

Legitimizing sustainable river management *narratives** in New England's changing climate

UMass ISSR Climate Change, Sustainability & Social Science Research Panel

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**Narratives* are simple stories about “problems” that suggest logical management “solutions.” Narratives are not politically neutral...

EXAMPLE: Prof. Naomi Oreskes’ “Merchants of Doubt”

Background

Climate change means New England will become wetter with more frequent with more intense rains. Land erosion from flooding represents one of the largest climate change threats in Massachusetts (Yellen et al. 2014). Flood damage costs continue to dramatically rise.

Questions

- (1)** What are the different narratives about river management in Massachusetts?
- (2)** What development pathways do the narratives suggest, and what are the implications of these for the region's capacity to respond to climate change?

Methodology

- (1)** Mail surveys and semi-structured interviews with landowners along rivers in MA.
- (2)** Questions were asked about impacts and what should be done to manage rivers now and in the future.
- (3)** Narratives emerge in the context of respondents' descriptions of a problem, its causes, and solutions, as well as through their explanations of processes of environmental and social change.

#1 "Rivers must be clean and tidy!"

REMOTE SENSING DATA
PROVIDED BY JOHN GARTNER



2010



2011



2014

Post Hurricane Irene

FlyRod+Reel

Due to an ancient superstition, trout streams all across the Northeast are being sacrificed.

By: Ted Williams April 2012

Conservation Conservation



CURRENTS & EDDIES VOL. 61 NO. 1, SPRING 2012

The River Connects Us.

Connecticut River Watershed Council

Hurricane Aftermath: What Did We Learn From Irene?

BY RICHARD EWALD

THE RECORDER

GREENFIELD, MASS. ESTABLISHED 1792. - N.E. NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR 2012.

Hawley, contractor to pay for Chickley River fix



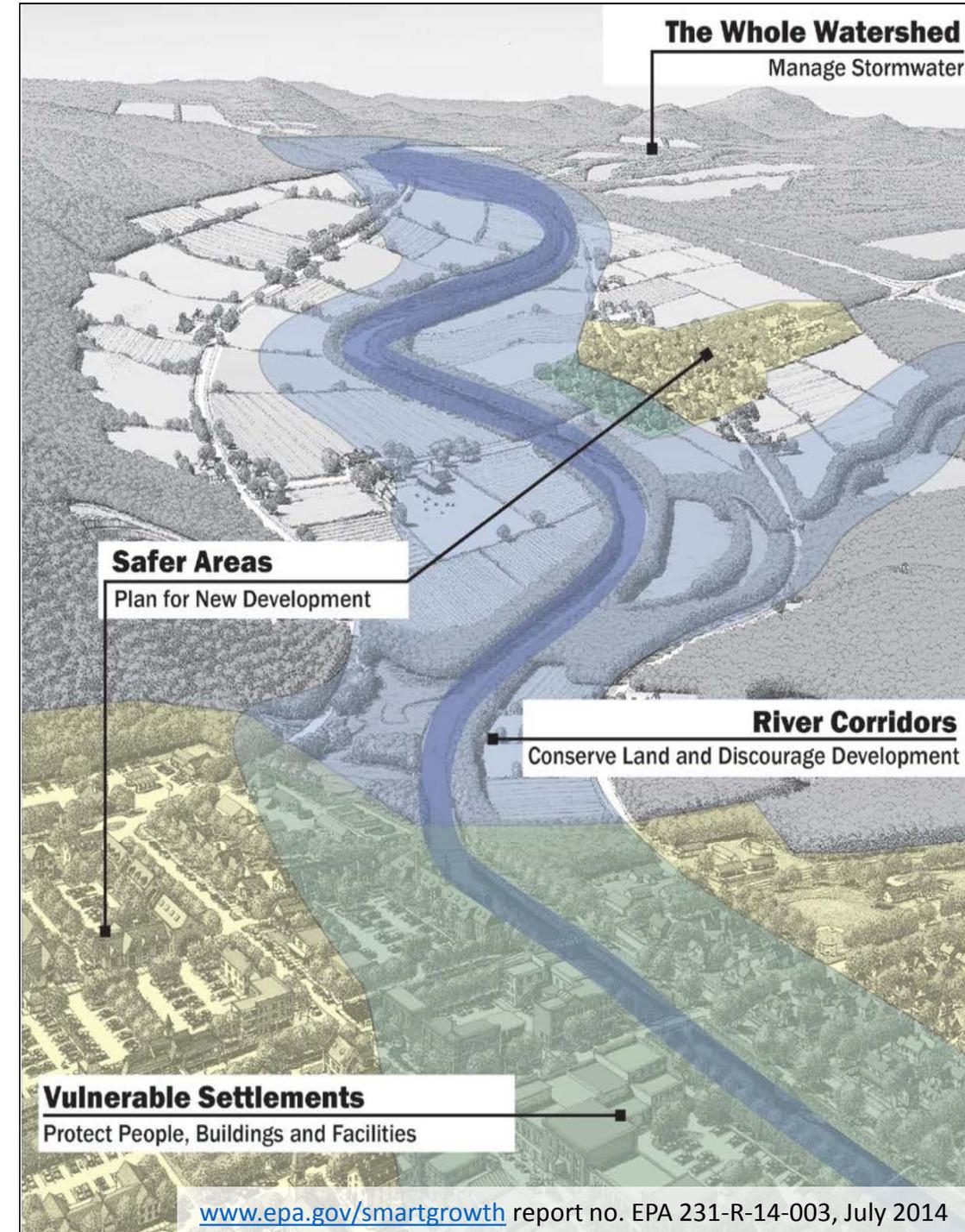
#2 “Living with rivers”

In our recent survey of 413 riverfront land owners in this area, 69% agreed that we should “manage rivers” but consider their multiple uses. 18% perceived narrative #1 to be more legitimate. But... 13% argued for an alternative river management narrative.

#3 “Freedom space for rivers”

“I think that these flood events are restorative in a way, in that, if we could just pay attention to that and quit trying to make the brook or the river go where we want it to and just understand that it's going to go where it wants to, and then, because we've straightened them, we've put bridges over them, and dams across them, and all this kind of stuff, we should not be shocked from time to time when nature reestablishes itself.”

-Riverfront landowner in Western MA



Summary

- (1)** Climate variability has increased; priorities for our rivers have evolved. A new discussion about our relationships with rivers may be necessary.
- (2)** Narrative analysis provides a means to identify and examine competing ways of looking at our relationships with rivers.
- (3)** It is my hope that, by calling attention to these narratives, this analysis may provide an opening for alternative narratives and opportunities to emerge in sustainable MA river management.

Ponderings...

There are different social constructions of sustainability. We often don't realize the bias in our approaches to development and science because of this. Understanding differences in our approaches (or narratives) to sustainability—and understanding who wins or loses given different approaches—must be tackled by social scientists pursuing sustainable development.