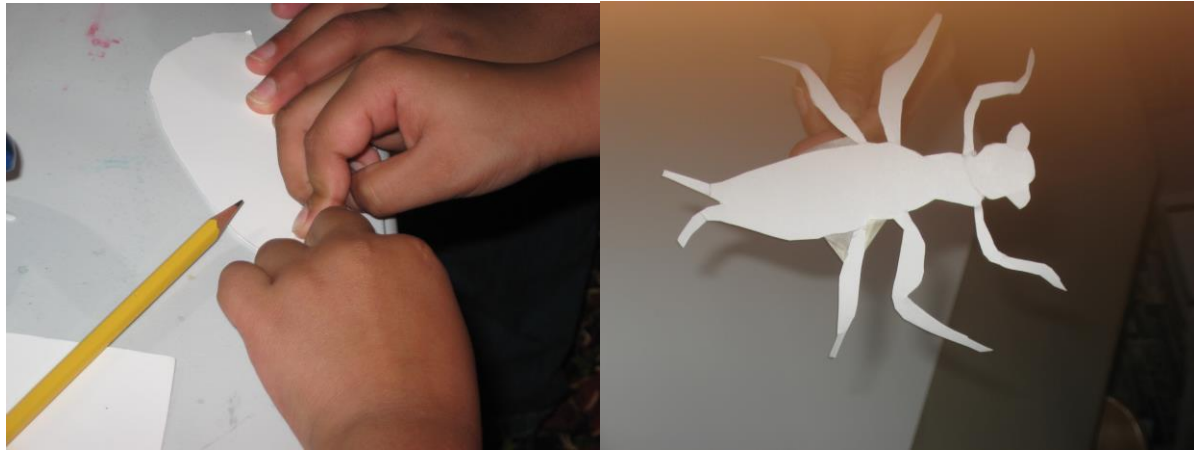


Meredyth Babcock helps curious children and their parents find the different river insects hiding in the collection pans.

The fascinating aquatic insects were returned to the river but their 'shadows' were not. The second afternoon of *Families to the River* involved each child and parent making a shadow puppet of the insect, frog or dragonfly they most admired. With a handful of helpful materials and a great deal of the available table space in the libraries, the families crafted their own keepsake river critter shadow puppets. The puppets and their creators became the stars of an amusing and informative play performed on the shadow puppet stage. Lingering in the library were some key tools and materials to be checked out when the families wanted to tackle more explorations or, hopefully, share the wonderful Wild & Scenic Westfield River with another family.



Eliseo and Ariel Engstrom celebrating 25 years of Wild & Scenic Westfield River



With a few simple tools and materials, memories of the river bugs found when exploring were transformed into puppets, a far ranging story of river life and a special remembrance to take home.



Children and parents brought their creations to life in a lively performance on the Shadow Puppet Stage.