Last week, I got my annual news jolt about shoreline pollution, this time from the river that divides Clinton and Madison. At issue is whether the Department of Environmental Protection should help a multinational corporation (Unilever) construct a mile-long pipe so that its factory wastewater can discharge directly into the larger, more distant Hammonasset River, rather than into the smaller, nearby Hayden Creek. Opposing this unlikely "hookup" are the towns, local advocacy groups, unaffiliated residents, shell fishermen and at least one environmental private detective.

There's a game being played here, an environmental blame game, which is a lot like marathon poker played with strategy, luck, bluffing and quite possibly some cheating. The corporation blames the town of Clinton for not installing sewers and other controls. Residents and local environmental groups blame the corporation for the excess pollution and the DEP for not inspecting the plant often enough and for not penalizing the corporation when it is in violation. Not having investigated this personally, I don't know what to believe. But I do know what's going on.

What's happening is that another environmental game is being played beneath the table. This one -- the dilution game -- takes its name from a bad rhyme: "The solution to pollution is dilution." Stated more bluntly, what matters legally in most cases is not the actual amount of pollution a town or corporation produces, but its concentration.

Consider, for example, the private environment of your body -- the relationship between your ability to metabolize a drink and your ability to drive a vehicle safely on public roads. The law says that you can drink slowly all day and still drive legally, provided that you keep the concentration of alcohol in your bloodstream below the legal threshold. Likewise, corporations and towns can pollute all day and be legal, provided that the concentration of pollution stays low enough.

Though normally only "tipsy" with pollution, sometimes Hayden Creek becomes legally drunk from the combined inflows -- beer from leaking septic tanks, wine from the downtown and liquor from the corporation -- which exceed the "toxication" limit. The DEP regulators who visit the site are analogous to state troopers who pull drivers over for sobriety tests when they appear to be driving erratically. Hayden Creek was suspected of flowing while under the influence of pollution and given an environmental breathalyzer. The creek flunked it. But it's not the creek's fault. It's the fault of the various establishments who knowingly served too much pollution -- the somewhat refined Clinton Cafe, the dimly lit Corporation Corral and the Shellfish Saloon. It was the total amount that put this innocent creek behind the wheel, polluted, so to speak.

With Hayden Creek in violation and with the polluting establishments dragging their feet, the DEP had to act swiftly and decisively. So, it opted for the wisdom of King Solomon: Cut the innocent marsh in half with a bypass pipe. But I have to ask myself: If the solution to pollution is dilution, then why not skip the Hammonasset entirely and pump the waste directly into Long Island Sound? Or, better yet, why not directly to the Atlantic Ocean?

In this case, the DEP is playing the role of the responsible bartender with a brimming shot of 100-proof vodka. Upon noticing that the ballerina (named Hayden Creek) is already drunk, he offers the drink instead to a linebacker (named Hammonasset) on the next stool down. But the amount of booze stays the same. The amount of pollution stays the same. Why not cut down on both, rather than simply shift booze/pollution from one place to another?

I really don't know what to think about all this. But I do plan to stay off the roads near Hammonasset, at least for the summer.