CAPE COD TIMES

Opinion

Herring River project aims to restore water quality

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Ron A. Gabel's recent letter (Could toxin-laden silt poison oyster beds in Wellfleet?" Jan. 10) claims that restoration of Wellfleet's Herring River will harm shellfish resources. He attempts to base his claims on my research into the water-quality problems of Herring River, but greatly misinterprets the findings. Restoration will, in fact, enhance shellfish habitat.

Contrary to Gabel's claims, restoring tidal flow to subsided marsh areas will reduce acidity in the soils and halt the leaching of metals into surrounding waters. The "toxins" Gabel refers to, e.g. high iron, sulfuric acid and aluminum, are from naturally occurring chemicals mobilized by the disturbance of diking and drainage. The Herring River Restoration Project aims to re-establish natural tidal-marsh conditions, and thereby restore water quality. Moreover, the science shows that sediment will flow predominantly upstream following restoration, not downstream.

Between 1980 and 2008, as a research scientist for Cape Cod National Seashore, I studied various aspects of the water and sediment quality of the Herring River, and in particular the effects of 100 years of artificial tidal restriction and wetland drainage. Under currently diked conditions, the river suffers from high acidity, low dissolved oxygen and high fecal coliform bacteria, the latter causing the closing of downstream shellfish beds since the state first tested around 1985. It is unfortunate that the letter writer doesn't understand the conditions or the science.

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