

community profile

Guarding the Waters

BY LYNN MACNICOL

Thanks to Em Richards, the West River Watershed Coordinator – and volunteers who refuse to wait until problems get worse – the state's first totally local grassroots-run basin planning initiative is well underway.

Em feels an urgency about the rivers and watersheds that feed them. "Whatever you do is eventually going to get into the river," she warns. And anything that empties into a river is part of the watershed.

A statewide program links officials with local citizens in forming watershed councils to protect all of Vermont's rivers. Due to the state's money crunch, it would have taken a couple more years for officials to start the Basin 11 council, which would include the West, Saxtons and Williams rivers. But Em Richards and concerned groups, working together as the West River Watershed Alliance, jump-started the program and have already begun monitoring streams and educating the public about water issues.

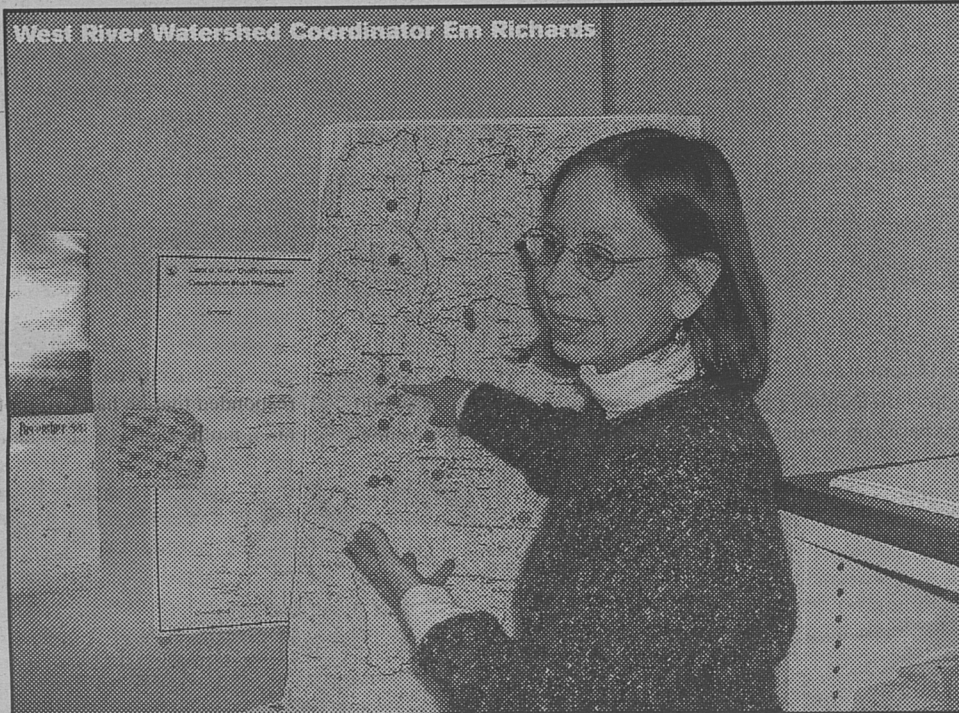
Em Richards lives in Westminster with her partner, three cats and an iguana named Moofie, near the West River in southeastern Vermont. Since 85 percent of the land is forested, there's less industry and farming to compromise the health of the area's streams, she says. The watershed hosts major ski areas at Stratton, Bromley and Magic Mountains, and summer brings hikers, campers and kayakers to the woods and rivers.

Em isn't from there, however. She grew up in the small town of Greenland, New Hampshire "at the end of a long dirt road." Her family was the only one living there and her brothers were much older, so young Em spent hours alone wandering in the woods and on the beach of Great Bay, a large salt-water tidal inlet.

"I wasn't lonely when I was in the woods and when I was walking by the shore – I think there was a certain reverence for it for me," she remembers.

After high school she went to the University of New Hampshire, where she considered studying oceanography but finished school with a degree in art history and German. She lived in Austria for a year, came back, got married and moved to Colorado.

West River Watershed Coordinator Em Richards



Em Richards watches over Southeastern Vermont's rivers and keeps lgtbqs in the loop.

Em and her husband later moved to Maryland to raise their two daughters. After 10 years, she gave up her graphics design studio to go back to school, discovering she had a knack for natural science courses such as microbiology. Em got an entry-level job with an environmental firm as a "picker" – someone who takes aquatic "bug" samples from streams and processes them for environmental studies.

As she followed her new career interests, Em discovered she was gay, and met Jan; the two have now been together for nearly 20 years. Em and her husband divorced, and the two women raised Em's daughters together.

Meanwhile, Em – following what she calls her "zig-zag" career path – had worked her

way up to project supervisor at Versar, an environmental consulting firm. She ran projects involving wetlands and storm water quality, and prepared assessments and impact statements for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Defense. She was responsible for large contracts of up to \$1 million.

But after years of living in Maryland, it was time to come back home to New England. Rather than head back to New Hampshire, Em chose Vermont. She opened a satellite office for Versar in Putney, while Jan finished a degree in Maryland; and after a year of separation they settled in together in their

new home. increased security measures, Em began looking elsewhere in her field and took the job as watershed coordinator.

"I would like to focus all my attention on water," Em says. "Water is the essence of our being. Without it we're dead. There's going to be real trouble in 20 years if we don't do something" as a community to protect our water resources in this area of Vermont.

Last summer, Em Richards and a group of volunteers surveyed the users of several area swimming holes. That survey included Indian Love Call – the upper "gay" section of which was shown to be one of the cleanest around. While there doesn't seem to be a problem of gays being harassed there, Em says straight swimmers tend to stay away, using the lower pools.

While she agrees that gender minorities "have incredible hills to climb" to be accepted, she expresses the desire to be "just the watershed coordinator and not the gay watershed coordinator." She adds that it's important for lesbians and gay men to be out, whatever their jobs.

Her presence as watershed coordinator, her insistence on including the watershed's lgtb users, and her solution-oriented approach help prevent any potential for gay scapegoating, especially around Indian Love Call.

She is fiercely protective of an essential resource, and gets angry when people don't care, or worse yet, think they can do something better than Nature can. "If enough people had a true understanding of natural events and a sense of awe, it wouldn't be such a struggle to get people involved," she says.

Em is determined to get as many people involved in watershed protection as she can. "I think if people just had a sense of connection

new home.

Em and Jan were joined in a civil union in 2002, which several of their coworkers attended. "Some of them were cute about it," Em recalls, and they insisted that "of course we knew" about their relationship.

Vermonters for about two years now, the couple is finding a strong and supportive community in their adopted home. The All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church is "opening its doors to any gays in the area," Em says. When she and her partner came out last year to their co-religionists, "we were welcomed with open arms."

When the events of September 11, 2001 made her job difficult because of

that we wouldn't have to have so many laws and regulations. The West is a beautiful river, and we need to keep it that way. We have a little bit of time to do that." ▼

There will be a basin planning public forum January 29 in Newfane. If you're interested in getting involved, contact Em at 802-254-5323x109, or em.Richards@vacd.org.