

OUR BASIN OF RELATIONS

THE ART & SCIENCE OF LIVING WITH WATER

M. E. SIPE & TREVIAN STANGER



Green Writers Press, an independent, Vermont-based publishing company, is dedicated to spreading environmental awareness and social justice by publishing authors who promulgate messages of hope and renewal through place-based writing and environmental activism. In the past five years, Green Writers Press has expanded significantly, publishing such authors as Julia Alvarez, Chard deNiord, John Elder, Dr. M Jackson, former Vermont Governor, Madeleine Kunin, and Clarence Major. Our mission is to spread a message of hope and renewal through the words and images we publish. Throughout we will adhere to our commitment to preserving and protecting the natural resources of the earth. To that end, a percentage of our proceeds will be donated to environmental activist groups and specifically those that support the Lake Champlain ecosystem and watershed.

Read more at www.greenwriterspress.com.

Note: for *Our Basin of Relations* a list of sponsors and nonprofits supporting us will be listed.

SPECIFICATIONS

Trim size: 11.5 x 12.5

~ 120 pgs

Hardcover with dust jacket

Full color photography

ISBN: 978-1-7328540-4-8

Cover photo: M. E. Sipe

Cover and Layout Design: Hannah Wood

<https://hannahwood.myportfolio.com/>

MARKETING

Retail price: \$40 Hardcover with dust jacket 120 pages 11.5 x 12.5 in.

ISBN: 978-1-7328540-4-8 | Pub Date: September 17, 2019

MARKETING: Launch events at various locations around the Lake Champlain Basin in Vermont and NY State. Vermont Public Radio publicity and interview with broad Vermont media publicity leading up to pub date. Ads in Vermont Land Trust and Lake Champlain publications. Editor and photographer will lead a New England book tour featuring various contributors from the book and photo exhibit. Distributed to the book trade by Midpoint Trade / IPG. Foreign Rights available.

For publicity and info contact Dede Cummings: dede@greenwriterspress.com

www.greenwriterspress.com / 802-380-1121

HOW TO ORDER

Individuals

Green Writers Press books, e-books, and audiobooks are available worldwide through both bricks-and-mortar and online stores such as: your local independent bookstore, Barnes & Noble, Amazon, BAM, Indiebound.com, Powell's, Chapters/Indigo, kobo.com, iTunes, LibroFM, etc. Our mantra is "Support your local, independent bookstore: Write a review on Amazon; but buy local!"

Bookstores and Wholesalers

Midpoint Trade / IPG is the distributor for our entire house and all its divisions including Green Place Books and DCDesign Books. This gives us national distribution for all our titles. Now retailers will be able to order our titles with ease through their preferred source, including industry leaders Ingram and Baker and Taylor. In addition, we have a supplement deal with Gazelle Book Services in England, which will handle sales in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Midpoint Book Sales & Distribution

27 West 20th Street, Suite 1102

New York, NY 10011

Orders & Customer Service Department

E-mail: orders@midpointtrade.com

Phone: 212-616-2020

Orders Fax: 888-250-3744

Independent Publishers Group

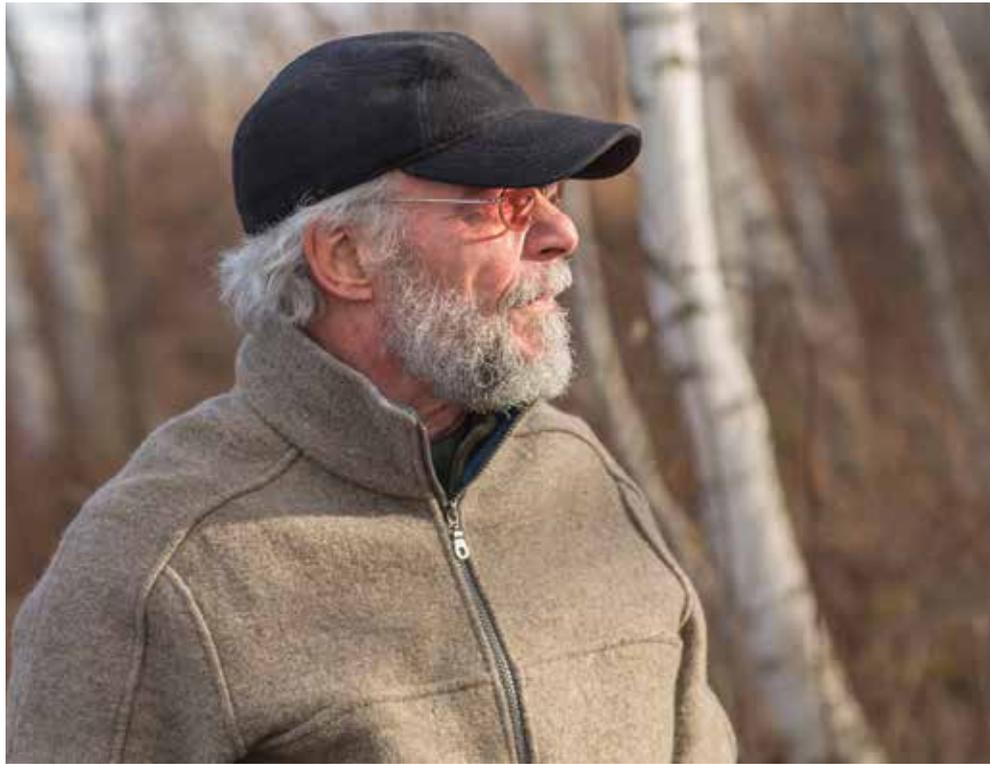
814 N. Franklin Street

Chicago, IL 60610

Trade or publisher inquiries: (312) 337-0747

Order Placement: (800) 888-4741

Fax: (312) 337-5985



MIKE SIPE

I have been a serious amateur photographer for over thirty years, gracing personal walls with images that have staying power. My objective is using natural light in capturing gifts of images, by being in the right place at the right time with the right equipment, which evoke a magical light and an interesting confluence of elements. Since my retirement from private practice as a Life-Wealth Planner in 2013, and completing the publication of my gift edition of *Advocate Planning: To Do What You Love To Do*, I am driven with my passion for the Lake Champlain region to pursue photography full time.

The Lake Champlain region is my unparalleled muse; the beauty of the lake, skies, mountains, valley and the people enjoying its splendor. I don't have to travel the world to find world-class beauty; it is here, in my own back yard. My ability to find the area's essence is evolving and it is exhilarating to me. I love to capture vistas with just the right light accenting a center of interest, the affects of natural elements and motion, and when I find a wide tonal range, the elegant impression of black and white.



TREVIEN STANGER

Ahoy! My name is Trevien Stanger, and I am a poet, tree-planter, educator, and writer living and working in the Champlain Basin.

Since my early twenties, I have worked seasonally for the Intervale Conservation Nursery, where I lead crews in completing ecological restoration projects along Vermont's rivers and wetlands. Throughout this decade of tree-planting, I have witness first hand the realities of Lake Champlain's clean water issues, while also helping play a small, direct role in generating new technical and cultural responses to the situation. For more on how this has shaped my thinking and action, please consider reading an essay I published in the *Burlington Free Press* this past winter, entitled "Thinking Like a Watershed."

The water cycle and the life cycle are one.

— JACQUES COUSTEAU

Introduction

COMING HOME TO THE BASIN

— *Trevien Stanger*

Watersheds don't lie.

And this river mouth speaks the truth, if you're able to sit and listen.

Here, on this spit of land beside where Vermont's mighty Winooski River spills its story into the larger saga of Lake Champlain, is where I'd have us sit. Here, right at lake-level, you can gaze in the four cardinal directions and behold this great basin with clear eyes. The sight is beautiful, no doubt, but the story it tells is teetering quickly from a Romantic tale of the sublime and a modern tale of supposed pastoral tranquility toward a more tragic story—one of a vast, dynamic ecosystem and culture in decline. This book seeks to play a small and humble part in halting, and reversing, that decline.

LOOKING SOUTH, we let our gaze traverse almost 80 miles of open water; $\frac{2}{3}$ of the lake's north-south length. Out there lie depths of 400 ft and unknowable acres of liquid darkness—darkness that once hosted beluga whales and torrents of salmon in our post-glacial past. That way also plays a large role in the lake's origin: two of the larger drainages that feed the lake, Vermont's Otter Creek and New York's Lake George watersheds both flow toward us from those distant lands. The lake's water takes a full three years to fully roil and mix and flow north to the lake's exit point in southern Quebec. If the last three years are any indication, the journey will be a wild ride, and we have essays in this book that will toss us right into that trip.

Cultural history also dots that horizon—Fort Ticonderoga and some of the first towns settled by European colonists can still be toured there. Nearer still, and older yet, you can make out Rock Dunder, an island of great significance to the Abenaki that, to this day, exists as a living link to this whole basin's mythological past. We've two stories about that island for you in this book.

TO THE WEST, across nearly 12 miles of cold blue chop, the widest this lake gets at present, you can experience the visual thrill of great contrasts—the flat shoreline made even flatter by the explosive rise of the Adirondacks behind it. Nearly the entire western side of this lake's basin or watershed (Watershed = the land area that drains or *sheds* its water to a common point) feeds rivers born of snow-melt from sharp Adirondack peaks, most notably the Saranac and Ausable Rivers. Some of the places up there are known—Lake Placid and its Olympic past, the Keene Valley and its ongoing cultural cominglings of hikers, snowmobiles, hunters, yuppies, hippies, and developers—while other areas of these mountains are seldom visited, and because of that, the rivers pouring out of them are seldom sullied. Closer to shore, there are only a few towns of significant size, with Plattsburgh sitting as the only lakeside city.

Westward beyond the lake lies the Mohawk nation who, like the Abenaki here on the Vermont side, live with the ongoing quagmire of colonial erasure. Rising against that, however, is also the inspired upwelling of a traditional culture, one that seeks both political and spiritual sovereignty. The land and waters are central characters in many of their stories, and we have one of those tales of passion and perseverance in these pages.

TURNING TO THE EAST, near at hand, is this muddy, coffee-colored river flowing past—a river that tells me more stories than any river ever has and has stolen my heart and claimed my allegiance in the process. Chugging out from beneath an old railroad-trestle-turned-bike-path-bridge, and behind that, from beneath towering silver maples and prehistoric ostrich ferns rising from the fertile floodplain, you could be forgiven for thinking we were looking up a river in Delaware or Carolina. This is Vermont's Winooski River, a terrifically large watershed in its own right. Like the mighty Lamoille and the Mississquoi rivers to the north, the Winooski's headwaters emerge from high country almost 90 miles to the east—east of the balmy Champlain Valley floor, east of the rugged Green Mountains, and even further east than Montpelier, the state capitol that was once a three day horse trip from here but is now just an hour's drive. The Winooski watershed drains over 1,000 sq miles of land, and just a few hundred years ago, it supported dozens of salmon and trout runs, featured exceptionally rich old growth forests with streams and rivers providing safe drinking, cooking, and bathing water.

The Winooski watershed today however, like the other major drainages in Vermont that flow into Lake Champlain, is a beautiful mess. This summer, with my newborn daughter, Fern, in my arms, we explored many of the cold, clear, stunningly beautiful creeks and streams that pour clean and true from the mountains near my hillside home. Watching Fern splash her pebble toes and giggle with her acorn nose was a joy, and I know how fortunate we both are to have such places to explore when so many millions of fathers and daughters do not.

Up in that forested high country that births so many of the mountain streams of this basin, with no one upstream from you save a few hikers and a moose or two, you could well imagine this water through which you wade is the cleanest water surging anywhere on this compromised planet. In some sense, you'd be right, but the water doesn't stay that way for long. As these streams join others to form smaller rivers, and those rivers carve through the final few miles of flatlands before joining the Winooski, the waters pick up all manner of our cultural shrapnel. Be it an overcrowded and over-fertilized dairy farm, or an underfunded public storm drain system, an old dump site, or a stretch of railroad bed drowning in herbicides—it's clear that our main-stem rivers take a beating, even here in "green" VT. Could we fix this? What would it take? We have several essays and stories in this book that try to float some answers.

All that said, these rivers and the lake they feed are also, when we're honest with ourselves, Home. For many of us, we don't simply live in this recent political entity called "Vermont"—we live in these watersheds, and we live in this Basin. (Basin = an apt metaphor or image for the bowl-shaped terrain of this place, with the mountains forming the upper edges and the low point in the middle where the water flows into and settles). And to truly call this Home, and feel at Home, and to embrace all the responsibility and weight and joy that comes with that requires that we look about us with honest eyes and willing hands. There is a reason that both ecology and economy share the root of *eco*, which comes from the Greek word *ekōs*, which means "home."

To be at home here, to "come into the watershed" and "become native to one's place," as Gary Snyder says, is itself a process. For those with Abenaki or Mohawk blood coursing through their bodies, as well as their cultural stories and traditions flowing through their minds, a connection to this place is indigenous

to their very being, and we'd do well to listen closely to their words. But for those of who are immigrants or settlers, whether fifth generation Vermonters with our names etched into the aging village tombstones; or New Americans flung here from far-flung (and sometimes war-torn) lands trying to hold onto the culture of ancestral lands while learning this new one; or just suburban refugees from the apathetic placeless limbo of strip-mall-and-sub-development complexes carpeting the American landscape—we all have a lot of work to do. This work, I believe, is not just to claim this place as home, but also, as the mythologist Martin Shaw admonishes, *to have this place claim us*. To swear allegiance not to a flag, but to a river, and to all of the human and more-than-human beings with whom we share this Basin—beings with whom we share relational nodes of reciprocity and interconnectivity—our Basin of Relations.

But we're not there yet. We're not even *here* yet. And this river mouth tells us much. Essays in this book are in conversation with that telling.

FINALLY, LOOKING NORTH, we confront some of the harshest images that this water mirror has to offer back to us. One of those larger rivers to the north, the Missisquoi, is a sort of living laboratory for the often reckless biochemistry experiment that is industrial dairy. That river and its tributaries are used like large sewage pipes for all the waste that is created and all of the excessive fertilizers being utilized to get us cheap milk and cheese. Those excess nutrients spill into the lake with the near constancy of a gasoline generator humming in the night. And in the day. And the night again.

As these rivers pour into the lake they mix into a few very shallow bays, such as St. Albans Bay, and the resulting overdose of phosphorous in particular kicks off one of the most dramatic feeding frenzies of the plant and bacterial kingdoms: we get blue green algae blooms, or more accurately, cyanobacteria blooms. Our warming climate serves only to exacerbate the problem. These blooms are toxic: toxic to drink, toxic to swim in, and, it's being discovered, toxic to *breathe* in.

Like other major bodies of water in our nation, notably Lake Erie and parts of the Gulf Coast, these blooms can become a really big deal quite quickly, costing communities massive sums of money and having significant impacts on public health. When Toledo, Ohio had a particularly bad outbreak a few years ago

they had to shut down the entire city's drinking water system until the bloom cleared—there is no rule that I can find that says Vermont can't one day face a similar future. With over 200,000 people in the Basin who depend upon the lake for drinking water, it's not hard to imagine how disruptive, and tragic, it will be if we squander this life-nourishing abundance.

Can you imagine? A population living on the shores of a once pristine lake that can no longer drink that water because of our own neglect and inability to right our course? I can too. But I don't want to, and we don't have to.

But to look north is also to look to many other possible futures. The water that we impact in the Basin does not stay with us forever—these waters, like most in this world, are bound for the sea. This lake, counterintuitively, flows north, spilling its content slowly but surely through Quebec's Richlieu River and into the truly giant St. Lawrence River (which drains all of the great lakes), and it is this mighty river that is destined to meet and mix with the cold Atlantic waters 300 miles to the northeast.

Why should we care where the water goes once we're done with it? It is often said of ecology that it's important to remember that “we all live downstream,” and to a large degree this is true, as we are always impacted by the decisions people made upstream from us, either literally on the land or figuratively in the past. But, we might do well to recall, we also *all live upstream*. Even as we struggle to value our own natural capital and local beauty, we should not destroy the water and livelihoods of others downstream from us, either in those rivers or in that great Ocean toward which they are bound, or in the greater future we will leave to our children. And just as we begin to learn as children that we should treat others with respect, and treat them how we'd like to be treated, so too must we apply these basic ethical precepts to how we treat our downstream neighbors.

FINALLY, TURNING A SLOW 360°, we survey once more the 587 miles (!) of the lake's shoreline. We contemplate the 435 square miles of its surface. We count over 70 islands and wonder about their histories and their experience of being surrounded by this water. We try to imagine the nearly 7 trillion gallons of water flowing and plunging and mixing before us. We consider the 54 public beaches and the joy and economic benefit they bring. We float above the over

300,000 acres of flood-mitigating, life-nourishing wetlands that ring the lake and follow the last reaches of every river. We hold in mind that this Basin is home to over 500,000 people, millions of individual plants and animals and fungi, and we then give a special nod to those among us who are children, for it is they who will be inheriting this legacy we are creating with every passing day and with every decision we make. It is they, and their children, who will live downstream from our decisions.

Above all else, it is becoming clear that while the challenges we face here are similar to those being faced by thousands of communities across this continent, there is also no one else experiencing these exact repercussions in this exact place. There is only one Champlain Basin. As such, we can also surmise that no one else, from nowhere else, is going to save us or *our* lake. The solutions we need, and the art and science and photographs and stories that will nourish us to discover and implement those solutions, will not be delivered from D.C. or Silicon Valley, or even from some sort of return to an Edenic Indigenous paradise. Solutions must come from us. We are, right now, this Basin's people.

And like or not, we're in this together. We're all, at varying scales and in varying degrees, in relations with one another. And this book, of essays, stories, and photographs seeks to play a role in this great work before us by revealing and elucidating the waters that connect us as ties that bind. These words and images will not solve our problems as such—no book can do that—but it is our hope that all who engage with this might receive, like the land receiving a refreshing rain, a flowing set of reminders, provocations, and invitations to come home to this Basin. To play a role in slowing the destruction and in expediting its restoration. To remember, as in re-member, that we are not isolated as individuals, and nor as humans, but that we are members of this one and only flawed and fleeting and miraculous place that we call the Champlain Basin. That we are connected, all of us, in this, our Basin of Relations.



VERMONT ROADWAY

Water finds its way along Mill Creek road from Lincoln pass, eventually to Lake Champlain. Scenes from the roadways and waterways of the Green Mountain foothills and Champlain Valley touch my soul, crying for me to capture the moment to view at will.

If gold has been prized because it is the most inert element, changeless and incorruptible, water is prized for the opposite reason—its fluidity, mobility, changeability that make it a necessity and a metaphor for life itself. To value gold over water is to value economy over ecology, that which can be locked up over that which connects all things.

—REBECCA SOLNIT

WATER STORY

—Chief Donald Stevens

Chief of the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation

The Abenaki, like all Native American peoples, have rich oral traditions and stories that are designed to educate people. These beliefs have been passed down by knowledge keepers throughout the ages from one generation to the next.

As part of our stories, the Creator found that the earth was covered in a solid sheet of ice. In order to melt the ice to get a drink for his companions and himself, he needed to build a large fire which is now our sun. We know these stories to be true. The remnants of the original ice sheets are still visible in Antarctica and Greenland and one only needs to look skyward to see the Sun. These ice sheets are rapidly melting into the sea.

Since water came before life, we cannot truly own something which is not ours. People forget that we are but one strand in the web of life that is dependent upon this resource. Our Mother (the earth) has given us special privileges to be good stewards over the land, water, and other creatures. We were given certain teachings and responsibilities in regards to good stewardship at the time of our creation. Humans are the only ones that have these responsibilities because we have the ability to affect the global environment in which we live. Our actions affect all living things, not just our own.

With modern innovations, many people have lost touch with those things that provide for them and, in turn, what we need in order to reciprocate and protect the circle of life. When we poison the water, we poison ourselves. One only needs to look at Flint, Michigan to understand these lessons.

Water is part of who we are as a people. It sustains our life and holds the reflections of our ancestors. When we look into the lake, pond, or stream, does it not look back at us and show us who we are? There is more than what is reflected on the surface. A depth of life lies just beneath what we see and has existed for thousands of years before us. Our ancestors saw these same reflections of life and honored the gifts of water.

Native peoples have been taught to look at more than the here and now. Individual drops of water that fill our bodies have cycled through a lifetime of living things and places since the beginning of time. These shared drops of water have served and sustained life to thousands of my ancestors who came before me. We have the awesome responsibility to protect these drops of water which will, in turn, pass through our future generations. If we're not careful we can pollute them and break the cycle of life as we know it. Water will survive us, no matter what we do to it. However, we may not survive what we do to it.

So I ask you to think of these questions: How would we be born if our mother's water did not break and show us the way to life? How would we gather fish to eat and nourish our crops if there was no suitable water? How would we travel to our families who live far away if there was no water for our canoes? How would we sustain our lives if there was no water to drink? Why, then, would we be so careless with things that matter so much to us?

Listen to what the spirits are saying to you. Reconnect to the things that sustain your life. Be good stewards of our land for the children and the animals that walk among us. Remove the temptation of instant gratification to do the hard things that make a difference. Start or change the conversation that water is not just something that flows from your tap. Water is a precious resource that we have a responsibility to protect.

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.

— TONI MORRISON

WATER/MOTHER

for the Champlain Water Basin

—Meg Reynolds

You love her when you turn the faucet off
between dishes and toothbrushes,
when you set the cold cycle,
when you take water along in bottles
or bathe both babies at once,
even when you become the lady
who brings her dishes in the tub
and raves at butter knives
kissing like a sunfish at your toes.
It's an experiment in affection:
small choices, nagging habits, talking points,
things you could be called crazy for.
Love is a crazed thing and as manic
as the first summer submersion.
Under cold winter runoff,
the river clear to the bottom,
you may roar with chill.
The river lifts your cries
with a buoyant magic.
You can leap into her lap
and the water claps around you
in ovations, standing suddenly for every splash.
Think of everything she does
not in terms of repayment
but evolution.
That's all she wants.
It's why she led us away from her,
her rainless children,
so she could watch us
come home over and over.



BABY BLUE

I miss Baby Blue.

It rested so beautifully in Burlington Bay Harbor summer after summer.

Now it is gone.

I love capturing different moods of the lake, sauntering the boardwalk.

Change, always.

Pristine forever?



SAVE THE LAKE CHAMPLAIN BASIN

Water does not lie. Here in the Champlain Basin—a flowing landscape of mountains and rivers, forests and farms, towns and cities—it is the water that whispers difficult truths. From erosion, pollution, and habitat loss, to the toxic algae blooms that close Champlain’s beaches every summer, this once vital ecosystem is coming undone. And while there is no shortage of proposed technical and legislative solutions, it is clear that we also need distinct cultural responses to the problem—ways to see, hear, feel, and understand what the water is telling us. That is where this book comes in.

Featuring the fine art photography of Mike Sipe, the curating vision of Trevien Stanger, and over a dozen essays written by thinkers, academics, poets, farmers, and activists who call this region home, *Our Basin of Relations* presents new ways of thinking and old ways to remember, helping us chart a more honest path forward toward preservation and renewal. With open hearts, wild minds, and attentive bodies, these essayists deepen our insights and advance our sense of the possible for all of the beings, and for all of our relations, that constitute our home: this beautiful place, the Champlain Basin.

WRITERS

Mary Abele — Pastor Emerita, All Souls Interfaith Gathering

Chief Donald Stevens — Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation

Chris Boget — Executive Director, Lake Champlain Land Trust

Michael Colby — Regeneration Vermont

Doug Facey — Professor of Biology, Saint Michael’s College

Rich Holsuch — Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs

Mike Kline — Vermont Rivers Program

Mark Krawczyk — Keyline Vermont

Declan McCabe — Professor of Environmental Science, Saint Michael’s College

Rich Redman — The Sun Community News

Meg Reynolds — Burlington Poet, Writing Inside VT

Kris Stepenuck — Professor of Natural Resources, Rubenstein School, UVM