

A DIP IN THE CHARLES

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WHEN **JOHN DeVillars** and several other environmental activists plunged into the Charles River this month they were sending a message that much of the river is swimmable much of the time. They're right that the state should reopen swimming areas, long closed, wherever it can, but centuries of pollution on the riverbed will force the state to devise innovative ways to get people back to the water.

DeVillars set the goal of a swimmable Charles a decade ago, when he was regional administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency. Much progress has been made, thanks to a coalition of federal and state authorities, local activists, and communities along the river. The days when rowers who spilled into the Charles had to be given a tetanus shot are long gone. It's time to celebrate the rebirth of the river by encouraging everyone to follow DeVillars's example. Legislators, led by state Representative Alice Wolf of Cambridge, have filed a bill to establish a special commission to investigate how swimming should be restored to the Charles. The Legislature should pass the measure this year.

DeVillars took his dip off Nashua Street, just before the Charles meets Boston Harbor. Water is exceptionally clean there and all the way across the wide river basin to the bridge at Massachusetts Avenue, according to Robert Zimmerman of the Charles River Watershed Association, who also took the plunge. Swimming could begin there immediately, with several caveats. Swimmers should not get in the way of sailboats in the basin or sunbathers along the Esplanade, and, most important, they should not touch the bottom, where sediments of industrial waste a foot or two deep lie undisturbed.

West of the Mass. Ave. bridge the river narrows, and pollutants can pile up in close quarters near Magazine Beach in Cambridge after a heavy rain flushes waste from storm drains. The waters are swimmable only 50 percent of the time from there all the way upstream to the Watertown Dam. More work must be done to keep the water clean, and solutions must also be found to eliminate or avoid the sediments. The state allowed swimming at Magazine Beach into the 1950s, but no wading can be countenanced there today until the sediments, containing many toxic substances, are removed, and the cost may be prohibitive.

Paul Parravano, codirector of community relations at MIT, also dived in alongside De Villars on Sunday. "It was warmer than my neighbor's pool," he said. Parravano promised MIT's cooperation in devising solutions to get people back into the water. Someone from MIT, Harvard, or Boston University, whose campuses also face the Charles, ought to be on the special state commission to provide advice on swimming and cleanup options.

DeVillars's swim came during a duck boat cruise organized by the Charles River Conservancy, an advocacy group that focuses on enhancing the appeal of the river in Boston, Cambridge, and Watertown. The Watershed Association is dedicated to protecting the river along its entire 80-mile length. Upriver from the Watertown Dam, Zimmerman notes, much of the Charles is also clean, and there are at least two potential swimming spots Havey Beach in West Roxbury and Forest Grove Park in Waltham that do not have a sediment problem. These locations would also merit the attention of the special commission.

The Conservancy organized the duck boat cruise to coincide with a series of swims in Europe called the "Big Jump," which encouraged people throughout Europe to try out newly cleaned rivers and press for the restoration of others that are still polluted.

People in Zurich never stopped using the Limmat River for swimming. They avail themselves of bathhouses built along its banks. A massive campaign after the reunification of Germany has restored swimming to the Elbe in Hamburg. The special committee should examine the European examples for novel approaches to the sediment and runoff problems.

Although there is talk of reviving swimming in the Chicago River and in the East River in New York, it is not allowed in any major urban river in the United States. Along much of the Charles the water is ready. State government needs to summon the will to bring this refreshing summer delight back to a revived Charles River.

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