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Opinion Page

**A river that's fit for swimming**

By Renée Loth | May 15, 2010

FICKLE MAY has been cool lately, but with the upcoming Memorial Day weekend marking the unofficial start of summer Bostonians are starting to dream about lazy days by the shore and taking a refreshing dip in . . . the Charles River?

Believe it: swimming is coming back to the waters indelibly marked as “dirty” by the Standell’s classic song. The wide stretch of river below the Watertown Dam known as the Charles River Basin is already clean enough for swimming on most days — so long as you don’t touch the bottom. And though river swimming is often safe, it still isn’t legal.

Efforts to make the Charles swimmable date at least to the passage of the Clean Water Act of 1972. In the 1980s, the Metropolitan District Commission installed six pumps designed to push oxygen into layers of decay on the river bottom. In 1995, the Environmental Protection Agency began the Clean Charles River Initiative, aimed at making the river swimmable and fishable by 2005.

The EPA’s efforts dovetailed nicely with the \$4.5 billion court-ordered Boston Harbor cleanup, which intercepted river pollution on its way to fouling the harbor. The newly created Massachusetts Water Resources Authority repaired or replaced the combined sewer overflow pipes that were flushing untreated sewage into the Charles whenever it rained. By 2005 the EPA’s annual report card for the Charles had improved from grade D to B-plus. What it means: last year the water in the basin was clean enough for human contact 62 percent of the time, up from just 19 percent in 1995.

Now a special legislative commission will start testing the water for bacterial counts and clarity at four potential swimming sites: Magazine beach in Cambridge; the MIT sailing pavilion; near the Hatch Shell on the Esplanade; and North Point park below the Museum of Science. Sentimentalists root for Magazine beach, where bathers frolicked until the 1950s. But the river is cleaner farther downstream.

For centuries, Bostonians treated the Charles like a liquid landfill, tossing in all manner of debris from factories, tanneries, and abattoirs. A 1656 ordinance allowed dumping “beast entrails and garbidg” into the river without a fine. Mercury, lead, and arsenic competed with human waste for the most toxic

ingredients in the soup that could make a person feel sick.

I myself felt vaguely ill when I braved the waters of the Charles in 1983 for a story on cleanup efforts. Back then, the MDC stated bluntly in its annual report that the Charles would never be swimmable below the Watertown dam, so I took my dip at Forest Grove in Waltham. I wore old canvas sneakers to protect my feet from broken beer bottles obscured beneath the tea-brown waters, but the swim wasn't slimy or unpleasant.

The MDC (now folded into the Department of Conservation and Recreation) got it wrong because it couldn't predict the massive public investment that went into cleaning the harbor. Swimming in the Charles would be the redemption of that investment — a legacy project for a new generation of environmental stewards.

Challenges remain. A hard rain still flushes pollutants into the river, as daily monitoring by the Charles River Watershed Association attests. But now the biggest offender isn't sewage, but storm water run-off. Phosphorous — from fertilizers, detergents, and even car exhaust — contributes to blooms of cyanobacteria (blue-green algae), which can cause rashes or other ill effects.

Then there's the sediment — heavy metals and other sludge that settles in the basin, robbing fish and other living things of oxygen. "There's 150 years of industrial pain down there," according to Kate Bowditch, a hydrologist at the watershed association.

To make swimming practical, officials would need to engineer some sort of cap for the sediment, since dredging would probably make things worse. Or a dock could be erected that lets swimmers enter into deep water. The Charles River Conservancy publishes a booklet showing how Zurich, Basel, and other European cities have enlivened their riverfronts with swimming pavilions. Boston would be the first American city to try it.

On July 11, with a special permit from DCR, the pioneering members of the Charles River Swim Club plan a mile-long race near the Hatch Shell. There's still time to register. I wonder whatever happened to those old canvas sneakers.

Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the *Globe*.