RAZING GLASTONBURY DAM AN ENVIRONMENTAL WIN

Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is a staple of environmental politics.

Take the case of the old stone dam on the Blackledge River in Glastonbury. The dam is likely to come down not because it's the right ethical response to nature, or because it's economically advisable, but because the regulators are forcing the town to compensate for environmental damage it did along the Connecticut River.

The back story begins with the northward recession of the last ice sheet about 17,000 years ago. A vast glacial lake lay over Glastonbury. Deposited on its floor was a pile of sediment very susceptible to landslides, especially when the Connecticut River meanders hard against it. The early colonial settlement of Glastonbury grew as an agricultural community on the terraced top of this former lake bed, overlooking the river from a steep bluff.

As the town grew during the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a strong demand for mechanical power. So, brooks were exploited for hydropower to run factories. Stone-faced earthen dams were built across streams in Glastonbury and elsewhere throughout New England.

As coal, petroleum, gas and nuclear power provided more and more power during late 19th century, the vast majority of such factory dams were abandoned. Without maintenance, their stones shifted, their embankments eroded and heavy rainstorms overtopped or undermined them, gutting out the dams. Centuries of mud and muck then sluiced away to reveal the clean, stony brooks that had been there all along. These were cases of natural reclamation.

Given Glastonbury's location near the state's capital city, the 20th century power of gasoline and nuclear energy allowed what had been a colonial farming and manufacturing village to become a wealthy suburb. As it developed, the town purchased a public park containing an old dam and a nearby waterfall, both on a tributary to the Blackledge River.

More recently, the town built a vast park and public marina on the steep, landslide-prone bluff above the Connecticut River. Unsurprisingly, parts of the park began to creep toward the river. The solution was to riprap the verdant bank with heavy stones to anchor it and prevent erosion. This created the unavoidable negative environmental impact for riverbank life. In response, the regulatory agencies -- in this case the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection -- insisted that the town make up for what was being lost on our state's namesake river by doing something else, somewhere else, that would improve it.

So the town got smart and decided to double dip. By removing the Blackledge Dam, it could appease the regulatory agencies by returning this part of the Salmon River drainage basin to its pre-dam condition, one in which salmon and other fish could migrate. Simultaneously this action would negate the need to pay for future dam maintenance, thereby appeasing town taxpayers.

In agency-speak, it's called mitigation. In the local vernacular, it's called robbing Peter to pay Paul. Emancipating one part of the channel network compensates for corrupting another.

This makes sense, except for one problem. While Peter and Paul are busy compromising, Mother Nature is being ignored. Why not unshackle her streams for the simple reason that it's the right thing to do? Why not let her brooks babble and her fish swim freely again?
For inspiration to make this choice, I suggest turning to the grander and sadder story of the Glenn Canyon dam on the Colorado River in Arizona. There, in the early 1960s, and in spite of ardent environmental protests, more than a hundred miles of gorgeous red-rock canyons were submerged by the dubiously named U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Half a century later, the climate is now too dry to keep its reservoir, Lake Powell (also dubiously named) full. As water levels fall, the canyons are reclaiming themselves, leaving the dam as an expensive eyesore.

The Glen Canyon Institute is a nonprofit organization committed to getting the damned dam down and the river emancipated. I support its opposition to river slavery. Let freedom gurgle.