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Ripple Marks

The Story Behind the Story BY CHERYL LYN DYBAS

A River Raged Through It: Through the Lens of Vermont's In-Sight Photography Project, A Confluence of Art and Science

Torrential rains from Hurricane Irene in August 2011 closed northeastern US parks and wilderness areas, washed out roads, swept away homes and businesses, and changed the face of interior New England. They also brought people together, from scientists who study flooding, to citizens of Northeast river towns, to photographers who captured the storm in all its havoc and beauty. Near—and in—the Connecticut River's overflowing tributaries stood the artists of the In-Sight Photography Project in Brattleboro, Vermont. Their vantage point has set, literally and figuratively, new high water marks for art and for science.

Deep in the Green Mountains that ring Brattleboro, Vermont, rises Whetstone Brook. It springs to life more than four and half meters above sea level, in Hidden Lake on the flanks of Central Mountain. Out of Hidden Lake and along Church Hollow Road the brook cascades. A sharp right turn, and the Whetstone parallels Vermont Route 9, flowing by MacArthur Road and Hamilton Road and threading between Richardson

and Round Mountains. It gathers force from Halladay and Ames Hill Brooks, sluices through West Brattleboro and Brattleboro and—after dropping 380 meters in elevation in just 11 kilometers—empties into the Connecticut River at a mere 75 meters above sea level.

The Whetstone Brook watershed covers almost 72 square kilometers in southern Vermont. Whetstone, as its cutting-stone name suggests, and its tributaries have sliced straight down into granite bedrock to form narrow waterways. But bucolic flats along their bends beckon kayakers and canoeists, swimmers and hikers and birders.

Usually.

The brook John Willis saw on the morning of August 28, 2011, was a whetstone gone wild. "It was a raging river," says Willis, "pure whitewater."

Willis is the In-Sight Photography Project's Executive Director and a Professor

of Photography at Vermont's Marlboro College. He was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for his contributions to the art world.

Two decades ago, he co-founded In-Sight with Vermont resident Bill Ledger. "We conceived of it as a way of fostering sustainable cities and towns, and encouraging their citizens to develop a sense of place, and of self, through photography," says Willis. "Photography is a wonderful means of understanding one's own and other communities." In recent years, In-Sight's efforts have expanded from Vermont to states across the country. Since the project's beginning 20 years ago, a river of several thousand students has flowed through its doors.

In-Sight offers teenagers from ages 11 to 18 the opportunity to learn photography—from the mechanics of how a camera lens works to developing an artist's eye—regardless of their ability to pay for classes and equipment.

BELOW LEFT | View of flooded Flat Street from Elliot Street, downtown Brattleboro, VT. Photo credit: Christina Bernales.

BELOW MIDDLE | View of Whetstone Brook during the 2011 flooding. Photo credit: Annie Flanagan.

BELOW RIGHT | Route 9 eroded by flooding of the Whetstone. Photo credit: Ferne Johansson



Courses cover such topics as introduction to black and white photography; digital photography; social activism and photography; and people, places, and things.

In a class called Exploring Southern Vermont, participants captured “on film” the stone-laden West River and nearby mossy paths of the Retreat Meadows. The course fostered deeper views of a river ecosystem and of outdoor photography.

“Students hiked and canoed to reach beautiful wooded areas,” says Stephen Dybas, Director of the In-Sight Photography Project, “then photographed them in changing light and environmental conditions, while learning about equipment like cable releases, tripods, and filters. They discovered new ways of understanding and appreciating the wonders of the natural world.”

Although some In-Sight students have prior photographic experience, many have never touched a camera. “Few have had the chance to delve into what photography reveals,” says Vermont resident Jon Mack, President of In-Sight’s Board of Directors, “from the tiny details of a snail, to expansive landscapes, to the nitty-gritty of real-life experience.”

In-Sight’s efforts are largely supported through its major fundraiser, an annual autumn auction of works donated by photographers from the well-known to the enthusiast. A part of last fall’s auction proceeds was shared with Vermont flood victims to support their recovery. Individual patrons, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Vermont Arts Council, Vermont’s Stratton Foundation, and other organizations also fund In-Sight.

In water terms, In-Sight has grown from a

brook to a river to a watershed.

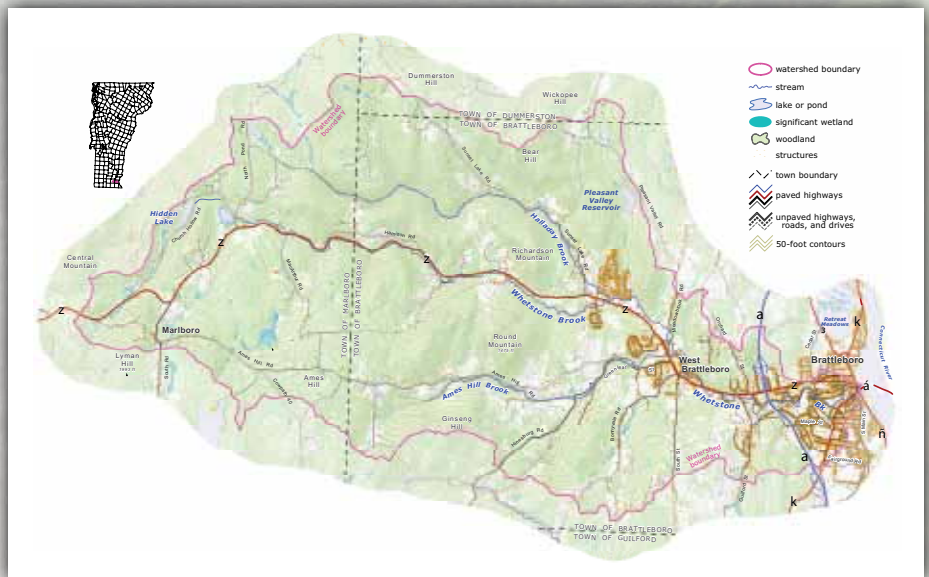
“River is a beautiful word, beloved for the lyrical impetus of those magic two syllables,” writes W.D. Wetherell in *Where the Great River Rises: An Atlas of the Connecticut River Watershed in Vermont and New Hampshire*. “Valley is a rhythmic word, too. But watershed tops all its competitors, embracing the meaning of those two smaller words and flowing outward. To use the word watershed is to pay tribute to a force of linkage, togetherness, interconnection.”

Like a watershed, In-Sight encourages students to become an active part of a larger life experience, says Dybas. “There’s a lot more to photography than showing someone how to point a camera and click

the shutter. Through photography, In-Sight’s students learn about the world around them—from the local to the global.”

Every week In-Sight’s students explore new photographic methods, including working with long or short shutter speeds and using filters. “As young people fill the classroom corkboard with images of landscapes, cities, and towns, we see the wonderful results of their dedication,” says Mack.

The project is all about community, says Dybas. In the spring of 2010, for example, In-Sight launched a Digital Mobile Program in southern Vermont. Instructors travel to rural towns, carrying digital cameras, digital projectors, and laptop computers loaded with Adobe Photoshop. Junior high and high



ABOVE | The Whetstone Brook Watershed covers nearly 28 square miles, or 72 square kilometers, in southern Vermont. *From a map produced by the Windham Regional Commission, Brattleboro, VT.* BELOW LEFT | Latches Hotel and other businesses flooded during Irene. *Photo credit: Annie Flanagan.* BELOW RIGHT | Williams Street after floodwaters had receded. *Photo credit: Christina Bernales*



school students in these areas otherwise wouldn't have access to photography classes. "The Digital Mobile Program is a strong step forward for In-Sight as it continues to develop innovative ways of engaging teens of all backgrounds and abilities," says Willis.

Similarly, the project's Exposures Cross-Cultural Youth Program is a confluence of students and photography instructors, linking Vermont with inner-city Chicago and South Dakota Native American communities. "Participants interact with each other through in person and online exchanges, and share both their unique and their common experiences," says Erin Barnard, who runs the Exposures Program.

Early last summer, teenagers from the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, from Chicago, and from Vermont converged on Pine Ridge for three weeks to explore their cultures through photography. "They portrayed their sense of where they were from, of 'home,' then collaborated to convey their understanding of life on the reservation through photo and multimedia projects," Barnard says.

Students camped in South Dakota's Badlands, where they took part in activities that included sunrise photo shoots. "Days were filled with interviewing community members, going on impromptu photo adventures and cooking group dinners, while learning about other cultures," Dybas says.

One student remembers that "living with the staff and facilitators really broke down the barrier of what the word 'teacher' means. Not only did I learn about photography during the workshops, I learned about the larger world."

"Spending every day with new people helped me realize that cultures may be different," recalls another In-Sight student, "but that people are the same."

Last fall, the Dine Southwest High School of the Navajo Nation in Arizona became the newest member of In-Sight's Exposures Program.

In-Sight may now be a watershed, but its mainstem remains in Brattleboro. There, Whetstone Brook is a stone's throw from In-Sight's office doors along the aptly named Flat Street.

In Whetstone Brook's headlong race from Hidden Lake to the Connecticut River, it borders Flat Street before making its final run.

"It almost claimed all of us on Flat Street during Irene," says Willis. "The brook jumped its banks and poured down the street, leaving everything in its path under several feet of water. In-Sight escaped with mostly minor damage, but only because its offices are five feet above the road."

In-Sight's fall session was just gearing up, but administrators, teachers, and students already in for the season poured out of the building, cameras clicking. Waterlogged

photographers captured Whetstone Brook as it spilled over, rushed down main streets, and left behind floating debris from tires to milk jugs to cars. Motorcycles washed away. Moving trucks were themselves moved—several hundred yards downstream.

By late that flooded week, In-Sight's staff members and students needed Wellington boots and special permission from law enforcement authorities to enter their office building and its downtown Brattleboro neighborhood. Student Ferne Johansson had her camera at-the-ready. "I was biking down Route 9 after the rain fell, and at first I didn't think it was that bad."

Then she saw roads cracked open under the weight of the floodwaters, leaving gaping holes so wide they might have led to the center of the Earth. Highways across Vermont and throughout the region broke apart and fell into pieces, landing in Connecticut River tributaries like Whetstone Brook.

"Life in a river town is something of a dance," says Mack. "The music has long periods of quiet waters, then all of a sudden, the crashing of flooding brooks. The trick is to know when the latter is about to start—and to get off the dance floor in time."

Enter the US Geological Survey (USGS) New Hampshire-Vermont Water Science Center and hydrologists like Kenneth Toppin.

"Flooding in places like Brattleboro is often linked with the intense rains of hurricanes or



LEFT | Whetstone Studio's building partially swept away as Whetstone Brook overflows its banks. Photo credit: Christina Bernales. BELOW | Comparison historical photograph of Whetstone Brook from the mid-1900s. Courtesy of Brattleboro Historical Society





ABOVE | Flooding near the Branch School House in 1936. *Courtesy of Marlboro Historical Society.* RIGHT | Comparison view of the former Branch School House after Irene flooding in 2011. *Photo credit: Bobbi Angell*

other major storms,” says Toppin. “If there’s a hurricane or tropical storm warning, watch out for flash floods.”

Whetstone Brook overran its banks in August “because it flows down such a steep slope over a short distance,” Toppin says. “The water starts moving faster and faster. By the time it reaches even ground, it has gained tremendous force. It’s bound to flood when it hits flats.”

Major floods have occurred several times over the past century in Brattleboro and other river towns in Vermont. In 1936, two storms collided over the state. Within 45 hours, almost 23 centimeters of rain had fallen. Over the next year, workers built bridges to replace those that were destroyed—1,329 of them. Their efforts are preserved in historical photographs.

In-Sight faculty and students recently matched up flood photos they took in 2011 with images from 1936 held by the Brattleboro Historical Society and neighboring Marlboro Historical Society. “We looked at the high water marks on buildings like schools and houses, and on bridges and trees, in 1936 and 2011,” says Dybas. “The local Branch School House, for example, was flooded in 1936 and again in 2011. A tree to the left of the school is holding the riverbank in place in a picture taken in 1936. Amazingly, the tree is still there and holding

up the bank in a photo in 2011.”

During Irene, new record peak river stages and streamflows were recorded throughout Vermont and New Hampshire, says Toppin. “Where there weren’t stream gauges, we’re collecting high water mark information from trees, buildings, and bridges at sites where indirect determinations of water flow need to be made.”

Comparisons like those between In-Sight’s photos and pictures in historical archives are a big help.

From the results, Toppin and other USGS hydrologists will work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to determine whether the current 100-year and 500-year floodplain lines should be moved. The 100-year floodplain means that, in any particular year, land within that area will have a one percent chance of flooding; the 500-year floodplain equals a two-tenths of one percent chance of flooding.

“Flooding is a natural event, but we often see the effects as negative when waters inundate homes or wash out bridges,” according to *The Whetstone Brook: Flooding Happens*, published by the Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District. “However, flood damage only happens when we build within the hazard areas of floodplains [too close to a river]. Floodwaters are a necessary part of a natural system that recharges

aquifers, maintains surface water quality, and revitalizes soil.”

Indeed, cascading water in Brattleboro wasn’t always a *bête noire*.

In 1887, the Brattleboro Board of Trade issued a promotional booklet extolling the virtues of “Brattleboro: Its Attractions as a Home, Its Advantages as a Center of Business and Industry.” Its cover featured the poem “Chase’s Cascade” by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Chase’s Cascade is a waterfall along Whetstone Brook.

“My eyes are entranced in beauty; soft young leaves, moist mossy rocks and sparkling sunlit water. Magic Cascade! The greenwood’s loveliest daughter.”

A larger and longer magic cascade, Whetstone Brook itself, curves around the In-Sight Photography Project’s building. In-Sight’s students, after passing through its courses, flow out and into the world.

Wherever their own brooks may lead, they take with them a sharpened view, one that encompasses not one stream nor one river, but an entire watershed, say Willis and Dybas, and beyond, they hope, to encompass the human experience of the planet we call Earth.

For more on the In-Sight Photography Project, please see: http://www.insight-photography.org/The_In-Sight_Photography_Project.html.

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