



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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CAROL'S CURRENTS

At PRN, there is a distinct hum of excited commitment as our team takes on the many challenges of what seems like a constantly shifting landscape. The efforts of those in Washington and Springfield to attack and undermine our environmental protections motivates us every day. We will not back down. Behind every challenge, opportunity often awaits.

The past year has indeed brought us many opportunities. An expanding network of members and supporters have raised their voices with us. A bigger office that can accommodate our growing staff and room for volunteers. And many new partner organizations with whom we are working to advance positive solutions to challenging problems. Problems like power plant pollution, riverine flooding, soil loss and nutrient pollution, nitrates in drinking water, or the impacts on monarchs, pollinators, invertebrates, and birds from insecticides and loss of habitat.

As we enter our next 50 years, we are taking a few months to assess these challenges and opportunities,

designing a new strategy to strengthen our capacity, focus our energy, and ensure we pursue strategies that will protect water and wildlife in our changing world. We have begun with a series of idea generation sessions based on the design thinking approach. These help the staff and board get creative together, generating a wealth of innovative ideas in response to questions like: How might we operate PRN to have strategic impact on our mission and priorities? What skill sets, expertise, and other capacity might we need? How might we grow our network and engage our members?

The next step in our process will be to gather information from additional sources, such as our partners and funders, and from you, our members. Your input will help us shape not only how we work but how we engage people across Illinois to become champions of clean water, healthy rivers, and abundant wildlife.

You should have received an online member survey by email (<https://goo.gl/jtcaK8>), and I hope that you

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PRN staff and board members attended idea generating sessions in February and March in advance of a strategic planning retreat in April.

prairieriversnetwork

Prairie Rivers Network champions clean, healthy rivers and lakes and safe drinking water to benefit the people and wildlife of Illinois.

Drawing upon sound science and working cooperatively with others, we advocate public policies and cultural values that sustain the ecological health and biological diversity of water resources and aquatic ecosystems.

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WHY I RUN/WALK FOR PRN

LORRIE PEARSON

I have been drawn to water ever since I was a little girl vacationing in Wisconsin with my family. Being on a lake or river still brings me closer to nature and fills me with a sense of calm. As I grew older, I learned to better appreciate the importance of water to communities and wildlife. As an urban planner, I know that clean and safe rivers and lakes can attract people to the communities where they live or visit. This year, I am raising money for the Run/Walk for Clean Water campaign because the work PRN does to protect our rivers is important to me. In every mile of my training, I know that PRN is working just as hard to protect Illinois, and I'm happy to do my part. //

Thank you runners and walkers
for joining this year's Run/Walk for
Clean Water!

Support our runners by donating at
prairierivers.org/run



WHY WE GIVE TO PRN

RIC WEIBL AND TERRI NALLY

Participation is the heart of democracy. Everyone has opportunities to be a participant, from voting to drafting a letter to the editor, from participating in a public meeting to wearing a badge, from attending a demonstration to corresponding and meeting with elected officials. Supporting an organization that champions public policies is another effective means for engaging in democracy. We invest in PRN because of its successful five-decade record of advocacy rooted in sound science and in cooperative action with others. Deployed with the U.S. Peace Corps to rural South Africa in an environment where we fetched and boiled water every day, we learned that water is the molecule of life. Financially backing PRN's guiding principles sustains the health of water resources, and, in turn, our interconnected communities. //



Photos from Ric and Terri when they served in the
U. S. Peace Corps in South Africa.

CURRENTS continued from page 2

will take a few minutes to share your thoughts with us. If you would prefer to complete a paper survey and return it by mail, please call our office at (217) 344-2371, and we will mail you one. All of your ideas will be presented to the board and staff during a daylong retreat on Earth Day weekend, where we will reflect on the information and prioritize. Our intention is to have our new strategic plan finalized by June and to tell you about it at our Annual Fundraising Dinner on October 26—an important reason

to put it on your calendar now!

We are excited to be charting the road ahead and thankful to have you on the journey with us. Thank you for your commitment to protect Illinois' rivers and wildlife and for your enduring support for us as their voice. We couldn't do what we do without you. //

Carol

ILLINOIS' IGNORED WATER CRISIS

NITRATES IN OUR DRINKING WATER

BY CATIE GREGG & JEFF KOHMSTEDT

Illinois faces a drinking water crisis, yet few in our state have paid it serious attention. Excess nitrates enter our water systems, both ground and surface water, by way of runoff from agricultural fields, and this crisis continues to grow because Illinois doesn't take its water quality more seriously.

High levels of nitrates in our drinking water poses serious health dangers, especially to babies under 6 months of age. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 10 ppm of nitrate-nitrogen to protect infants from methemoglobinemia or Blue Baby Syndrome, so called because it impacts the ability of their blood to carry oxygen, thus causing babies to turn blue. However, new research suggests that consuming nitrate levels at even half of the safe drinking standard (5ppm) can cause early stages of methemoglobinemia, and chronic exposure at this level may significantly increase the risk of certain cancers and birth defects.

How widespread is this problem? Since 2010, public water systems serving a total of 41,955 people have exceeded the

nitrate limit at least once, another 303,530 people have been exposed to water near the limit, and 1,273,027 people have water with nitrate levels over half of the drinking water standard. Year after year the average nitrate concentration in Illinois water steadily increases.

Small rural communities with shallow groundwater sources are particularly vulnerable to nitrate problems and have fewer resources for purchasing the expensive filtration facilities needed to safeguard their water. Moreover, people with private wells are not required to test their water, leaving a whole other population potentially exposed to dangerous levels of nitrates.

As Illinois is the greatest contributor to the Gulf of Mexico hypoxia "dead" zone, nitrates that leave our state through its waterways have received the lion's share of the media's attention. While the focus has been on nitrates' impact elsewhere, the danger and cost of excess nitrates closer to home continues to grow.

Other states, like Minnesota and Iowa, are leaders in raising awareness about nitrates in their drinking water and ways to fix the problem. Illinois has a long way to go if we are going to keep our water safe to drink. //



Approximately 20% of applied nitrogen fertilizer either leaches into our groundwater or runs off into our streams. Conservation farming practices such as cover crops, wetlands, or grass buffer strips can take up nitrogen in the field, preventing it from entering our water in the first place.

MIDDLE FORK continued from page 1

pollutants such as arsenic and lead, seeps contaminants through the riverbanks at the site. Compounding that threat is the constant meandering of the river, which is moving closer and closer to the toes of the impoundments containing the ash.

Protecting a river takes constant vigilance. The coal ash is the closest and most immediate threat to the river's long term vibrancy. Prairie Rivers Network is taking this next big step to build on all of the great work that many folks have put in to permanently protect the river so that generations to come can know and love one of Illinois's hidden treasures. //

**Make a donation to protect
the Middle Fork!**

[prairierivers.org/donate/
middlefork](http://prairierivers.org/donate/middlefork)



THE THREATS TO SPRING

BY KIM ERNDT-PITCHER

Spring is here, and on the forefront of my mind once again is the excitement over hearing the return of the woodcocks, frogs, and warblers; seeing the first bumble bee; and chasing that wily fox away from our chicken coops. Down here in southern Illinois, tree buds are swelling. Many maples, redbuds, and ornamental trees are in full bloom and buzzing with native bees and flies. In the midst of all the excitement about the return of those things that we love (yes, we love the hen-eating fox in our own way), I also have this nagging dread of the coinciding increase in pesticide use that occurs every spring.

Planting time is near, and we already see tractors pulling spray booms. The pre-planting burndown has begun. Many of those applicators and farmers are using Dicamba, 2, 4-D, or a combination of the two broadleaf weed killers, both of which are highly volatile and can move great distances, damaging numerous types of plants at very low doses. Later in the spring, many of the seeds planted will be coated with a cocktail of pesticides, including a systemic neonicotinoid insecticide that is toxic to bees, harms birds, pollutes our streams, and injures the aquatic invertebrates that our fish and wildlife depend on.

In May, the Department of Agriculture will spray vast areas of Northern Illinois woodlands with BtK to control the gypsy moth, but it will likely kill all moth and butterfly caterpillars that consume the toxin. If you live near a big orchard, be prepared for almost daily spraying of fungicides. Then there are the many people treating lawns, homes, schools, and offices with insecticides. The list goes on and on.

We are constantly disrupting our natural systems in countless ways. Our land use practices, our dislike for “pests,” and the introduction of invasive species have prompted us to invent chemicals to deal with the problems



we’ve created. Many of these chemicals are improperly applied and are broad spectrum approaches to specific problems, further disrupting our natural living systems. We are in a constant battle with nature.

Timing is critical. The timing of burndown is important for farms and landowners that choose to use chemicals as methods of pest control. The amount of the drift, volatilization, and contamination that occurs is affected by the timing of application, temperature, wind speed, and precipitation. Systemic insecticides can be found in plants that were untreated, even if these plants are significant distances from treated fields. Pesticides may adversely affect non-target organisms that are exposed at sensitive developmental stages. In trees and shrubs, this can mean bud swell and leaf emergence. For aquatic and terrestrial organisms, it is often during their reproductive or early developmental stages. Many of these pesticides bioaccumulate in animals. They are even found in our cereal. We seem to love pesticides. But at what cost?

We douse our environment, the only one we have, with millions of pounds of pesticides each year. Yes, these eventually break down, but what are the exposure levels to non-target organisms? Is there a synergistic effect? Just how much is volatilizing and where is it moving? Are we stressing our flora and fauna, lessening their ability to reproduce or cope with habitat loss and climate change? These are very difficult and complex questions. The hard truth is, we really should know the answers to them. Unfortunately, from an ecological perspective, we seldom have adequate or up-to-date community composition, or life history data, for the species that live in these systems. So how can we measure what is being harmed or entirely wiped out?

This is all happening when we have cuts to research institutions, state budgets, hiring freezes in the agencies that are meant to review and enforce permits and guard our natural resources, a weakened EPA, and attempts to silence our research agencies and institutions. These agencies and organizations have many hard working, dedicated scientists in them, but the truth is there is not enough money, too much work, too few people, and in some cases, their hands are tied. The question I keep hearing come up is “Are we setting ourselves up for another silent spring?”

Probably. What are we going to do about it? //

WE ARE ALL DOWNSTREAM

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFELD

At the end of 2017, we passed a significant milestone on the path toward stopping Asian carp from invading the Great Lakes. After a six-month delay caused by the Trump administration, Prairie Rivers Network and partners were able to secure the release of an Army Corps of Engineers report on how the Brandon Road Lock and Dam in Joliet, Illinois could be re-engineered as a kind of technological gauntlet aimed at stopping the upstream march of carp toward Lake Michigan.

Then, during the final months of 2017, PRN and partners delivered more than 10,000 public comments in support of taking strong action at Brandon Road to stop Asian carp.

But let's be clear: the proposal for Brandon Road is a Band-Aid on a gushing head wound. The primary means of deterrence at Brandon will be the construction of yet another electric barrier. As of this year, there will be four other electric barriers operating in the canal system upstream of Brandon Road. Building a fifth electric barrier, even one that is supplemented by other deterrent technologies, is only a minor improvement. It is nothing like a long-term comprehensive solution to stop aquatic invasive species.

Report after report has shown that electric barriers are flawed, as small fish can swim across the barrier and barges can trap fish and pull them across. Even worse, the Corps is likely to turn the new electric barrier off when ships move through the Brandon lock, undercutting our defenses precisely at the



moment of maximum risk. So no honest defender of the Great Lakes should feel secure about the new plan.

There's also another glaring problem with Brandon Road -- this location can only block species moving upstream, and it can never block species moving downstream. No matter how many controls are installed in the Brandon lock, invasive species coming from the Great Lakes can simply go over the dam's spillway and continue on to the Mississippi River.

That's a serious problem because there are more species poised to move into the Mississippi River from the Great Lakes than vice versa. While Asian carp have been the focus of much-deserved attention and concern, little to nothing is being done to address the threat of invasive species moving toward the Mississippi River. That is unacceptable.

The artificial connection between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River that allows for invasive species transfer exists because, at the end of the 1800s, decisions were made to send municipal and industrial waste to the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers in order to keep Lake

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Everyone has heard of Asian carp, but many more AIS like bloody red shrimp (above) are a threat to the Mississippi River.

Aquatic Nuisance Species of Concern

Moving from the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes	Moving from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River
Species Posing High Risk	Species Posing High Risk
None	Bloody red shrimp
	Fishhook waterflea
Species Posing Medium Risk	Species Posing Medium Risk
Scud	Grass kelp
Silver Carp	Red algae
Bighead Carp	Diatom
	Reed sweet grass
	Threespine stickleback
	Tubenose goby
	Ruffe
	Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia

RECOVERING AMERICA'S WILDLIFE ACT

BY ELLIOT BRINKMAN & JEFF KOHMSTEDT

The monarch butterfly, the rusty patched bumblebee, and the Indiana bat. These species all need protecting, and the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, (H.R. 4647) could go a long way in helping their populations recover.

In 2000, Congress authorized federal funds to help prevent wildlife from becoming endangered. However, this program ranged from \$50-100 million each year, only a fraction of the more than \$1.3 billion needed each year to fund 75% of all State Wildlife Action Plans. Current funding levels are a fraction of that: \$58.7 million nationwide and only \$1.5 million for Illinois. These action plans form a nationwide strategy that will sustain our wildlife resources and prevent wildlife from becoming listed under the Endangered Species Act.

H.R. 4647, or RAWA, would dedicate the needed \$1.3 billion for states to proactively conserve all wildlife. Illinois would stand to receive an additional \$36.6 million annually, a 2,300% increase, to protect wildlife.

It is important to recognize just how important RAWA and the funds it would provide would be to Prairie River Network's long term goals to protect the water, rivers, and wildlife of our state. How would an increase of \$36.6 million annually impact Illinois' ability to keep the monarch, the rusty patched bumblebee, or the Indiana bat off of the Endangered Species List?

RAWA would provide the main source of funding for implementing the Illinois State Wildlife Action Plan, a comprehensive strategy for conserving habitat for the benefit of people and wildlife. It would restore and manage habitat for rare and declining species, and it will identify and prevent problems that threaten the health of wildlife throughout the state -- protecting species before they become threatened and endangered.

Examples of what this money has supported in the past include species and habitat monitoring, species



Photo credit: Robert Shaw

reintroduction, habitat restoration and management, planning, and biological assessment for things like dam removal and stream restoration.

As part of a nationwide effort, the National Wildlife Federation, of which PRN is the Illinois affiliate, has been working with Members of Congress to find co-sponsors and supporters for the legislation.

PRN Water Resources Specialist Elliot Brinkman and Communications and Outreach Coordinator Jeff Kohmstedt have been working together on the Illinois response to RAWA. The two have met or had productive phone calls with staff from Congressman Rodney Davis (R-13th) and Congressman Darin LaHood (R-18th) and have reached out to the office of Congressman Adam Kinzinger (R-16th).

The issues RAWA addresses highlight policy areas that have had broad bipartisan support as many agree that protecting and conserving wildlife has a wide array of benefits.

NWF has also been collecting the names of organizations to sign on to a letter to Members of Congress. PRN has reached out to over 60 organizations in Illinois to gain their support of RAWA and to sign on to the letter. The response has been promising as more and more organizations support the effort to protect Illinois wildlife and to ensure the state receives this important funding. //

DOWNSTREAM continued from page 6

Michigan clean for the people of Chicago.

We need to take the health of the Mississippi River just as seriously as we do the Great Lakes. There is, unfortunately, a long history of turning downstream communities into sacrifice zones because it's easier (and cheaper) to send

the problem "away" than to deal with it here and now. But that is neither just nor smart. There is no "away." We are all downstream from someone else, and we should look out for our downstream neighbors, just as we would have them look out for us. //

2017 PRN Members & Supporters

We are grateful to all of our members, partners, donors and funders whose financial gifts in 2017 helped fund our important work. We could not do the work we do without you. Thank you for protecting our rivers and streams! Your annual support ensures that the fight for clean water, healthy rivers, and wildlife habitat continues.

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A special thank you to our members who have contributed to the Prairie Rivers Network Endowment. Your gift is an investment in Illinois' future.



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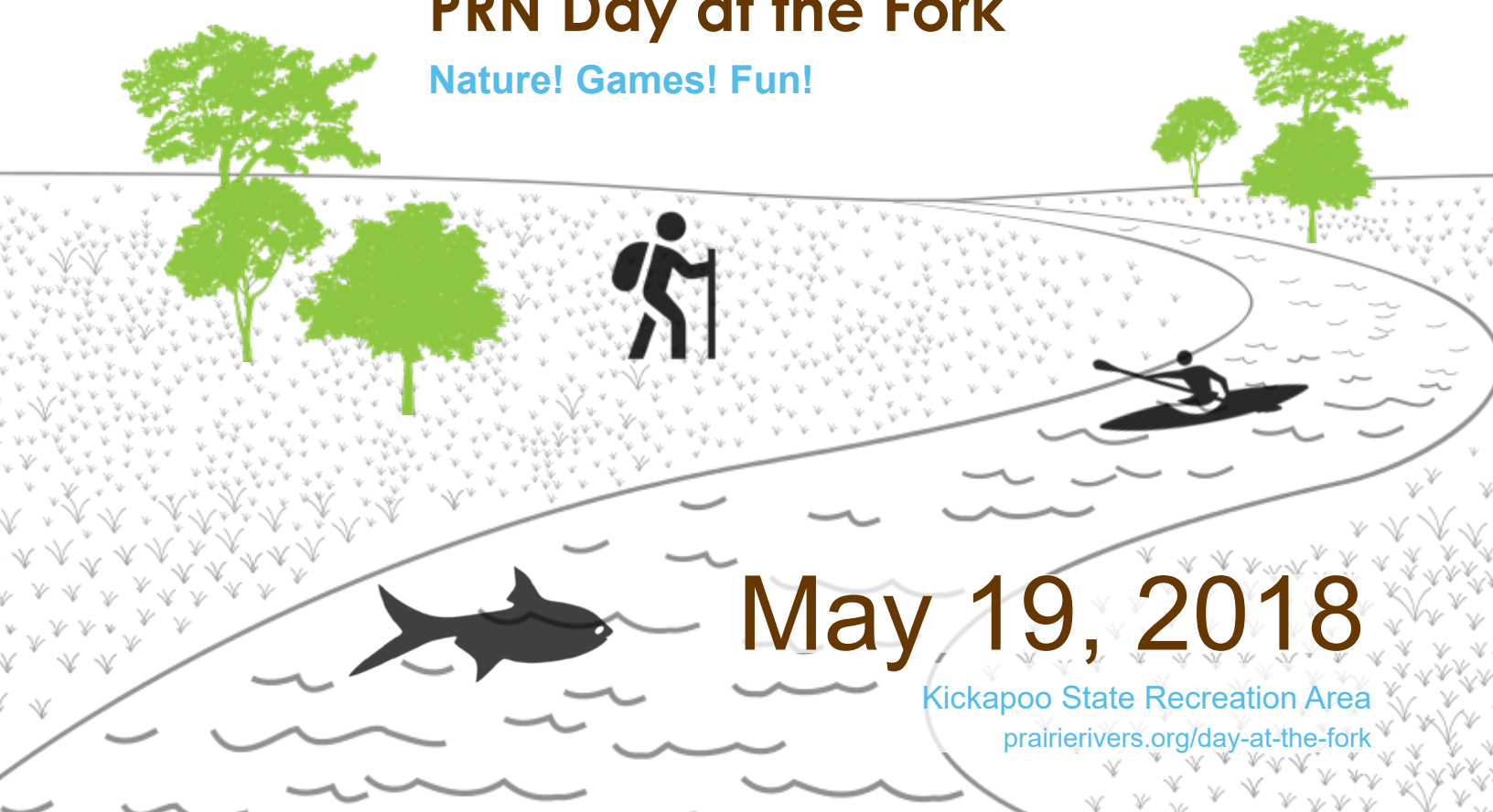
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