

Testimony from John Lipscomb, 10/14/11

My name is John Lipscomb and I am the Patrol Boat Captain for Riverkeeper. I have patrolled the Hudson over 5000 miles per year for 11 years, since October 2000, for the benefit of the River and the communities that line its shores. I grew up in Tarrytown and Irvington and had my first contact with the Hudson at age of 4. I learned to sail at Nyack Boat Club and boats and sailing became my career.

I appreciate the opportunity to submit comments and I'm sorry not to present in person today but instead, I'm where I should be... underway, northbound for Albany, Troy and the Mohawk River. I will be starting Riverkeeper's monthly water quality survey southbound this weekend. We will sample at 75 standard locations and post the data on line for the public to access.

Here are a few comments from my unusual personal relationship with the River.

First, I want to stress that the potential legislation we are discussing today is very important. The public really WANTS to know about Hudson River water quality - and DESERVES to know. "How is the water" is the question I hear most. I hear it from people with property along the Hudson, from swimmers, from families heading out for a day of boating with an armload of towels... from kayakers, rowers, sailors, and fishermen.

On a warm weekend the Hudson is full of people swimming, from officially designated beaches and from hundreds of shore points as well as from boats drifting out away from shore. I see people in the water from NY Harbor to the East and Harlem River all the way up through Albany. The public has returned to the Hudson because of the improvements we've been able to achieve over the last decades. And the public has a right to know where and when risks to their health persist.

Riverkeeper's water quality study, which began in 2006, was in response to this question. The response to our data and website has been overwhelming, beyond anything we had imagined. But we are not able to sample frequently enough or at all the stations needed to fully answer "How's the water." It was always our goal to demonstrate the feasibility and NEED for water quality information hoping that the State and the Counties bordering the Hudson would take up the job, and do it RIGHT.

Last summer Riverkeeper published a report titled "HOW IS THE WATER?" summarizing four years of our water quality data. To my knowledge, this report is the first of it's kind for the Hudson. Ironically, while researching for the report, I learned the answer to a person mystery dating back almost 40 years.

In 1974, when I was in my early twenties, I worked at Julius Petersen Boatyard in Upper Nyack, learning wooden boat repair from the "old timers." In those days I was an avid, aggressive windsurfer and I'd go out sailing in storms because I love a lot of wind. One year into my employment at Petersen's I became really ill, first with severe stomach

problems, which then developed into a neurological disease, GUILLAIN-BARRE SYNDROME. This disease attacks the motor nerves, the nerves that control muscles. I lost all strength in my arms and legs, could hardly walk. At the time there was no treatment, the disease had to run its course. Some victims recover, some die - because the heart and lungs stop working. I was hospitalized and kept close to intensive care should the disease advance. Finally I stopped getting worse, I was spared. The doctors told me that I would walk with a cane because I had lost 25% of the motor nerves to by legs.

Jump ahead to Hurricane Bob in 1991. There was so much rain that the storm drain on the street down to the boatyard (where I had become Manager) exploded. When we looked in the crater we saw a catch basin that had been installed to allow sewage to overflow into the storm drain when the sewer system became overburdened for any reason, like leaks that allow groundwater to infiltrate into the sanitary sewer pipe during heavy rain events. We had asked many times about the sewage odors from the storm drain on that street and had been reassured that there was NO connection to sewer lines there. In fact there was, and the sewage overflow ran out with storm water right at the riverfront edge of the boatyard.

Jump ahead again to last summer, researching for our water quality report. We turned up a CDC study from 1997 on diseases contracted in recreational waters. Until now, I'd had no idea how I had become infected with GUILLAIN-BARRE, but now, mystery solved. There it was, it the CDC study. When I was windsurfing at Petersen's I had, with out knowing, been sailing, and falling, in an unmarked sewage overflow.

There is a man who lives in Piermont, where I live now, who looks like he has had polio, he's spent his whole life in a wheelchair. Turns out he had GUILLAIN-BARRE as well, but he wasn't as lucky as I was. How did he get sick, was it from contaminated water? Don't know.

From the boat, I've met a doctor treating kids on dialysis from kidney failure caused by E. coli, and a Dad who gave a kidney to his son for the same thing after he fell in the Pocantico River in Westchester and got sick.

Sewage contamination is still a real issue in the Hudson. It's dangerous. We have a right to know.

Thank you

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