

## Before the next river changes its course . .

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■ Suncook," in the language of the Abenaki Indians, means "to the rocks," and rocks are all the Mothers Day flood left behind of a two-mile stretch of the Suncook River in Epsom. The river, which once split into two branches and flowed on either side of 112-acre Bear Island, now takes a shorter path through a gravel pit upriver.

Gone are several miles of superb trout fishing, the picturesque pool above what was once the Old Mill Restaurant and an enormous amount of sand that now covers yards and fields to the south. Two dams built in the 1870s no longer impound anything. Two campgrounds are no longer on the river. What may be the state's biggest population of endangered brook floater mussels has lost its home, and aquatic wildlife downriver has been smothered.

Was Mother Nature responsible for the change? Or did man's activities allow the Suncook to leave the path it had taken since the Ice Age? It appears both forces were at work.

Rivers are constantly seeking a straighter route to the sea, as Concord's oxbows prove, and the Suncook might have followed a new course eventually without the flood. But decades of gravel mining made it easier for the river to escape. A big chunk of two sandy hills that once blocked the river's preferred course had been hauled away.

No doubt, since some property owners were harmed, an attempt will be made to assign blame. None may be found, but the effort should be made. In the meantime, the historic shift in the Suncook's course has raised a slew of questions.

State law requires that gravel pit operators get a permit from their city or town and maintain a minimum 75-foot buffer between water bodies and any alterations in the landscape.

The pit breached by the river has a recent town permit. It may also be big enough to have needed a state permit, but it does not have one. That, apparently, is not unusual. The state Department of Environmental Services has the resources to investigate potential violations only if neighbors or local officials complain, and apparently none did.

Large pits must maintain the 150-foot buffer called for under the state's Shoreland Protection Act. Old gravel pits are exempt from some regulations, but unless they encroached on the buffers before 1992, they are not allowed to do so. Enforcement is up to local officials, and it is not yet clear whether anyone in Epsom monitored the site to see if the law was being followed.

Some Epsom residents want to return the river to its old bed. That would be a costly undertaking, and it might not work. It is not a wise use of tax money. The water is probably over those dams for the last time.

Given the Suncook River's eastward migration, the Legislature should consider whether the protective buffers between activities like mining and the state's waters are too small. They should upgrade a lackadaisical enforcement system that isn't up to the job of maintaining environmental quality in a state that might have more than a thousand gravel pits.

Conservation groups take periodic flights over the property they are responsible for to make sure development or activities like mining or logging aren't encroaching on easements. That's just responsible stewardship, and every improvement in satellite photography makes the job easier. The state must make a similar effort to safeguard its rivers, lakes, streams and wetlands.