



Protecting Illinois' Rivers For People, Fish, and Wildlife

FISH KILL NEAR MAHOMET TELLS AN IMPORTANT STORY

BY STACY JAMES

If fish were people, we would still be mourning the mysterious death of tens of thousands of our fellow citizens. We wouldn't just be talking about it in the break room. We would be making phone calls and demanding the perpetrator be caught. We would declare the incident an atrocity that should never happen again.

But fish aren't people. And the 40,000 fish that died north of Mahomet over Labor Day weekend seem to have lost our attention. Out of sight is out of mind. Few of us actually saw their pale bodies floating in the remote waters of Lone Tree Creek and the Sangamon River. Thus, we are neither haunted nor motivated by the memory of what we experienced directly. And we have not been reminded by the media, which has been quiet since the initial story broke. The fact that the government investigation continues may be a sign that the culprit will not be caught. Yet the fish still have a story to tell.

Chapter One reminds us of the power of individuals to make a difference. It was a member of the public who made the call resulting in the official investigation. If the call had not

been placed, if people had wondered without acting, the incident may have silently passed us by with no chance of justice being served. The importance of acting quickly cannot be underscored enough because good evidence only lasts so long. Unfortunately, not knowing what to do or fear of retribution prevents so many of us from taking action. Some informants face legitimate threats, but anonymity is better than silence. The Illinois Emergency Management Agency has a 24-hour hotline (1-800-782-7860) that can be called in the event of an environmental emergency.

Chapter Two reminds us that we all live downstream. The fish formed a death streak some ten miles long. A trip upstream unveiled an agricultural drain tile discharging dark liquid. A trip even further upstream showed life again. The world beneath our feet contains millions of miles of buried pipe, and it is not all mapped. Often times, many pipes feed a main pipe, much like many capillaries feed a vein. Therefore, when pollution is discharged out of a pipe and into a river, we don't necessarily know where it came from. Many pollutants are invisible or become diluted, so we cannot assume that a clear river is a safe river.

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The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has determined that only about 19% of assessed streams get a "good" rating for being able to safely support water recreation activities such as swimming; the other 81% of streams are more polluted and therefore receive a "fair" or "poor" rating. Streams will probably always be conduits of pollution, but they should not be dumping grounds or treated like sewers. Unfortunately, fish kills happen regularly in Illinois, not only in rural streams but also in urban rivers and neighborhood lakes. If we want to be able to safely use these waterways for generations to come, we need to honor our water with the same sacredness that we honor the blood in our bodies.

Chapter Three reminds us that the government agencies responsible for

[//cont'd on pg 7//](#)

12th ANNUAL DINNER: CELEBRATING ILLINOIS RIVERS

BY STEPH ADAMS

Prairie Rivers Network's 12th Annual Dinner was a resounding success! Thank you to all who made this one of our best attended dinners.



284 supporters celebrating our rivers

This year's keynote presentation was given by the Rivers Corps of Discovery, a group of citizen naturalists who document the natural beauty of local rivers through photographs, sketches, journals and other media. Their presentation was met with an enthusiastic standing ovation.



Thank You
Rivers Corps of Discovery

Thanks to our generous supporters, we have raised over 90% of our member donations goal for 2010, the majority coming from the dinner. This not only allows Prairie Rivers Network to keep our lights on and computers running, but goes directly to keeping Illinois' rivers and streams clean.



Dick Harris and Durango Mendoza check out the auction



Libby Johnston, Jean Mendoza, Clare Margiotta, Maggie Dougherty-Roberts

Visit prairierivers.org for more pictures of the best "environmental event of Central Illinois."

Award Winners

This year, Prairie Rivers Network was honored to present the **River Steward Award** to Kathy Andria.



It was also our pleasure to recognize Champaign Councilwoman Marci Dodds as **Outstanding Public Servant**.



Visit prairierivers.org to learn more about our award winners.

It is never too soon to start thinking about next year. E-mail Steph at sadams@prairierivers.org with your ideas for keynote presenters, musicians, silent auction items, or sponsors. //

prairieriversnetwork

...strives to protect the rivers and streams of Illinois and to promote the lasting health and beauty of watershed communities.

By providing information, sound science, and hands-on assistance, PRN helps individuals and community groups become effective river conservation leaders.

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PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK HELPS PROTECT WILDLIFE HABITAT IN THE VERMILION RIVER CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY AREA

BY LAURA KAMMIN

What comes to mind when you hear the names Middle Fork, Kickapoo State Recreation Area, Little Vermilion River, or Harry “Babe” Woodyard State Natural Area? Have you had the pleasure of visiting these local ecological wonders? If so, do the memories you cherish spark your desire to help protect these special places for future generations? That is what the Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area (COA) project is all about.

One of 32 COAs identified in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (IWAP) (<http://www.wildlifeactionplans.org/illinois.html>), the Vermilion River COA covers over 790,000 acres in Champaign, Vermilion, Ford, Iroquois, and Edgar counties and encompasses the Middle Fork, North Fork, and Salt Fork of the Vermilion River and the Little Vermilion River. The area is home to 162 animal species listed in the IWAP as Species in Greatest Need of Conservation. Creatures with names like rainbow mussel, bluebreast darter, river redhorse, northern madtom, smooth softshell turtle, black-billed cuckoo, and Indiana bat, all of which are listed as state threatened or endangered species in Illinois, still survive in the protected places within



Bluebreast Darter

the COA. But their continued survival will depend upon us.

The Conservation Opportunity Area designation does not confer special status to the 32 areas around the state, nor does it provide financial resources to help properly manage the sites.

What the designation does potentially do is to draw local conservationists, private landowners, and state land managers together to figure out the best way to keep these parcels of land and stretches of river in good enough shape

that our grandchildren will have the privilege of seeing the species of wildlife that are with us today. Because all things in nature are connected, protecting rivers means protecting the land that surrounds rivers. And so Prairie Rivers Network has worked closely with landowners and other conservation organizations to develop an action plan for the Vermilion River COA.

In May 2009, Prairie Rivers Network convened stakeholders with conservation interests in the Vermilion River COA to discuss forming a partnership to assess the gaps and overlaps between local conservation efforts and the objectives of the IWAP. Three more meetings were held in 2010, and partners worked together to determine how local efforts could help support the implementation of the

IWAP locally. A working group of 37 individuals, representing interests of private landowners, local NGOs and natural resource professionals, developed a list of priorities and challenges for wildlife habitat management in the COA. Understanding landowner concerns, attitudes, and values ranked as

the main challenge to conservation efforts within the COA. The initial list of priorities and challenges was further refined at the meetings and was used to develop the group's four main goals: improve outreach to landowners, im-

prove aquatic wildlife habitat quality, maintain and increase the amount of quality terrestrial wildlife habitat, and control invasive plant species. The Vermilion River COA action plan will be finalized in Spring 2011, but this living document will be updated yearly.

Anyone is welcome to participate in the Vermilion River COA. Whether you are actively managing your property for wildlife, or are simply interested in learning more about conservation, participating in the COA is a great way to meet others who are working to protect wildlife. By working together, we can improve our efforts to preserve the Vermilion and Little Vermilion Rivers, their tributaries, and the lands that surround them. //

“Creatures with names like rainbow mussel, bluebreast darter, river redhorse, northern madtom, smooth softshell turtle, black-billed cuckoo, and Indiana bat, all of which are listed as state threatened or endangered species in Illinois, still survive in the protected places within the COA. But their continued survival will depend upon us.”

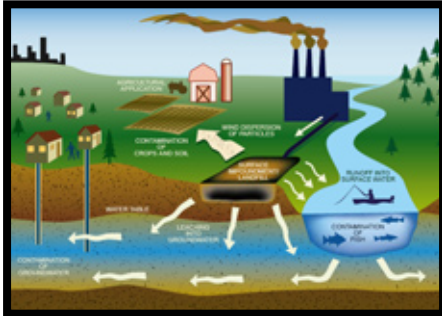
2010 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Preventing Water Pollution

Challenge:

Toxic ash is produced when coal is burned.

Current regulations allow this toxic material to pollute streams and groundwater.



- ☑ Exposed Illinois EPA's failure to protect clean water from the hazards of coal ash disposal.
- ☑ Helped national environmental powerhouses focus U.S. EPA on the extent of the coal ash problem in Illinois.
- ☑ Rallied citizens to support tougher regulations on coal ash pollution through petitions, letters, and testimony at EPA hearings.
- ☑ Developed water quality monitoring program for coal field communities to find and fix coal pollution.



Strengthening River Activism

Prairie Rivers Network gives people opportunities to experience nature and to then take steps on behalf of healthy rivers and clean water.

Our goal is to turn citizens into active river advocates.



- ☑ Online petitions ensure that citizen voices are heard.
- ☑ Monthly electronic newsletters keep 1,000+ people informed about the latest issues.
- ☑ Frequent Facebook posts give 500+ friends the inside scoop as it happens.
- ☑ Government agencies know that our members are active and involved and therefore listen to what we have to say.
- ☑ Media coverage of our work ensures that rivers remain relevant and visible.

Protecting River Health and River Habitat

Challenge:

Our rivers are under assault.

Dredging natural channels and clearcutting riverbank vegetation has profoundly damaged our rivers and the wildlife that depends on them.

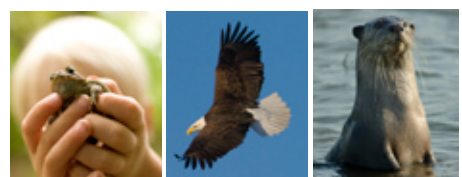
Choking the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers with dams to support barge traffic has destroyed America's greatest freshwater fishery.

Mississippi River

- ☑ We have a long-term vision of a truly sustainable and healthy Mississippi River, one where navigation interests do not dominate.
- ☑ This year we began helping citizen activists and municipalities along the Mississippi River develop a conservation action plans to restore wildlife habitat.

Vermilion River

- ☑ We led development of conservation action plans for protecting threatened fish and wildlife habitat throughout the Vermilion River basin.



Prairie Rivers is only able to do the work we do because of our members. Thank you!

Engaging Citizens in Protecting Clean Water

By providing information, sound science, and hands-on assistance, Prairie Rivers Network helps individuals and community groups become effective river conservation leaders.



Homeowners Reduce Flooding and Stormwater Pollution

- ☑ Led efforts by more than 50 residents in three neighborhoods to demonstrate ability of rain gardens and rain barrels to capture and treat polluted runoff.



Workshops Train Conservationists

- ☑ Trained more than 250 people from municipalities, government agencies, and water protection groups, plus interested citizens to join and lead local efforts to reduce water pollution and restore rivers and lakes.



Traveling Science Center and River Discovery Days

- ☑ 1700 school children, many of their parents and other adults learned the importance of protecting and preserving rivers.

Stopping Invasive Species

Challenge: Invasive Asian carp threaten our waterways and native wildlife populations.

Dramatic images of Asian carp leaping out of the water and injuring boaters, the intentional poisoning of thousands of fish in Chicago waterways to stop their spread to the Great Lakes – these events have captured the attention of the public, the press, and officials.

This crisis presents us with a unique opportunity to re-engineer the Chicago canals that allow destructive invasive species like the zebra mussel to move between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins.

We are working with state and national partners to demand that the half-measures that constitute current policy be replaced by a permanent solution to the problem: **restoring the divide between the basins.**



We Have Made Great Progress in the Past 12-18 Months

- ☑ The idea of separating the basins, until recently viewed as a political non-starter, has gained traction: Chicago's Mayor Daley recently made headlines talking about it.
- ☑ The Obama Administration signaled its commitment by creating a new position on the White House staff to coordinate the federal response to the threat.
- ☑ More than 150 scientists have signed on to our position statement supporting the need to restore the basin divide.

Enforcing Clean Water Laws

Our scientific and legal expertise and persistent watchdogging has resulted in stronger water pollution controls.



Factory Farms

- ☑ We found pollution near factory farms and brought in state inspectors to make sure problems were fixed.
- ☑ We are working with organizations across the state to win stricter rules on factory farm pollution.



Chronic Polluters

- ☑ If polluters don't follow the law, we take action.
- ☑ We joined in a case with the Attorney General against a dirty coal mine, challenging weak permits.
- ☑ Our efforts have resulted in state action on several other chronically polluting facilities.



Sewage Treatment Plants

- ☑ We strengthened pollution controls in many communities by challenging EPA permits.
- ☑ Our Antidegradation Guidebook helps treatment plants understand the law and describes innovative methods for controlling pollution.

PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK HELPS CITIZENS PROTECT THEIR STREAMS

BY MONITORING POLLUTION FROM COALFIELDS

BY BRIAN PERBIX

Citizens are on the front lines when it comes to protecting Illinois streams from pollution - those who use or live near freshwater are often the first to know when there's a problem. That's why Prairie Rivers Network and the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club have teamed up to offer training in stream monitoring to citizen volunteers in three coal producing regions of the state.

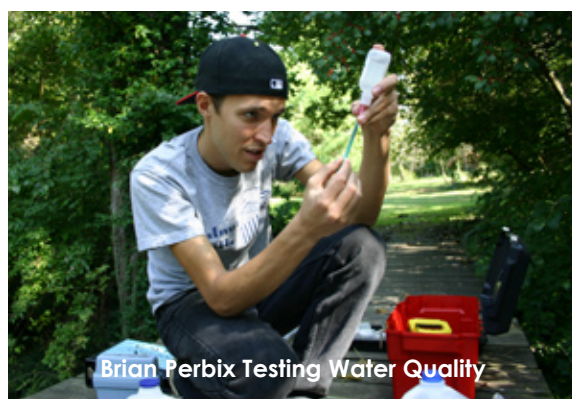
As mining companies leave Appalachia due to tighter regulations and dwindling reserves, they are increasingly turning to the Illinois Basin to meet the demand for coal. And while some are optimistic about Illinois' increased coal production, many citizens are pushing back to make sure that the health of their waters and communities aren't sacrificed in the process. Groups in Fulton, Montgomery, and Randolph Counties are all exercising their democratic rights to participate in the planning and permitting of proposed or expanded coal mining operations, quite literally in their back yards. One of their top concerns is protecting the waters that flow through their communities.

Many have already seen the orange stream beds devoid of life that flow from old coal mining operations near where they live. Others worry that pollution from coal ash disposal will seep into streams from unlined disposal sites. And as a recent study from West Virginia demonstrates, there is a link between the biological integrity of streams in coal mining areas and cancer rates (source: www.springerlink.com/content/lu7wgk595v1hhm64/). The health of our streams is intimately linked to the health of our communities.

Since the fall of 2010, Prairie Rivers Network and the Sierra Club have had a new Coal Country Organizer (me!),

who has begun working with Canton Area Citizens for Environmental Issues, Citizens Against Longwall Mining, as well as concerned citizens in Randolph County to develop volunteer water quality monitoring programs specifically tailored to the needs of each group. Each of these groups will be trained to use a basic water quality monitoring kit designed to detect pollution problems from coal mines at the first sign of trouble so that action can be taken immediately. Prairie Rivers Network's 2010 AmeriCorps Summer Intern, Madeleine Mahan, helped develop these easy-to-use water quality monitoring kits with funding from the Illinois Sierra Club's Water Sentinels Program. The kits feature handheld pH and conductivity probes, as well as simple tests for chlorides, iron, and dissolved oxygen. Volunteers will also be trained to measure stream turbidity and flow.

The data these groups collect will go a long way toward protecting the health of the rivers and streams that drain Illinois' coal country. The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has never assessed the health of most of these streams, and so this program truly represents a first step towards understanding how coal mining threatens Illinois rivers and streams.



Brian Perbix Testing Water Quality

BOARD OF DIRECTORS UPDATE: Brian Anderson Finishes Term of Service

The staff and board of directors thank Brian for his service on Prairie Rivers Network's board during the past 6 years. His extensive knowledge of Illinois' natural history and the workings of state government helped us work smarter and encouraged us to expand our habitat pro-

tection work. We're all lucky to have someone as committed to our shared natural heritage as this Chief of the Illinois Natural History Survey.



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Please visit prairierivers.org/business-members for links to the above sponsors.

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If you plan on shopping at Amazon.com this holiday season, click on the Amazon logo on the left bar of our website and you will be taken to Amazon.com where any purchase you make will result in a contribution to Prairie Rivers Network.

Bookmark this link and you can contribute to Prairie Rivers automatically any time you order from Amazon.com; what could be more convenient?



Prairie Rivers Network is now participating in Schnucks' eScript Customer Card Program.

Your existing Schnucks Fuel Rewards card can be updated to share the cash back rewards with Prairie Rivers (where available); just call (800) 931-6258 and give them our group ID # 500024645.

If you don't already have a Schnuck's card, pick one up at a participating store.

FISH KILL STORY CONTINUED

//cont'd from pg 1// upholding state and federal environmental laws are sorely underfunded and understaffed. When a fish kill occurs, significant time and resources are put into the investigation and other important work is postponed. The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Natural Resources are victims of budget cuts and swept funds, leaving them unable to adequately protect and monitor the environment. Conservation organizations like the one I work for, Prairie Rivers Network, find it difficult to achieve positive policy changes when public officials cite the lack of resources as preventing such

changes. Human civilization depends on a healthy environment, so we must find a way to safeguard our life support system.

Chapter Four reminds us of how lucky we are to have clean water. When we go to kitchens and restrooms, the water actually comes on and is drinkable. In other parts of the world, water is intermittent and may be so contaminated that people become sick. Fish and other wildlife cannot turn the water on and off. They cannot make the water cleaner. They live and die by what we give them. They depend on our compassion and ethics and how

we treat our common, shared resources. They depend on our intelligence and ability to understand the repercussions of our actions.

The final chapter is for us to write. Only a cruel author would end this story with the silent descent of flesh into the river's bottom. From death, new life can begin. By taking better care of our fish and water, we will take better care of ourselves.

This November 14, 2010 guest commentary by Dr. Stacy James, Water Resources Scientist with Prairie Rivers Network, was originally published in the Champaign-Urbana *News-Gazette*. Reproduced with permission.



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Happy Holidays

HAVE YOU JOINED RIVERWEB YET?

Please join our online community.

You can receive via e-mail our monthly electronic newsletter (e-news) about volunteer opportunities, clean water issues, and river conservation news within our state, as well as Prairie Rivers Network activities.

We also periodically send e-mails to members in specific geographical areas when we need your help in protecting your local river or stream.

We are asking all of our members to please sign up today and help us grow our online network. Just go to prairierivers.org and click on:



JOIN US ON FACEBOOK

Please become a friend of Prairie Rivers Network.

We are asking all of our members with Facebook accounts to please become a friend and help spread the word about the work that Prairie Rivers Network is doing.



MARK YOUR 2011 CALENDARS

It's Our River Day
September 17, 2011

Prairie Rivers Network's
13th Annual Dinner
October 14, 2011

Clean Water Act 39th Anniversary
October 18, 2011

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Prairie Rivers Network is the Illinois Affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

If you participate in a workplace giving campaign, look for ESI and designate Prairie Rivers Network to receive your contributions.