

# A river runs through his life

By SUSAN WEINSTEIN  
Gazette Staff Writer

**RAYNHAM** — Rivers have run as a recurring theme in Jim Ross' life, carrying him over seven thousand miles from New York to Alaska.

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Around  
Towns**

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These days, he is tending his long fascination with waterways to preserve the rivers in his own

back yard.  
For the next three years, Ross, executive director of Community Partnerships in Taunton, will help study the upper Taunton River in the hopes of having the 22-mile section designated and protected as "wild and scenic" by the federal government.

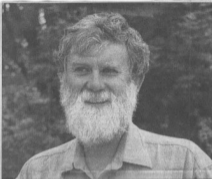
The five-community effort includes residents and officials from Raynham, Taunton, Bridgewater, Middleboro and Hallowell.

"For me, there is some symbolism there — the recognition that we all have a part to play and that no spot is small, that what you do in one town, with your waste or trash, has an impact on the others," Ross said. "People often don't think of the interconnectiveness of our natural resources."

This is not the first time Ross has volunteered his time to preserve nature. He served on the Raynham Conservation Commission for 10 years, until being forced out by opponents in a management dispute.

Last year, he helped found the Raynham Conservation Action Force Team (RCAPT), a group of grassroots environmentalists who support green control and the protection of open spaces.

At the non-profit Community Partnerships, Ross provides support services to the developmentally disabled, providing them with the means to live in the community. As part of his job, Ross has been a strong advocate of affordable housing — "some of the poorest of the



By Susan Weinstein for THE GAZETTE

Jim Ross, the executive director of Community Partnerships in Taunton, hopes to have a 22-mile section of the Taunton River designated and protected by the federal government.

poor" in the state, he says.

He sees nothing unusual in his desire to safeguard people and the environment. He says he shares a "commitment and fervor" to social causes with many of his generation.

"A lot of us who grew up in the cities are attracted to these issues and to this line of work. We try to stick to our guns about what we believe is right," said Ross, 53.

The eldest of 11 siblings, Ross has children of his own from two marriages — a diverse group of progeny ranging in age from 24 to 3.

He lives in Raynham with his wife, Diane, a special needs teacher in Easton, and several of his children.

Ross has trekked to the remote and unspoiled terrain on the continent. But he says he is always drawn back to New England and its finer distant seasons, mountains, woodlands and, of course, its rivers.

When did your love

affair with rivers begin?

"When I was a kid, I would often go fishing with my father and grandfather in upstate New York.

The first time I ever set foot in Alaska was from a canoe I built in the late 1970s. I paddled seven thousand miles across the continent and over four canoeing seasons, mostly alone, from the Hudson River in New York. The boat is still hanging in my garage.

That's one of the reasons why I was so thrilled to be appointed as a town representative to the Taunton River Study committee. It allows me to continue to do something very loudly to make sure we protect this valuable resource.

Who taught you to respect nature?

I don't remember it as an overt teaching, but my father and grandfather were such good role models. There was this inherent sense that you pack out what you bring

in, recycle and take care of our world for the next people who come along.

What made you decide to serve on the Conservation Commission?

I had a long interest in the issues that the commission deals with — open spaces and wetlands protection. It seemed like a natural outlet to help the community.

Is there anything insignificant in the environment, anything that is not worth protecting?

No. The real question is how to recognize their significance and to know that there are any number of other issues that are also significant.

We need development, we need to find places for people to live and we also need to protect the environment. We have to ask: How do we balance them?

If we go through an open and honest process, it can be done. But we need to recognize that when we lose open

spaces and damage natural habitats, none of that is irreversibly.

I worry about the attitude of people who cavalierly say that certain insects and plants and turtles have no value, that the only thing of value is what people do.

Posts have their place in the world, even posts that rot.

Isn't there a dichotomy between building affordable housing and saving the environment?

I think there are other ways to promote affordability. This area is under strong pressure for development. But whether you are rich or poor, black or white, Christian or Muslim, you're going to enjoy living in Raynham, more if the quality of life is high. And that includes having open spaces and clean and inexpensive water. I don't find that particularly conflicting.

Is it difficult to stand your ground in a small town?

What happens in many communities is that there are projects that are popular. It has never been particularly important for me to be popular, if I felt it was the correct side to take. I'm thick-skinned enough. I think it's important to speak out — and to act.

It's very important for us to recognize that to be good shepherds of our environment, popularity is not the issue.

Is there an historical figure you admire?

I enjoy reading about Abraham Lincoln. He took stances that were not popular.

What kind of a world do you want to leave your children?

Certainly a place that is kinder and gentler than what we've seen in the news these past weeks — a place where they also afford to live in a town they choose, a place where they can go out in the woods and wander for hours.