

**Final Report for CCEJ's 2011-12 "Safe Fishing" project, funded by the
Lower Quinnipiac River Fund**

CONNECTICUT COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

2012

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Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice has completed the second successful year of our project to educate low-income fishers on the lower Quinnipiac River on how to eat fish safely and in safe amounts. Our new project educator, Robert Hudson, a lifelong fisherman, spoke to 169 fishers on the lower Quinnipiac between mid-summer and fall of 2011. He held casual interviews with each fisher he met to discuss the safe fishing topic. He found most did not know about safe fishing guidelines for the river. He provided nearly all of them literature that describes which fish are safe to eat from the river and in what quantity. The literature included laminated reference cards with fishing advice for the lower River and Long Island Sound, a copy of the flyer, "Fish Choices in Connecticut: What's Safe—What's Not", and the state angler's guide, "If I Catch It, Can I Eat It?". The laminated cards described safe fish consumption for members of fishers' families, including pregnant women. (We have included the literature as an attachment). In total, Hudson distributed 120 pieces of literature to the fishers.



FIGURE 1: LEAD WEIGHTS IN HAND OF A NEW HAVEN AREA FISHER

Besides safe fishing, Hudson raised the subject of lead fishing weights with the fishers. He found all the fishers were using lead sinkers. Hudson told them that many fish weights being sold now feature lead and hard plastic in an alloy which could reduce contamination of the river and river caught fish. Several fishers said they would consider buying the lead alloy sinkers when they next shopped for fishing supplies. Hudson raised the issue of lead weights also at the tackle shop in North Haven that is the main vendor to low-income fishers on the lower Quinnipiac.

In addition to his direct education for fishers, Hudson put up safe fishing signs in English and Spanish at all the locations he went. When he joined the project, he saw no signs up at any location. When he last checked sites in December, he saw no sign had come down. Moreover, Hudson left 2-3 copies of the state angler's guide at two bait and tackle shops that served low-income fishers on the lower river. One of the shops pinned an unfolded guide on its wall for fisherman to see.

Hudson says he approached the fisher interviews as a way to talk with fishers not talk down to them. He showed respect to fishers and their personal space: he let them see him at a distance before walking up to them. He dressed like a fisher, not an outsider. He wore a casual shirt, jeans and construction boots; sometimes, he carried a fishing pole. When he spoke with a fisher, he started with casual subjects to break the ice before he brought up his interest in safe fishing. He then offered each fisher a pamphlet and a card with the information on which river fish are safe to eat and in what quantity. Hudson would let the fishers pocket the literature without reading it when he felt their interview come to a close. But he returned soon after and made it clear he thought it a good idea for them to read the literature in their own interest. Most fishers read



FIGURE 2: NEW HAVEN AREA FISHER

the literature this second time they were asked. If a fisher resisted approach, Hudson respected the decision and left the fisher alone. Hudson further interacted by taking photos of the fishers with their permission. He sometimes took a photo from a distance or with the fisher in profile if a fisherman did not want to be clearly identified.

Hudson found most of the fishers he encountered were low-income men who kept the fish they caught to eat and feed their families. The fishers came from varied backgrounds; 30% were Black, 30% were Hispanic, 30% were white, and 10% were other identities. Fishers appeared at the river at all times of day, especially on weekends.

Hudson says he has learned much about outreach to fisher in his first year as fish educator for the program. He says anyone reaching out to fishers must approach them cautiously, for fishers wish to be alone when fishing and suspect newcomers as government officials interested in enforcing rules. Fishers also like to be treated as equals, he reports, not talked down by someone acting like a teacher. Hudson saw that showing respect made it easier for him to be heard. Moreover, he found fishers enjoy secluded spots to fish. He had to trek awhile through dense vegetation to locate many. Parking furthermore was an issue near several spots. At a few locations, he had to park across the street and cross through traffic. Sometimes, heavy construction was occurring nearby that he had to maneuver carefully to avoid.

CCEJ compiled a list of recommendations based on Hudson's work that we have shared with the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and Department of Public Health, which writes Connecticut's official fishing advisory guide. The recommendations included having DEEP and DPH staff in the field to talk directly with fishers by the river; putting up signage on lead poisoning risks associated with lead fishing weights; and conducting a more active public education campaign on safe fishing. CCEJ awaits word back from the departments as to how they view our recommended actions.



FIGURE 3: FISHER EDUCATOR ROBERT HUDSON POSTS FISHING ADVICE CARDS

Hudson's educational effort with the fishers helped inform CCEJ's effort to promote a 2012 state bill to restrict lead fishing weights. Similar measures have passed in Maine and New Hampshire and, given Connecticut's strong leadership on toxic exposure issues, CCEJ had every reason to feel encouraged we would succeed. CCEJ organized a committee this January to draft the bill; the committee featured Hudson, Joe Wasserman, our Hartford organizer, and Dr. Vivian Cross, a member of CCEJ's Board and physician with interests in lead poisoning and its impacts on families. The committee created bill language and found a potential bill champion in state Rep. Rich Roy, who chairs the state House environment committee. Unfortunately, a hearing for the measure fell through and the bill does not look like it will be considered this legislative session. CCEJ is considering whether it will be feasible to push for a state lead fishing weight ban next year.

CCEJ envisions continuing the fish educator for the 2012 fishing season again with Hudson as the educator. We will add strong lead education to the outreach. Hudson will have ample supplies of non-lead weights to exchange with fishers for their lead. He also will educate the fishers on the health benefits of switching to lead-free.