

HEADWATERS THE RIVER STARTS HERE

“What happens to the Westport River is impacted by what happens in Lake Noquochoke, what happens in the Shingle Island River, what happens in the Bread and Cheese Brook, and what happens in Copicut, because it all trickles down and flows through the river.”

- Gay Gillespie (2000, *Standard-Times*)



Rivers are created by their headwaters. The East Branch of the Westport River begins in seeps, springs, intermittent, and permanent brooks that drain white cedar bogs and red maple swamps and flow south from extreme southern Freetown, eastern Fall River, and northwestern Dartmouth to tidal water at the Head of Westport. From the Head the river becomes an estuary, a drowned river valley glacially scoured and then flooded following the last glacial period 10,000 years ago.

Most folks living along and/or recreating on the lower, estuarine, portion of the Westport River give scant thought to the river above the Head, yet the headwaters are a critical source of freshwater, nutrients, and minerals to the lower river and provide freshwater spawning sites for numerous marine species like alewife and blueback herring, shad, sea-run brook trout, sturgeon, rainbow smelt, and other anadromous (fish that run up rivers to spawn) fish. While headwaters are vitally important to the lower river, they are also important for the unique freshwater ecosystems and rich biodiversity they provide.

Fortunately, the East Branch of the Westport River has a large portion of its headwaters on land within the Southeastern Massachusetts Bioreserve. There should be an ongoing effort to protect all headwater sources of both the East and West Branch to ensure the Westport River, from its headwaters to the sea, is protected in perpetuity.

Early historical accounts show the indigenous Wampanoag utilized the wildlife resources of the entire river system and in the seventeenth century the early European settlers followed suit. The oak, chestnut, and pine forests and deep, dark Atlantic white cedar bogs of the river's headwaters provided wood for shelter and furs for trade. The cold and damp fall through spring weather of coastal New England provided furbearing animals with thick, lush pelts much in demand here and back in Europe. The river's furs and wampum were the region's first mediums of exchange.

Interested in the more recent history of the headwaters area of the river? Check out Westport Historical Society's "North Westport and Beyond Research Project." Find it here: <https://wpthistory.org/north-westport-and-beyond-research-project/>

Being remote, the headwaters area, in a less environmentally conscious time, suffered from the dumping of toxic waste that still, today, impacts the river's headwaters. <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.Cleanup&id=0100682#bkground>

Here's another. <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/08/vy/fs-ofrrlf.pdf> It is also possible to search for waste sites and reportable releases here: <https://eeaonline.eea.state.ma.us/portal#!/search/wastesite>

Today, environmental awareness is more important than ever. Everyone is needed to keep watch and protect the entire river from its headwaters to the sea.

“I think the Westport River is the town, and without the Westport River, the town would be just like any other place.”

- Selena Howard (2000, *Standard Times*)