

Published in *Whole Terrain: Reflective Environmental Practice*, Vol. 13 (2004/2005).

A HUDSON RIVER IMMERSION

by

Laird Christensen and Jon Jensen

As political victories for American conservationists have lately become something of an endangered species, a day like December 4, 2001, should have stood out like a California condor at the neighbor's birdfeeder. In the shadow of September 11th, however, the national media scarcely noticed when the federal government ordered one of the world's richest corporations to spend half a billion dollars cleaning up the nation's largest Superfund site—never mind that the corporation was General Electric, or that the toxic waste site was New York's Hudson River.

Considering the passion of the arguments over dredging PCBs from the Hudson, one might describe this event as the closing salvo of a battle that had raged for twenty years along the river, leaving communities shell-shocked by a barrage of contradictions. In the fall of 2001, while residents, activists, and executives awaited the Environmental Protection Agency's official Record of Decision, twenty students and four professors set out to turn the Hudson into something more than a metaphoric battleground: a literal classroom.

Although located in western Vermont, Green Mountain College is only several miles and a low ridge removed from the upper Hudson River watershed. Blue anti-dredging signs lined the roads across the Poultney River in New York. Because ours is an environmental liberal arts college, the educational potential of this conflict seemed obvious. We designed a block of courses that led students out of the classroom and into the heart of controversy. For an entire

semester they would study nothing but the Hudson, meeting residents and activists up and down the valley and forming their own opinions about how best to treat a toxic river.

We knew from the start that experiential education inevitably leaves more to chance than classroom instruction. Nevertheless, throughout the course we found ourselves dealing with a host of unexpected challenges that ranged from suddenly obsolete lesson plans to placing our students in dangerous situations. To be sure, we were ready for some of the more obvious risks: medical emergencies, swamped canoes, and students lost in the pedestrian crush of Manhattan. We attempted to make up in preparation what we lacked in certainty. There are some situations, however, that defy even the most careful planning—such as that unforgettable 11th of September, when some of our students were serving on the crew of a sloop that raced full sail toward the smoldering city.

Of course, all experiential education involves a certain risk since faculty relinquish the control they have in a classroom setting, but dropping students into the middle of a contentious civic debate raised the stakes even higher. After vandals set fire to a large anti-dredging banner in Fort Edward, New York, its scorched remains measured the heat of local emotions each time we passed by. We knew that the intensity of this conflict would draw in students, fueling their interest in the nuances and complexities of the issue. But such passion, we came to see, can close minds as well as open them.

This experiment would require students to discover their own truths in a sometimes violent collision of conflicting views. The faculty could provide the cultural and ecological context necessary for this investigation—integrating the study of history, biology, policy, art, and literature into our visits through the watershed—but in the end students would be left to learn

their own subjective, and often surprising, lessons. Because formal education is too often a poor imitation of just this kind of learning, this was a risk we were willing to take.

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Our experiment began where the Hudson begins, high in the blue Adirondacks. After pitching camp under a cloudless September sky, we worked our way through crowds of spruce and balsam fir to where the Hudson is still called Calamity Brook. Wading the knee-high current and camping along its banks, the students became comfortable with the river and curious about its fate. These quiet days set up a dramatic contrast: “We were to see how beautiful the river is in this spot,” wrote student Megan Fries in her journal, “so that down the road we could understand what has been done to it by the years of human interaction.”

Even at the headwaters, however, the river was entangled in controversy. Newcomb Town Manager George Canon described to students the region’s mining history, then compared state ownership of the Adirondacks to communism, stealing economic opportunities from local residents. A vigorous straight-shooter in his mid-sixties, Canon had worked thirty years at the Tahawus Mine and hoped that operations there might resume. Later we explored the old mine, scampering up the mountain of tailings where the young Hudson is diverted through a narrow canal. It was hard to forget Canon’s claim that mining had not degraded the site, but students could not so easily dismiss his claim that current policies reward downstate vacationers at the expense of local economies.

It was disconcerting to find that even here, at the source of the Hudson, humans had left a lasting stain. A subsequent canoe trip through nearby Warren County reinforced this impression. The first few miles mirrored our time in the wilder Adirondacks. Students paused to collect water samples for Dr. Meriel Brooks, who taught the Biology component of the course, and watched a

bald eagle rise from the river clutching a silvery lunch. As we slid downriver, students were distracted by increased housing and erosion, the rumble of gas-powered generators, and even the manicured artifice of a riverside golf course. These human effects were mild, however, compared to what awaited us downriver.

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There was no sign of fall in the last day of summer, when our vans eased through the forlorn town of Fort Edward, New York, and banked down to the local marina. Students stretched and yawned as they piled out, gravitating toward the riverbank. They watched mallards paddling by and joked about toxins and contaminated sediment, wondering aloud what would happen if someone fell in. This marina was a familiar classroom. Just upstream, the students knew, two GE plants once filled transformers with carcinogenic Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), leaking over a million pounds of excess into the river. Each could point out the riffle where the Allen Mill Dam once stood; its removal in 1975 released millions of tons of PCB-laced sediment downstream toward Albany, Manhattan, and the Atlantic.

The students gathered in a small gazebo as an oversized pickup truck rolled down to the marina. “That must be Tim Havens,” a student ventured. Others reached for their notebooks, reviewing the questions they had prepared for this morning’s speaker. A stout, mustached man in work boots and a flannel shirt eased out of the cab, and the message on his hat—“Stop the Dredging”—confirmed the student’s suspicion. The president and founder of CEASE (Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation), Tim Havens has spent years fighting plans to dredge the Hudson. For the next hour and a half, this bespectacled dealer of farm equipment held the students’ complete attention. Some fidgeted as Havens produced folksy, self-assured

answers to nearly all of their questions. Dredging would simply stir up the PCBs, he insisted: “They’re in a watery tomb. They aren’t coming back.”

Driving south from Fort Edward we passed the Thompson Island Pool, a willow-shaded stretch of river that hosts the highest concentration of PCBs on the Hudson. “How can such a beautiful river be so toxic?” wondered a student as we rattled past. It was a question that lingered, even as we gathered on the lawn of the historic Schuyler House, a dozen miles downriver, to hear the other side of the dredging debate.

With a nod to David and Goliath, Chris Ballantyne of the Sierra Club described the struggle to compete with GE, which he estimates spent \$25 million making its case against dredging. A polished activist, Ballantyne chuckled from time to time while deftly countering points raised by Havens an hour before, then passed out buttons and stickers supporting the dredging. Once again the students squirmed. Some, determined to observe the debate objectively, took offense that Ballantyne seemed to assume they would share his position. Others embraced the environmentalist arguments eagerly, relieved to find themselves back in a comforting world of moral absolutes. From an educator’s perspective, such certainty can be more challenging than apathy. How can students learn when they are convinced they already know the truth?

As we met with activists and residents up and down the Hudson, the arguments we had previously discussed in the classroom began to seem less abstract. When voiced by people whose lives and homes are directly affected by the EPA’s decision, those same arguments took on a different value, each inextricable from a tangle of personal circumstances. Even students who leaned toward dredging disliked the thought of downstate activists forcing change on a

largely resistant local population. Others were more concerned that area residents, their own health in danger, were being manipulated by corporate propaganda. The waters grew murky.

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The afternoon was mild for November, and the students aboard Riverkeeper's patrol boat shed their jackets as they rode the current of Rondout Creek toward the Hudson River. The creek had left an impression on them. From its barge-cluttered banks to the hillside ranks of condominiums, this hard-used channel bore little resemblance to the upper Hudson watershed they had explored for the past two months. Here, they glided past gravel mines and industrial boatyards, and by the time they drifted by the ragged stacks of crushed automobiles that line the western shore they look slightly dazed. Captain John Lipscomb explained that the oil, gas, and other fluids from those flattened cars drain directly into the creek, following it into the Hudson.

Rondout Creek would not seem out of place in most industrial landscapes. After coming to know the watershed on the forested banks of Calamity Brook and the Battenkill, however, the students were alarmed. They had begun to recognize its entire drainage, from Adirondack headwaters to the New York Harbor, as a single organic system. Inevitably they had seen the effects of industry multiply as they traveled downriver. Rondout Creek was the place where the truth sank in: to some this river is less a home or a source of inspiration than it is a tool, a highway, a drain.

Leaving the Riverkeeper at Kingston, we continued south, crossing the river at Tappan Zee and winding through stiffening traffic to the Beczak Environmental Education Center, riverside in Yonkers. We were stopping there to learn about the center's work with urban youth, but for us the real education was seeing the Hudson fenced off from the public. Bleach bottles and other trash marked high tide on the tiny beach. After touring the center we stepped out into

autumn's sudden evening, where a low, glowing sky sat humming its monotone. This may have been the same watershed, but we were in a different world now.

The following morning we found our way to the offices of the Environmental Protection Agency on the twenty-ninth floor of the federal building in Manhattan, five blocks east of where the Hudson chafes between concrete banks. There we met Doug Tomchuk, the capable, broad-shouldered engineer who has managed the Hudson River clean-up project since 1989. He described in detail the agency's research and gamely answered student questions long past our allotted time. Tomchuk seemed impressed by the depth and clarity of student questions: they knew the issues well and repeatedly shot straight to the heart of the matter. While we could not have known at the time that the official Record of Decision was only three weeks away, Tomchuk clearly was ready to wrap up the project.

A wind-whipped ride on the Staten Island Ferry later that day allowed us to observe the mouth of the Hudson from New York Harbor. Many of us struggled to connect this last mile of river with our memories of Calamity Brook. At Battery Park students described in their journals an overwhelming human presence: helicopters chopping through the rare parcels of sky, passers-by speaking a dozen different languages, horns from cars and ferries alike, the sounds of heavy equipment at the site of the World Trade Center, the remaining skyscrapers looming over us. In this context, the river seemed less the defining feature of the ecosystem than an afterthought. "The millions of people who walk down the streets of New York City every day most likely aren't even aware of the correlation between their lifestyle and the Hudson River," observed student Kathryn Crane. Indeed, it was hard for us to keep in mind that this park where we sat writing was the tip of an island.

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Back on our tiny brick campus, where Taconic streams drain north to Lake Champlain, our lives resumed a gentler pace. As we gathered to assess what we had learned from our time on the Hudson, it was clear that the students' first impressions of the river had been profoundly complicated. It became difficult to separate the question of dredging from the rest of the stories we had learned along the river. This was, after all, the same river that students had sketched from a Catskill ridge while learning about the Hudson River painters from Dr. Patricia Moore, who taught the History component of the course. It was the same rippling highway that carried a Hong Kong freighter past our Hyde Park campsite, rumbling upriver through shreds of morning mist. It was the same current they sailed while helping crew the *Clearwater*, a replica of a 19th-century Hudson River sloop.

As any teacher knows, leading students toward an emotional investment in their subject is risky business: even as it inspires a personal relevance that invigorates the learning process, it makes that process more difficult to predict and control. Almost as soon as our students began to try out the arguments about dredging the Hudson, emotions had begun to collide—though generally in a useful way, guided by our insistence on respectful disagreement.

The professors had also in some way become humanized by the unruly nature of this learning process. Students observed us straining to weave unexpected information into suddenly outdated or irrelevant lesson plans, and they watched us react to viewpoints that challenged our own. In fact, our initial positions were often complicated by what we learned in the field and by the knowledge that certain decisions—such as where to sort and send contaminated sediment—have very real and personal consequences. Despite our best intentions, the students may have benefited more from watching our own views evolve than from our carefully planned lessons.

Perhaps the greatest risk of a course like this, we had begun to realize, was that we did not really know exactly what we would learn until after we had learned it.

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When the EPA released its Record of Decision in early December, the students were putting the final touches on a public forum designed to help local residents understand the dredging debate. In spite of their various concerns, their hour onstage stretched toward two as they fielded questions about PCB chemistry and led the audience through the maze of Superfund law. At the conclusion of the forum, students arranged themselves at the front of the room according to their own opinions about dredging the Hudson. With peers and neighbors looking on, they formed three lines—sitting, standing, and raised on stage—separating those who agreed, disagreed, and remained undecided as to the wisdom of the EPA's decision. After four months, thousands of miles, and countless hours of study, it came down to this: twenty young faces gazing out from the stage, each announcing a personal stand.

The students gained analytical skills from this experiment that will serve them well in the future. They had acquired a taste for critical and engaged citizenship, which is no abstract virtue but a daily practice. After spending a semester immersed in the study of the Hudson River, these students knew more than just the history of a watershed. They understood that with the pleasures of knowing a place so intimately come certain responsibilities. They had, in fact, learned the real cost of community.

It would be hard to overestimate the power of such lessons, shaped by a broad, integrated perspective and an authenticity born of personal engagement. This is not to suggest that equally valuable learning cannot take place in conventional classroom settings, but there is something

about the lack of control—the very element that makes experiential education so risky—that seems best to provide students with the skills they will need to negotiate conflicts in their own communities. As student Tatiana Abatemarco observes, “The Hudson River block course taught me the intricacies of complex problem-solving in the real world.” That is a lesson clearly worth learning despite the risk of chaos—or, better yet, because of it.

Laird Christensen chairs the Department of English and Communications at Green Mountain College. A native of western Oregon, Christensen worked at a variety of forest jobs—from lumber grader to ranger—before turning to activism, teaching, and writing. His poems and essays have appeared in such publications as *Wild Earth*, *Utne*, *Northwest Review*, and *Whole Terrain*.

Jon Jensen is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Jensen received his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Colorado and taught at Green Mountain College before returning to the Midwest, where he has deep roots. He is the co-author of *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy* as well as articles in environmental philosophy.