



Protecting Illinois' Rivers for People, Fish, and Wildlife

PROTECTING THE MIDDLE FORK OF THE VERMILION

A DECADES-LONG EFFORT OF RIVER STEWARDSHIP

BY ANDREW REHN

The fight for the Middle Fork has been decades-long, and without the tireless work of many folks who have stood up for the river, we wouldn't have it today. Late this January, Prairie Rivers Network took the next big step in protecting Illinois' only National Scenic River by announcing our intent to sue Dynegy for ongoing pollution of the Middle Fork. The coal ash at Dynegy's closed Vermilion Power Station has been polluting the river for decades, and we're looking to put a stop to that and permanently protect the river for generations to come.



The Middle Fork of the Vermilion River
(Photo credit: Gary Jackson)

In 1966, the land that would become the Middle Fork State Fish & Wildlife Area was on the Army Corps list of planned dams and reservoirs. To build the dam that would flood the area to create the reservoir, state and county governments started purchasing land in the Middle Fork river valley from the farmers and other private landowners along the banks of the river. Even the coal ash pits at the power station, then owned by Illinois Power, would have been drowned by the dam. The ash would have made the lake a risky drinking water source; although, we didn't know as much about the threats of coal ash then as we do now.

The dam was opposed by the Committee on the Middle Fork, who fought tirelessly to stop the dam. The land grab by the state and county ended up working for the Middle Fork river, as the Committee saw an opportunity to turn the river valley, now largely owned by the public, into a recreational and wildlife space. In '77 and '78, the land was turned over to conservation, connecting and expanding Kennekuk County Park in the north and Kickapoo State Park in the south with the new Middle Fork State Fish and Wildlife Area to create a contiguous park and wilderness area.

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But even that wasn't enough to protect a river, as proponents for the dam revived the reservoir project in the early '80s. To ensure that the Middle Fork wouldn't be threatened by another dam or other man-made ecological disaster, advocates for the river worked to get the National Park Service to give the Middle Fork the National Scenic River designation. Ultimately, they were able to get the General Assembly to make a recommendation that the Middle Fork be added to the US list of National Scenic Rivers, one of the few in the Midwest, and to date the only designated in Illinois.

Now, Dynegy's Vermilion Power Station is the last inholding of privately owned land along the 17 mile stretch of otherwise publicly owned land that is part of the National Scenic designation. The power plant was closed in 2011, but for decades it dumped coal ash in three huge coal ash impoundments on the banks of the Middle Fork. That coal ash, which can contain

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