

Prairie River Notes

Volume 5, Issue 4

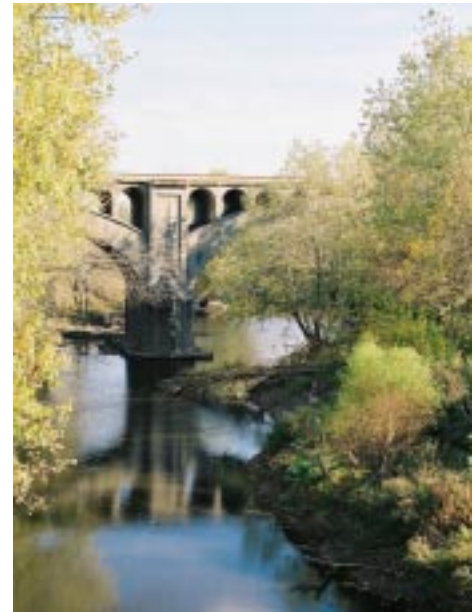
A publication of Prairie Rivers Network
The Illinois Affiliate of National Wildlife Federation

Winter 2003

Dinner Celebrates Illinois' Rivers

Prairie Rivers Network's Annual Donor Dinner on November 14, 2003 was a huge success, raising \$40,000! The dinner was a wonderful opportunity for our supporters to hear about our work in 2003 to protect Illinois rivers. Our heartfelt thanks to those who traveled to join us for the dinner, and who graciously donated to support the work of Prairie Rivers Network for the upcoming year. Attendees enjoyed the insightful and thought-provoking comments of Robert J. Glennon, Morris Udall Professor of Law at the University of Arizona and author of *Water Follies: Groundwater Pumping and the Fate of America's Fresh Waters*. Mr. Glennon illustrated how the misuse of groundwater in various states affects surface water everywhere.

Prairie Rivers extends their thanks to all of our supporters across the state, including those who were unable to attend the dinner. It is with your support that we are able to accomplish all that we do to protect the rivers and streams of Illinois.



2003 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT A GLANCE

Enforcing the Clean Water Act. Prairie Rivers continues to press for full implementation of the Clean Water Act. This includes enforcement of the new "anti-degradation" policy to protect our highest quality waters, better land management and stormwater controls, and improved implementation of the watershed restoration program for degraded waters. With partner groups, we have taken steps to designate Illinois' finest streams as Outstanding Resource Waters.

Empowering River Advocates. In January 2003, we trained 40 citizen activists to use the Clean Water Act to reduce pollution discharged to their hometown streams. Through the year, we worked with community advocates from New Lenox to Carbondale, challenging projects that would pollute streams and threaten fishing, swimming, and safe drinking water.

Ending Clean Water Act Exemptions for Mining. With the Environmental Law and Policy Center, we challenged the law exempting the mining industry from requirements of the Clean Water Act. Now all mining permits that the Illinois EPA issues must first be reviewed by US EPA to ensure they meet Clean Water Act requirements. Since this new practice was adopted, the permits issued are some of the strongest we have seen in Illinois.

Improving Chicago Waters and Combating Unsound Development. With partners such as the Environmental Law and Policy Center and Sierra Club, Prairie Rivers is pressing Illinois EPA to significantly improve water quality standards for Chicago-area rivers. In addition, when sewage treatment plants seek to expand their discharges to accommodate urban growth, we work with local communities to ensure full compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Working in Our Own Backyard. We again co-hosted the annual Salt Fork River Clean-up, attracting nearly 200 volunteers. Plans are underway to initiate a similar event on the Sangamon River and to establish a new group to be the voice for that river. We hosted canoe tours for policy makers, developed a Vermilion Rivers educational display, and gave numerous presentations for local groups.

Prairie Rivers Seeks Standing in Drainage Project

On November 7, 2003, Prairie Rivers filed a petition in Circuit Court seeking legal standing to represent the public interest in protecting the environmental values of the Salt Fork River in Champaign County in a drainage district proposal pending before the court. A hearing on the petition is scheduled for December 30, 2003.

At issue is a plan by the Upper Salt Fork Drainage District (USFDD) to clear trees from and dredge more than twenty miles of the river. An amended petition before the Circuit Court, filed by the USFDD and seeking approval to assess landowners in the drainage district more than half a million dollars to pay for the project, contains many assertions about the need for and benefits of the proposed work, but no documentation to support those assertions. Moreover, the amended petition does not demonstrate how the proposed work will meet the legal requirements of the state drainage code to protect the environment.

Specifically, the law requires drainage districts to use “all practicable means and measures, including consideration of alternative methods of providing the necessary drainage, to protect such environmental values as trees and fish and wildlife habitat.” Unfortunately, there is no information provided in the USFDD petition that demonstrates how the proposed project meets these requirements to protect the environment.

Scientific research shows that drainage district management practices such as channelization and clear-cutting—which have not really changed

since they were established in the 1870’s—result in a host of negative impacts. Among other things, such activity can degrade fish and wildlife habitat, increase flood heights and decrease base flows, and increase bank erosion. In addition, habitat alteration is the third leading cause of water quality impairments in Illinois, affecting more than 2700 miles of rivers and streams, according to Illinois EPA.

Nor does the petition filed by the drainage district identify a serious consideration of alternatives that could achieve the same drainage benefits with less impact. This despite the fact that new studies from land grant universities in the Midwest are showing that these traditional practices are no longer necessary, and other fish and wildlife friendly practices can be used that balance drainage and environmental needs. A strong economy depends on adequate drainage *and* a healthy environment, and the old ways of thinking need to be updated to ensure that the public interests of protecting water and wildlife are being met.

Charles Goodall, Prairie Rivers Board member, farmer, and drainage district commissioner explained the situation in this way. “Decades ago, our grandfathers improved drainage by excavating. Now the task of maintaining drainage calls for the use of new techniques such as localized bank protection, minor meander adjustment, and spot removal of obstructions. All must be done with an understanding of the realities of water flow and the willingness to accommodate the multiple uses and purposes of the river.”

Dredged (above) and undredged
(below) portions of the
Salt Fork River.

Stream Stories

Bell Smith Springs to Bay Creek

By Sam Sterns, Friends of Bell Smith Springs

Bell Smith Springs

Bell Smith Springs is an essential destination for anyone interested in native ecology and local history. It is designated a National Natural Landmark by the U.S. Park Service, a Natural Area by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, and a recreation area by the U. S. Forest Service.

Untold thousands of citizens have visited this piece of public property through the years to observe the rare phenomenon of interconnected, complete, functioning ecosystems. There are four tributaries which come together in the canyon at Bell Smith Springs and flow as Bay Creek (see the following) all the way to the Ohio River. Even when the streams are parched there are a dozen ice-cold spring pools which never go dry. The uniqueness of the canyon contributes to its vegetative diversity: over 700 species of plants flourish at Bell Smith Springs.

Native Americans utilized the canyon for its abundant water and huge shelter bluffs. Early settlers farmed the ridge tops and grazed livestock on the hillsides. The cougar, wood bison, bear, elk, and many other species which once drank from the pools have long since been extirpated. But bobcat, turkey, deer, fox, a plethora of song-birds and other animals are still glimpsed at Bell Smith Springs.

During the decades that these hills and hollows have been protected as public land, natural regeneration has restored much of the area's biological diversity. Pine plantations on the ridgetops now nurse a diverse understory of native oaks, hickory, and other hardwoods. Continued protection and respect for the land will insure its survival for future generations.

Bay Creek

Bay Creek in Pope County, Illinois originates in Bay Creek Wilderness of the Shawnee National Forest in the southern tip of the state. It meanders through moss-covered sandstone outcroppings and quiet forests, through a heavenly recreation area, and on to the Ohio River. Not far from its headwaters the creek is joined by three tributaries in the canyon of the Bell Smith Springs National Natural Landmark. Each tributary beckons hikers to explore crevices, niches, and ledges which are enchanting worlds of their own. During the springtime, water trickles through ferns down canyon walls; in fall the forest is a full palette of changing colors; and in winter incredible ice formations make the surroundings seem surreal.



Bay Creek at Bell Smith Springs.

Getting There: Forest Service campgrounds and a marked system of hiking trails make this an attractive destination for a day trip or weeks of exploration. Easy access to the area is available through Delwood or Ozark, Illinois, about eighteen miles south of Harrisburg. For more specific directions contact the U. S. Forest Service at 1-800-MY WOODS or Friends of Bell Smith Springs at bellsmithsprings@hotmail.com.

Stream Stories is a regular column featuring river destinations in Illinois. If you would like to share a stream story for our newsletter or our website, send a copy to Jean Flemma at jflemma@prairierivers.org.

Prairie Rivers Challenges Pollution Permit

In December, Prairie Rivers Network, Sierra Club, Livable Communities Alliance, and Des Plaines River Watershed Alliance filed a legal challenge of the water pollution permit (NPDES permit) recently issued by Illinois EPA to the Village of New Lenox. The Environmental Law and Policy Center will be representing the river advocates in this appeal before the Illinois Pollution Control Board, a judicial panel that will decide whether or not IEPA will be required to revise the permit to comply with the law.



The permit allows the village to greatly increase the amount of pollution it dumps into Hickory Creek from one of its sewage treatment plants. Although Hickory Creek remains one of the finest streams left in the Des Plaines River watershed, it is beginning to suffer the impacts of intense suburban development.

Prairie Rivers Network worked closely with local and regional advocates to demonstrate that state regulations were violated in issuing this permit. Specifically, this facility is already contributing to water quality problems in Hickory Creek, and the village has not taken all reasonable measures to minimize the increase in pollution from the facility.

We were hopeful that the village would be interested in working with us to explore feasible alternatives, as other growing municipalities in the Chicago region have done in the past several months. However, the village has not expressed interest in such a cooperative approach, forcing advocates to adopt other measures.



Foundations Support Prairie Rivers Network

In addition to the financial support of its members, Prairie Rivers Network is funded by foundations headquartered throughout the United States, with grants that range in amount from \$1,000 to \$40,000. Some are one-time grants that fund specific projects, while others are annual grants that fund ongoing work. We would like to thank the following foundations who supported our work in 2003:

Environmental Support Center
Field Foundation of Illinois, Inc.
Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation
Grand Victoria Foundation
Illinois Conservation Foundation
Illinois Department of Natural Resources,
Conservation 2000 Program
Lumpkin Family Foundation
McKnight Foundation
Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
U.S. Cellular

You Can Help Illinois' Rivers

Protecting Streams in Developing Areas

Prairie Rivers Network, the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Openlands Project will be offering a full day of training on using the Clean Water Act to protect local streams from the impacts of urbanization. The workshop will be conducted Saturday, February 7, 2004, in Aurora. For more information or to register please contact Beth Wentzel at bwentzel@prairierivers.org.



River Saving Tips

Many citizens don't recognize that an important step in protecting rivers and streams begins with what we put down our drains. Sewage treatment plants often don't treat for chemicals found in paint and common household cleaners that are disposed of down household drains. Additionally, oil and other chemicals that run down storm sewers empty directly into rivers. The following tips help protect rivers and streams from pollution:

- Fix car leaks right away.
- Dispose of oil and anti-freeze safely; never dump it down the storm drain. A quart of oil can create an eight-acre oil slick that contaminates drinking water and kills fish and wildlife. Anti-freeze also poisons household pets and wildlife.
- Rake leaves from your yard and sidewalk so they don't clog storm sewers. It is also important to prevent leaves and yard waste from washing into storm sewers so rivers and streams don't become unnaturally overloaded with organic material from an entire watershed, which eventually results in the depletion of oxygen in the water.
- Buy and use environmentally friendly products and alternatives (avoid chlorine, phosphates, and solvents).
- Dispose of household cleaners, paint, and other chemicals safely. Never dump them down the sink or storm drains.

Dumping pollutants in household drains and storm sewers harms all those who use rivers.



Information adapted from River Network's Riversmart campaign, www.riversmart.org

Thank You to Volunteers

One of the most important factors contributing to the success of Prairie Rivers Network is the hard work of our dedicated volunteers. Each week, a regular group of volunteers assists the Prairie Rivers staff with a myriad of tasks. These include everything from media research, which produces the “news updates” subscribers to our listserve receive, to stamping envelopes for mailings. A sincere THANK YOU to each one of these volunteers!

If you would like to learn more about volunteering at Prairie Rivers Network, contact Marc Miller at mmiller@prairierivers.org.



Watershed Organizer Marc Miller works with Volunteer Coordinator Geriann Albers at the Sixth Annual Salt Fork River Clean-up.

Fall 2003 Volunteers:

Gerianne Albers – Volunteer Coordinator
Patty Albrecht
Erick Caamano
Natalie Galatzer
Rob Kanter
Lauren Kerestes
Karin Krohn
David Moody
Anne Phillips
Alan Piggot
Joe Rupp
Cecily Smith
Sarah Stanfield
Sara Terranova
Edwin Winzeler

Volunteers of the Year

Our 2003 Volunteers of the Year are Rob Kanter and Cecily Smith. Rob edits our *Prairie River Notes* newsletter, and has assisted in the planning of the 5th and 6th Annual Salt Fork River Clean-ups. In addition to office tasks, Cecily, who is a lawyer by training, frequently does legal research and aids Prairie Rivers with everything from grant proposals to stuffing envelopes. Rob and Cecily were acknowledged at our Annual Dinner, and received Duluth bags with the *Prairie Rivers Network* logo. Congratulations and thank you to both Rob and Cecily!



Volunteers of the Year: Rob Kanter and Cecily Smith

Watching Out for Our Waters

2003 State of the Fox River Report

By David Horn, President of Friends of the Fox River and Assistant Professor of Biology at Aurora University

Friends of the Fox River is a non-profit organization dedicated to building a watershed of caretakers in the Fox River Valley. In November, Friends of the Fox released its 2003 State of the Fox River Report. The report describes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats the Fox River and its tributaries face right now. Below is a summary of the report. A PDF file of the entire report can be accessed at <http://www.friendsofthefoxriver.org>.

The Fox River and its tributaries have three major strengths. First, the watershed contains a high quality habitat with a rich flora and fauna. In a recent study, the Fox River was named an area critical to biodiversity in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Second, the watershed has a large number of citizen groups that promote the watershed's protection and restoration at both the watershed and tributary level. Third, the Fox River Study Group is a diverse coalition working together to assess water quality by fostering sustainable growth. The group has secured the services of the Illinois State Water Survey to develop a computer model of the watershed in order to guide future development and restoration projects.

Weaknesses of the Fox River include the river's current impaired condition, dams, and a lack of a holistic approach to the river. In 2002, the IEPA categorized the entire 115-mile stretch of the Fox River in Illinois as impaired. Causes for the impairment include PCBs, flow alteration, habitat alteration, siltation, low dissolved oxygen, and nutrients. Fox River dams in Illinois have impounded nearly 47% of the river's length. The pools behind dams have a less rich animal community, and poorer habitat and water quality.



Finally, there is a lack of a holistic approach to the river with a lack of coordination between government officials and agencies to solve the well-documented environmental problems that the Fox River faces.

Opportunities of the Fox River include regulation of nitrates and phosphates, dam removal, and the development of a master plan for the protection and management of the Fox River watershed.

Illinois does not require dischargers to streams to remove nitrates or phosphorous. Dam removal may be an important river restoration tool that should result in enhanced habitat and water quality conditions. Finally, a plan should be created and implemented by state agencies, municipalities, and watershed organizations to remove the Fox River from the IEPA impaired waters list.

The major threat the Fox River faces is rapid population growth and urban development that does not utilize watershed friendly practices. Rapid human population growth and urban development brings several subsequent threats to the watershed. First, increasing the amount of impermeable surfaces delivers more stormwaters to the Fox. Second, increased polluted runoff comes from impermeable surfaces. Third, increasing the amount of industrial discharges and sewage wastewater being released results in nutrient

enrichment. *Prairie River Notes features watershed groups and the watersheds they strive to protect on a regular basis. If you would like us to feature your group, contact Marc Miller at mmiller@prairierivers.org.*

River Views



Sangamon River at Allerton Park

Prairie Rivers Network

The Illinois Affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation

...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, Prairie Rivers helps individuals and community groups become effective river conservation leaders.

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Marc Miller—Watershed Organizer

Beth Wentzel—Watershed Scientist

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Lisa Fitzgerald—Events Coordinator

Olivia Dorothy—Support Staff

Rob Kanter—Newsletter Editor

Join Prairie Rivers Network!

Give a Gift Membership!

Membership Categories:

- ☐ \$15.00 Student Membership
- ☐ \$25.00 Basic Membership
- ☐ \$50.00 Friends' Membership*
- ☐ \$100 River Steward
- ☐ Other

Make checks payable to:

Prairie Rivers Network
809 S. Fifth Street
Champaign, Illinois 61820

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Looking for the perfect gift?

A membership to Prairie Rivers Network is the perfect gift for avid hikers, fishermen, paddlers, birders, or anyone who is concerned about the health of Illinois' rivers and streams. A one-year gift membership to Prairie Rivers Network includes quarterly newsletters, action alerts, and the knowledge that you are helping to protect the environment of Illinois. A card announcing your gift will be sent, and for those who give a gift membership of \$100 or greater, a copy of *Paddling Illinois* will be sent to the gift recipient as well by Prairie Rivers Network!



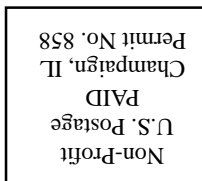
Protect Illinois' rivers and streams:

Join Prairie Rivers Network — the only state-wide organization in Illinois working solely on river issues. Your donation will help fund our efforts to bring science and technical information to bear in issues affecting all of our state's flowing waters. Your name on our membership roster will add strength to our campaign to restore and protect Illinois' rivers and streams.



All who join **Prairie Rivers** will receive our newsletter and action alerts. Your contribution to Prairie Rivers is tax deductible.

*Those who join at \$50 or above will also receive a **Prairie Rivers** poster featuring the nature photography of Jason Lindsey.



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809 South Fifth Street
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217-344-2371 fax: 217-344-2381
www.prairierivers.org

Mark Your Calendar!

Greater Midwest Fly Fishing Show

Drury Lane, Oakbrook, IL
January 31 - February 1, 2004

Clean Water Act Training

Aurora, Illinois
February 7, 2004
Contact: Beth Wentzel, Prairie Rivers Network
(217) 344-2371

Bronzeback Blowout 2004

Illinois Smallmouth Alliance
American Legion Hall, Elmhurst, IL
Saturday, February 28, 2004

*Best Wishes
for the Holidays
and the
New Year!*



Photo Attributions

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