

Pomperaug Watershed Provides Fascinating History of Region

By Al Hemingway

Ed Edelson strongly believes that environmental science, as well as history, go hand-in-hand - especially when it comes to discussing the Pomperaug River Watershed Coalition. By studying the background of the region, including the Pomperaug River, it can give historians and scientists a much better understanding of how it has evolved through the years.

On Friday, July 24, the Heritage Village Adventures in Ideas Club hosted a slide presentation by Edelson to help residents gain more insight as to the tremendous importance of the subject.

Edelson, also known to many people as the "River Guy," is the executive director of the organization because, as he puts it, "he wasn't good at folding newsletters and stuffing envelopes." Since moving to Southbury, he and his wife have become very active in the coalition.

The group was formed in 1999 by Bethlehem, Woodbury and Southbury residents "to protect the quality and quantity of water in the Pomperaug Watershed." This 90-mile area is vital because it offers recreational activities and clean drinking water to these towns.

"The organizers of the PRWC had three questions in mind when they started 10 years ago," Edelson said. "Of the 50 inches of rain that falls in the basin, which amounts to about 80 billion gallons of water, is that enough water for all the things we want to do? The second question concerns the diversions. Diversions are things like the pumps for the Heritage Water Company, as well as private pumps that supply people's homes. Is enough water going back to the river and how does it affect its flow? Lastly, how much water do we need to keep in the river?"

According to a 2001 "State of the Watershed"

report published by the coalition, the basin is "filled with glacial sands and gravels creating a significant ground water resource known as the Pomperaug Aquifer."

The drinking water supply is adequate to support the various communities within the area. The cleanliness of the water is also in good condition. The coalition continues to test it to assure that the quantity and the quality of the water is of the highest standard.

ironically, studying the fish population can give an accurate account of how well the river is doing.

"We use the fish population as an indicator," explained Edelson. "If it is in good shape, then that is a sign that the river flow is excellent."

The Pomperaug River was not always the same shape it is today. By damming the waterway at different points, they have altered its flow. During World War II, the government straightened out rivers in order to increase flow to produce more crops to feed the thousands of men overseas.

"It was done with the best of intentions," commented Edelson. "Later, people started saying maybe that's not letting the river do what it should be doing."

PRWC has developed programs to ensure the vitality of the river. One such project is studying the historical background of the region and how it has changed the river and also how the waterway assisted in developing the surrounding towns.

Known as The Pomperaug Plantation History Project, Edelson said: "We want to help others see how the river has changed over the last 300 years. By joining with historical societies, libraries, and museums, we hope to forge a collaborative effort that would bring together the various towns with their extensive historical materials."

To find out more about the PRWC and become a member, go to their website at www.pomperaug.org, e-mail them at info@pomperaug.org or call 267-1700.