

To: The Water Resource Panel of the Natural Resources Board
From: Adam Gebb
Case Name: "Somerset Reservoir"
Case Number: "UPW-05-04"

The following is an ecological and geographic tour of the Somerset Reservoir and its surroundings. Also included is information on how our community sees and uses the local area. The significance of the Somerset goes far beyond Southern Vermont. As the wildest large recreational water body in the state, we have a much greater responsibility to preserve its wild character for future generations. Numbered photographs can be located on the enclosed topographic map.

THE SOMERSET RESERVOIR BASIN

Somerset Reservoir, located at the end of a 10-mile gravel road north of Vermont Route 9 in the townships of Stratton and Somerset, is the largest undeveloped water body in Vermont. Having more than 16 miles of shoreline, and covering 1,600 acres, its broad northern reaches with 12 scattered islands and several winding channels offer remote fishing and paddling unmatched outside the Adirondacks or the down-east coast of Maine.

Views among groups of islands and toward distant Glastenbury Mountain and its high ridge to the west provide an extraordinary sense of remoteness and grandeur. Clear and deep water makes for great swimming and fishing.

A fast kayaker can easily spend a very full day just exploring the Somerset Reservoir's remote fingers and coves. Fish include smallmouth and largemouth bass, trout, crappie, yellow perch and landlocked salmon. Birds include eagles, hawks, herons and many migratory species. Visitors should detour loon nests on low islands near the western shore, but can thrill to the frequent haunting calls of these primeval birds.

Those wishing to get out of their boats and hike find many opportunities. On the west side of the reservoir are numerous ponds, streams and wetlands, a very large tussock sedge marsh, and many black spruce bogs (See pictures 1 and 2).



Picture 1



Picture 2

A large number of moose thrive in this area. A deep broadleaf marsh of more than 60 acres blends into dwarf shrub bog and poor fen on the eastern shore (See picture # 3).



Photo 3

Heron nesting, uncommon in the GMNF is happening in this area. The Catamount Trail, established for cross-country skiing, follows the east side of the reservoir on its way north to the Grout Pond recreation area, which offers camping, and a marked hiking and skiing trail system. North of the reservoir two tributaries of the Deerfield River drain Grout Pond and the Lye Brook Wilderness plateau. Primary succession due to the large variety of natural communities helps to support a large and diverse mammal population. A look at the USGS map makes it clear that this area is the ecological heartland of the southern Green Mountains. There is no other area on public land in the State of Vermont with a greater quantity and diversity of natural wetlands. These wetlands drive up the richness of natural communities, creating some of the best wildlife habitat in the state. The gentle gradient of the lands around the Somerset allows for the frequent impoundment of water. This greatly increases the diversity of the aquatic, semi-aquatic, avian and terrestrial species.

Paddlers come from afar to experience this fantastic water body and dominate in terms of recreational use. A number of schools and organizations with summer outdoor programs have regular trips and classes on the Somerset. Leland and Gray High School in Townsend, Vermont owns 50 acres on the Somerset and is the only land owner besides The Transcanada Corporation. They run canoe and kayak trips for many students in combination with wilderness style camping trips on their land. The school has taken a clear stance in favor of limiting motorized access on the Somerset (see attached letter).

The Vermont Wilderness School and Kroka Expeditions also depend on the Somerset for wilderness paddling programs. They have a number of classes each summer on the Somerset. (Letters coming soon)

Many local residents are awed by what a large, wild and secluded water body the Somerset is. Many paddle here daily or weekly. For others, it is that magical place they get to once or twice a year. Many avid paddlers have moved to the area, because of the fantastic paddling found here. On many weekends, half of the vehicles parked are out of state paddlers. This directly correlates into tourism dollars being pumped into the local economy. A large contingent of fisher people with electric or small motors also frequent the area.

Whether you just want to lie on a beach and swim from a little island, fish, or really get out there and see the superlative wildlife habitat that this remote part of the Green Mountains has to offer, you will find Somerset Reservoir a memorable experience.

THE GROUT POND AREA

The most significant factor in describing the use of the lands around the Somerset is understanding the Grout Pond area. The Grout Pond area, shown in photographs 4 and 5, covers all the land north of the Somerset and up to the Kelley Stand Road. (This road can be seen at bottom left of photo # 4)



Photo 4



Photo 5

The pond itself is 86 acres in size and has a gravel put in for canoes and kayaks. (No motorized boats are allowed). Grout Pond has rare and endangered plant species, such as tuckerman pond weed and bladderwort, and is fished for small mouth bass, chain pickerel and yellow perch. The surrounding area has healthy populations of moose, deer, bear, beavers, bobcat, fisher, river otter and mink.

Most people know of this area as a great place to cross country ski, snow shoe, hike, camp, swim or canoe. The popularity of the area is on the rise, (as is the population of southern Vermont) due to the unique recreational mix offered and the close proximity to population centers. These great recreational opportunities are matched by a truly diverse ecological mix of ponds, rivers, streams and a three-mile stretch of wetlands on the east side, running all the way to Somerset Reservoir. Aerial photographs 6, 7 and 8 (As well as the cover shot) show what a diverse wetland system wraps around the east side of the pond on the way to Somerset Reservoir (see matching map labels). Natural communities include black spruce swamp, hemlock swamp, dwarf shrub bog, poor fen, shallow emergent marsh, sedge meadow, alluvial shrub bog, river mud shore and river shore grassland.



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8

The emphasis of the area is clearly non-motorized recreation. The US Forest Service website describes the area as 1,600 acres set aside for recreation. The forests have mostly been left untouched to maintain a natural setting. Snowmobile use is limited to the access road to the west side trail, and a trail on the east side of the Deerfield River. (Shown as BN 21 on the VAST map)

From Grout Pond heading southwards, the Catamount Trail follows the east side of the Somerset. This trail is used year round by hikers, snow shoers and cross country skiers. Except for the snowmobile trail # C7-100 that skirts the SE corner of the reservoir, the Catamount carries the only human usage this land sees. The dominant feature of the east side of the Somerset are diverse and numerous wetlands set in mixed hardwood forests that see very little human use of any kind.

The West Side Trail runs the length of the west side of the Somerset reservoir and also sees very little use. As previously mentioned the Leland and Gray High School owns 50 acres and runs wilderness camping programs on their land.(See map # 1)

Map 1 is available for inspection at the office of the Water Resources Panel in Montpelier.

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER LARGE WATER BODIES IN VERMONT
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AREAS AND FACILITIES

The Missisquoi Refuge

The Missisquoi Refuge is 5,839 acres in size and is managed as a waterfowl stop over area. As a wildlife refuge, human recreation is de-emphasized. The area offers great paddling, but not an ideal place for swimming, or getting out of your boat. The water is murky and delta edges thick with grass's and other vegetation.

The Green River Reservoir

The Green River Reservoir is set in a state park that is 5,110 acres in size. The reservoir is 653 acres in size. There are 28 camp sites spread all over the edges, some holding as many as 12 people/campers. This management plan makes it very difficult to get a real wild, secluded feeling. As you paddle around, there is the regular site of the numbered plaques for camp sites which are often cleared to or visible from the water as you paddle by. This high density of recreation emphasis is likely to be the detriment of the area's natural communities and wild spirit, as the years pass.

The Harriman Reservoir

The Harriman Reservoir is the largest body of water completely within Vermont's borders. The reservoir is 2,000 acres in size, has 28 miles of coastline and is about 10 miles long (accounting for curviness). Water is clear and deep allowing for great swimming and fishing. The eastern shore has some houses visible from the water, and is not national forest. The western shore is rugged forested mountains with no development visible. At the northern end, Route 9, follows the coast. There are two motorized boat launch sites on the east side. A small one at the end of Boyd Hill Road has picnic sites and parking along the road side. The larger launch area on Fairview Ave is about 1 mile from Wilmington. It has two wide boat ramps, a dock and space for over 80 vehicles (See photos 13 and 14). On Route 9 there is a put in with space for 15 vehicles next to a motor boat rental business offering everything from speed boats to jet skis(See photos 9 and 10). In the south near Whitingham Village, there is another small put in. Recreational usage is over 75% motorized.



Photo 9



Photo 10

The Somerset Reservoir

The Somerset has 1600 acres of water, is 5 miles north/south and has 16 miles of coastline. The protected lands, which completely surround the reservoir, are

east of Forest Road 71, south of the Kelley Stand Road and north of the Somerset Road. This area is well over 13,500 acres. If you add in the 1600 water acres you have a 15,000 acre water wilderness, which by far exceeds anything else in the state. The coastline is completely wild (except for picnic sites near the put in) and shows very few signs of human usage. Emphasis is quiet human recreation surrounded by diverse wildlife habitat where over 80% of users are paddlers.

The put in for the Somerset is a rustic gravel ramp. It is a challenge for large trailers but perfect in size and character for the canoers and kayakers which make up the majority of users. The parking areas are small and grassy holding up to 20 vehicle spaces, near the put in, and 30 spaces further down the road (See photos 11 and 12).



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13



Photo 14

THE TRANSCANADA CORP LANDS

The lands owned by the TransCanada Corporation are shown in green on map #1. There is a special “FERC” permit, that regulates usage of the property. Several nongovernmental organizations became parties to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission proceeding to relicense the hydroelectric facilities on the Deerfield River. As a result, they hold conservation easements on much of the utility company land now owned by TransCanada Corporation. These organizations include the Conservation Law Foundation, The Vermont Natural Resources Council and Vermont Land Trust. They have strict land management guidelines in place, that are highly protective of the property. They include regulations on sustainable logging and strict limits on any road building. Lands are required to stay in their natural condition.

NRB RULES

The “Vermont Use of Public Waters” rules amended January 2005, Section 2.10 states that”

When regulation is determined to be necessary to resolve conflicts between two or more normal uses, priority will be given to resolving the conflict by separating the conflicting uses, such as designating specific times or places where various uses are allowed.

Because we have two large water bodies in close proximity it would be appropriate to separate uses, which could easily be achieved without denying

anybody in this local area an outlet for their use. The larger Harriman Reservoir is clearly a fantastic and popular place for motor boats and jet skis.

Rule 2.11 states:

“Those water bodies which currently provide wilderness-like recreational experiences shall be managed to protect and enhance the continued availability of such experiences”.

The Somerset is Vermont’s premier wild recreational water body. No other area exists in the state that is more appropriate for the application of rule 2.11.

THE EVOLVING SCENE

The recreational situation in the Somerset has evolved a lot in the last ten years. The population in the area is steadily increasing. The popularity of water sports of all kinds is also increasing. We have now reached a point where due to the increased traffic, the unique values that the Somerset offers are eroding quickly.

Many people who have been using the Somerset for fishing, canoeing and kayaking for a long time, are now avoiding the area on weekends because of the lack of solitude and peace due to fast moving large motor boats.

There are definitely a number of very respectful motor boat users who actually do travel at 10 mph. However, on the weekends (and to a lesser extent on weekdays) there is the regular loud noise created by large horse power motorists who travel at full throttle or far faster than 10 mph in all parts of the Somerset.

ABOUT THIS PETITION

In this modern age it is not easy to get people to just sign things. However, it was very easy to get 650 plus signers on this petition (see attached). **(Petition is available for inspection at the office of the Water Resources Panel in Montpelier.)** At various locations where I set up a table for a couple of hours, I had up to three people at a time eagerly signing and asking how they could help. This is a true sign of the public’s support for this rule change.

Any rule change will make some people unhappy. In this case it is clear that those who will benefit on the Somerset, many times out number those who will have the larger Harriman any way. On average, over 80% of the people using the Somerset are paddlers. The most common remark I received from the public was the desire to see motor boats completely banned.

Unfortunately a 10 mph speed limit is unenforceable and vague in an area that almost never sees enforcement. Imagine a highway that you knew the police “never” patrolled. In the past, paper rule signs have been torn down. In the future, sturdy durable signs should be made. One should be placed near the beginning of the Somerset road, so that nobody needlessly drives 20 miles of dirt road.

CONCLUSIONS

- 1) The Somerset is the wildest large recreational paddling area in the State of Vermont. It has a long established use pattern dominated by paddlers and people fishing with small motors.
- 2) The lands around the Somerset are very wild and see mostly hiking and cross country skiing for recreational use. They hold the most significant quantity and diversity of natural wetlands on public land in the state.
- 3) The local community, as shown by signers to this petition, feel strongly about keeping the Somerset quiet and wild. This includes numerous residents as well as local schools and summer camps running adventure programs.
- 4) The Somerset is very important to the high quality of living in southern Vermont. Canoers and kayakers as well as the many people who already fish the Somerset with small or electric motors will benefit greatly by this proposal. They are united by the desire to have a peaceful and wild experience on the Somerset. Those who wish to speed around will always have the Harriman.
- 5) The close proximity of the larger Harriman Reservoir leaves us a clear opportunity to provide the people of Southern Vermont with a rich diversity of water recreational opportunities.
- 6) A 15 Horse Power maximum motor size is the simplest and most easily enforceable way to protect the peaceful and wild spirit of the Somerset’s waters for future generations.