

Mussels lose their river home

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Brian Lehmann / Monitor staff
Kim Tuttle of New Hampshire Fish and Game shows off a handful of endangered brook floater mussels in Epsom yesterday.

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When Susi Von Oettingen heard that the Suncook River had changed course in Epsom last week, her mind turned to mussels. The river's rocky, sandy bottom was just the kind of habitat that the endangered brook floater mussel prefers.

That stretch of the Suncook hadn't ever been surveyed, but Von Oettingen, an endangered species specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, thought she might find a few when she visited the spot Friday. Instead, she found hundreds.

"They were stuck in the sand," she said. "We were pulling some out alive. Some were dead."

Yesterday, about a dozen people, most from the wildlife service and the state Fish and Game Department, spent the afternoon rescuing the live ones, collecting them in plastic bags and bins and moving them to the federal fishery in Nashua. Officials hope to transfer them back to a place upstream on the Suncook once the town decides what to do with the diverted section and the waters calm down.

In boots and waders, the group walked the river, using clear-bottomed mussel buckets to cut the glare of the water and looking for the mussels' distinctive lima bean shape and pink foot.

Populations of the brook floater are declining across the Northeast. The mussels are listed as endangered by most of the New England states.

Michael Marchand, a wetland biologist with the Fish and Game Department, said the decline may be caused by changes in the populations of host fish, such as brook trout, that carry the mussels through a river. Shoreline development and habitat destruction may also play a role. Water quality is a factor, too, he said.

"They really need clean water," Marchand said. "They're really sensitive to change."

The mussels experienced a big change last week when the river upstream jumped its banks and plowed through an abutting gravel pit, leaving about a mile of the old riverbed

nearly dry. Yesterday, only about a foot of water remained in areas where the crew was collecting.

In Nashua, the mussels will be kept in 51-degree water and fed algae shipped from a West Virginia fishery. Some will be marked to monitor for life expectancy.

"We're not really sure the survival rate of moving mussels to a new location," Marchand said.

They'll remain at the fishery until the town and state decide what to do with the relocated river. In the meantime, scientists will look for a good place in which to release them.

Von Oettingen said the mussels must return to the Suncook River. The Suncook mussels have specifically evolved to the conditions of that river, she said, and their population could be genetically different than brook floater mussels in the Merrimack or other rivers.

Even though many had died, the group found hundreds of mussels that could be saved between the Old Mill dam off Route 28 and a bend in the river channel a few hundred meters downstream, where more water was flowing. In the past, Von Oettingen has been excited to find a few dozen mussels together because they are so rare.

The Suncook now has one of the largest known populations in the state.

"I'm a little overwhelmed," Von Oettingen said. "It's a phenomenal opportunity for research."

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