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Fisher Museum Event to Focus on the Rise of Dam Removal in New England

Visiting Professor Will Discuss History and Ecology of Dams

(Petersham)—More than ten thousand dams were built on New England rivers over the past four hundred years. In the last two decades, an increasing number of those dams have been removed, motivated by public safety, maintenance costs, and the desire to restore passage for migratory fish. On March 27, a special event at the Fisher Museum in Petersham will feature Noah Snyder, Harvard Forest Bullard Fellow and Associate Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Boston College, as he reviews the history of dam construction and removal in our region.

The event is free and open to the public, and will begin at 7:00 p.m.

Snyder is a geologist who studies river sediments, especially the historical information they can reveal about past environmental change. He became interested in dams while working in California, where large dams cause reservoirs to fill with sediment. When he moved back east, he found that most of the ecological stories about New England dams today were stories of dam removal.

“New England is one of the parts of the country that’s been leading the charge on dam removal since the late 1990s,” explains Snyder, “as a form of stream and habitat restoration.”

He adds that although most dam removal projects have an ecological component, often to benefit migratory fish, projects that gain traction with the public generally involve other factors, like the high cost or public safety risk of a failing dam. “When dam removals happen,” says Snyder, “it’s because several motivations are lining up.”

Dams are strongly linked to the history of European settlement in New England. The period Snyder calls “peak dam” occurred in the late 19th century, when dams were providing mechanical power to mills. Settlement, he says, followed the mills. “It’s not an exaggeration to say that pretty much every length of river in the populated part of Massachusetts was probably dammed at that time,” says Snyder.

When electricity and fossil fuels began providing the region’s power, some dams were retrofitted for hydroelectric power, he says, but most were not. In the century that followed, some dams failed on their own in major floods. Others are still there, echoes of a bygone economy.

“Once you know what to look for,” says Snyder, “you can find remnants of dams all over the place. There were thousands more dams in the colonial period than there are now.”

A small fraction of the dams in our region were built for flood control – like the Corps of Engineers dam on Tully River. Some dams, like the Winsor Dam on the Quabbin, were built for water supply. Others are used primarily for water-based recreation, and still others are used for emergency water for rural fire departments, which Snyder calls an under-appreciated but important aspect of existing dams.

Almost any dam removal will result in surprises, he explains, pointing to a recent, high-profile removal of the Pelham Dam on Amethyst Brook in Amherst: “When they removed it, they found another one under it. There are often multiple generations of dams that have been built and expanded over the centuries.”

According to Snyder, the North Quabbin is one of the regions in New England that had – and still has – many dams, because it’s wet and hilly. The presentation will touch on some local examples, including Harvard Forest’s recently restored dam on Harvard Pond in Petersham.

Snyder will close his presentation with lessons learned about sediment management following dam removal that apply to stream restoration projects throughout our region.

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The Harvard Forest, founded in 1907 and located in Petersham, Mass., is Harvard University's outdoor laboratory and classroom for ecology and conservation, and a Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) site funded by the National Science Foundation. Its 4,000 acre property is one of the oldest and most intensively studied research forests in the U.S. Open to the public year-round, the site includes educational and research facilities, the Fisher Museum, and recreational trails. Learn more at http://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu.