BUILD A FLOATING WETLAND MODEL

A STEAM ACTIVITY KIT EXPLORING THE CHARLES RIVER FLOATING WETLAND
Despite being the most densely populated watershed in Massachusetts, the Charles River is home to many thriving ecosystems preserved by the government and advocates like the Charles River Conservancy.

The Charles River used to be a free-flowing tidal estuary. A complex habitat of wetlands and mud-flats supported a diversity of species including shellfish, birds, and anadromous fish.

Today, dams maintain a near-constant water level. Hardscape covers much of the river, and nutrient pollution carried by rainwater from the city streets acts as fertilizer fueling the growth of algae.
The Charles River Conservancy installed the Floating Wetland on the Cambridge side of the river between the Museum of Science and the Longfellow Bridge.

The Charles River Floating Wetland reintroduces native plants to increase habitat diversity and support the tiny animals, zooplankton, that graze on fast-growing algae.

Algal blooms in the Charles River can be understood as a symptom of a broken food chain. The Floating Wetland is an ecological intervention that aims to restore balance.

Northeastern University scientists working on this project hypothesize that the roots of the Floating Wetland will provide a protective habitat for zooplankton to grow, eat more cyanobacteria, and reduce algal blooms.
Each spring, millions of river herring migrate into the coastal waters of Massachusetts to begin their annual trek up dozens of streams and rivers to *spawn*.

**Daphnia** are one type of zooplankton. They are often called water fleas due to their jerky swimming movements.

These tiny creatures eat **cyanobacteria**, algae that grows in the Charles River.

**Sweet Flag**
**Lurid Sedge**
**Tussock Sedge**
**Canada Rush**
**Soft Rush**
**Hard-stem Bulrush**
**Soft-stem Bulrush**
**Seaside Goldenrod**
**Swamp Milkweed**
**Boneset**
**Boneset**
**Swamp Rose Mallow**

**Swamp Rose**
**Arrow Arum**
**Spotted Joe Pye Weed**
**Great Blue Lobelia**
**Monkey Flower**
**Common Elderberry**
**Buttonbush**
**Blue Flag Iris**

**Photo: Aaron John Bourque**
**[WEEK 1]**

**SET UP THE TRAY**

**WHAT YOU’LL NEED:**

1. Find a sunny spot on a table or a flat, stable surface by a window to set up your mini ecosystem.

2. Place the clear tray on top of the waterproof placemat poster of the Charles River Floating Wetland.

3. Carefully fill the tray almost to the top with the bottled spring water, leaving about half an inch between the surface of the water and the top of the tray.

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**HATCH THE DAPHNIA EGGS**

**WHAT YOU’LL NEED:**

1. Check the water temperature (it should be at least 65°F for hatching). Morning or early afternoon is best for sun!

2. Carefully pour the daphnia eggs into the water in the tray. Slowly stir with a straw. It’s normal for eggs to float.

3. Now, prepare the daphnia food! The nutrients mixture contains yeast and spirulina powder. Fill the container with spring water, close the lid, shake, and refrigerate.

4. Daphnia can take several days to hatch. Every day, look closely to see if you can spot any movement. They will look like swimming fleas. Once they have hatched, use a straw to add one drop of the nutrients every day.
Fill the container of wheatgrass seeds with water and put the lid on.

Let the seeds soak in the water for about 8 hours. This will soften their seed coat and help them to sprout!

Create a reminder for yourself to place the seeds on the grow mat later tonight (see next page). Set an alarm, write a note, or ask someone to remind you!

After 8 hours of soaking the seeds, place the grow mat on the bamboo plate and dump the seeds and water onto the mat. Use your fingers to spread the seeds out.

Cover the mat and seeds with a folded paper towel and use the spray bottle to wet the towel completely.

Every day, spray the paper towel to keep it wet, and check the seeds. After 2-3 days, once you see sprouts, uncover them and spray with water every day.
Position straws in the tray near the rim, above the water, as shown above. The ends of the straws will touch the inside of the tray. The straws should be about an inch apart and parallel to each other.

Using both hands, pick up the grow mat from the plate and carefully lay it on top of the straws.

**WHAT YOU'LL NEED:**

The straws are the perfect length to fit snugly across the inside of the tray.

**ADD PLANTS AND ANIMALS**

Color these species, cut them out, and add them to your wetland!

**WHAT YOU'LL NEED:**

- Great Blue Heron
- Blue Flag Iris
- Painted Turtle
- Beaver
Week 1 Observations:

Week 2 Observations:

Week 3 Observations:

Week 4 Observations:
In your kit, you'll also find a pass for a free day of paddling on the Charles River! Special thanks to Paddle Boston - Charles River Canoe & Kayak and the Charles River Conservancy.

EXPLORE THE CHARLES!

Have a canoe or kayak adventure and explore parks along the Charles River: (thecharles.org/about/visit/)

Christian A. Herter Park
North Point Park
Magazine Beach
Riverbend Park
Pathways

SHARE YOUR PHOTOS!

Share photos of your floating wetland model, Art with Algae activity and your Charles River adventures!

SOCIAL MEDIA:
@MITSeaGrant
@CharlesRiverCRC

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

1. Add water to the container of spirulina and mix with the paint brush. This is your natural paint!
2. Paint a floating wetland on your watercolor art board.

CLEANING UP:

The paper towels, plate, and straws are biodegradable. Please recycle water bottles.

By the end of the month, your daphnia will have completed their life cycle (they usually live 10-30 days).

*Ask an adult to help you dispose of the tray water*

You can use the contents of the tray to water an indoor plant - these are healthy nutrients for your plants!

OR

Ask an adult to help add a small amount of bleach to the tray and pour down the drain with water.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Algae:** organisms like seaweed that live in water and make their food by using sunlight to turn carbon dioxide and water into food through photosynthesis.

**Algal bloom:** an overgrowth of algae or cyanobacteria that often results in scum on the surface of water, which can be harmful to other organisms.

**Anadromous fish:** a type of fish, such as river herring, that migrates from saltwater to freshwater to release eggs.

**Cyanobacteria:** microscopic organisms (blue-green algae), which can create algal blooms on the water’s surface.

**Daphnia:** small swimming zooplankton known as water fleas that live in aquatic environments and eat mostly algae.

**Ecological intervention:** habitat restoration and other environmental solutions to help improve ecosystem health.

**Ecology:** a branch of science focusing on the relationships between living things and their environment.

**Ecosystem:** a community of living organisms interacting with one another and their environment.

**Estuary:** the mouth of a river where fresh and saltwater mix, home to unique plant and animal communities and wetlands.

**Floating Wetland:** a human-made island of plants; the Charles River Floating Wetland aims to restore zooplankton habitat and help improve river health.

**Hardscape:** man-made features in landscape architecture like paths or the concrete walls lining the Charles River.

**Mud-flats:** an area of land that lies just below the surface of water or repeatedly covered by the tide.

**Nutrient pollution:** too many nutrients running from urban areas into a body of water, causing an overgrowth of algae.

**Organism:** a living thing - a person, plant, or animal.

**Spawn:** the process of aquatic animals releasing eggs in water; river herring migrate to the Charles River to spawn.

**Spirulina:** a type of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria).

**Watershed:** an area that drains streams and rainfall to a common body of water.

**Wetlands:** areas and ecosystems flooded by water, such as marshes or swamps, supporting aquatic and land species.

**Zooplankton:** tiny creatures living in oceans, seas, and bodies of fresh water, which are an important part of the food chain.
Learn more about the Charles River Conservancy’s Floating Wetland project and MIT Sea Grant:

thecharles.org/floating-wetlands/  
@CharlesRiverCRC

seagrant.mit.edu  
@MITSeaGrant

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