



The Rock River, near Castle Rock State Park, in Oregon, Ill. (David C. Olson photo)

Once a waterway of pristine beauty, the Rock River has suffered from the impact of urbanization along its shores. There's a long history of local groups who have worked to restore and preserve this natural resource, however. Among them is the Rock River Trail Initiative, which recently worked to make our river part of the National Water Trail System. Because of this, our river now has the support of the National Park Service, which relies upon local groups to manage its designated water trails.

The Rock River and the landscape through which it flows is a legacy of the last period of Wisconsin glaciers, which retreated almost 14,000 years ago. For eons the river was home to Native American tribes, who fished, drank and canoed its waters. The Sac and Fox, who inhabited the Rock River Valley through the mid-1800s, called it "Sinnissippi," meaning "rocky waters."

Today, the river begins its journey near the village of Brandon in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, before drifting into the Horicon Marsh east of Waupun. From there it wends its way more than 300 miles, past forests and farmland, hills and bluffs, villages and towns, across the state line at Beloit, then traverses southwest across northwestern Illinois, finally emptying into the Mississippi River at Rock Island. During that trip, it flows over 23 dams, past 37 municipalities, through five counties in Wisconsin and six in Illinois.

Earth Day

Gaylord Nelson was a Wisconsin politician and environmental advocate who served as state senator, governor, and as a U.S. senator from 1963 to 1981. In 1969, after unsuccessful attempts to get legislation passed to protect our earth, Nelson proposed a nationwide "teach-in" on the crisis facing the environment, modeled after similar events to protest the war in Vietnam.

The concept caught on, especially on college campuses. To preserve the grassroots aspect of his plan, Nelson rejected the idea of controlling the agenda in Washington, instead encouraging Americans to "get together any way they want." The result was the "biggest town meeting in the nation's history," as nearly 20 million citizens met all over the country to discuss, witness, perform and learn about the challenges to our natural world. On April 22, 1970, Earth Day was born.

What followed was a new wave of environmental activism and legislation at all levels. The Clean Air Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972), Endangered Species Act (1973) and others focused on preserving, protecting and restoring the quality of the environment. To monitor and enforce such legislation, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was formed in 1970.

Since then, the third week in April has been designated Earth Week throughout the world. In 1990, on the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, 800,000 people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC, while 1.8 million attended a similar event in New York City's Central Park. In 1995, Nelson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in recognition of his lifelong environmental work.

River Clean-ups

A local response to the original Earth Day was an effort to clean up the littered shorelines of the Rock River in Rockford. Titled "Clean Rivers and Streams Help" (CRASH), the first event was held May 23, 1970, organized by the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.

In spite of rainy weather, nearly 1,000 volunteers, mostly school-age and young adults, removed 425 truckloads of trash and trees from 20 miles of shoreline between the Riverside Bridge and Blackhawk Park, including Keith and Kent Creeks. Dozens of boats and canoes moved up and down the river, collecting debris and dumping it at designated sites along the riverbanks. Private companies and municipal departments donated drivers and heavy equipment, including dump trucks, end loaders and cranes, to haul trash out and away to a dumpsite at the south end of the Greater Rockford Airport runway.

The project was expanded in 1971 to include Loves Park shorelines up to the Machesney Airport (now Mall), but fewer people showed up to help. Nearly 650 volunteers removed 250 truckloads of debris on June 6. Jack Armstrong, then a science teacher at Marsh School, was on the CRASH steering committee in charge of recruitment. Armstrong is an environmental activist, past president of the Rockford Park District, and board member to several environmental groups.

"I was disappointed [in 1971] that we hadn't been able to get as many people as we thought we needed," recalls Armstrong. "But we got a lot of stuff out of the river, anyway."

Armstrong also was part of a small group of activists who called themselves "Save Our Streams" (SOS). They tried to initiate a class-action lawsuit against local industries suspected of dumping toxic wastes into the Rock River. As part of their investigation, SOS members flew over the city in the Rockford Newspapers airplane, photographing the river with infrared color slide film, in the hopes of detecting thermal pollution sites. Unfortunately, the film's sensitivity was unable to detect the evidence.

"The idea was, if our suit was successful, we would receive a percentage of the settlement," says Armstrong. "We planned to plow the funds back into local environmental activities. But [U.S. President Richard] Nixon cancelled the initiative."

In the early 1990s, Bob and Tamara Labombard organized a one-day Rock River cleanup drive in the Oregon, Ill., area.

"It was huge," says Bob's widow, Tammy. "Lots of folks, including Bob's brother, Al Levine, were instrumental in pulling it off. We worked the shorelines from Oregon down to Grand Detour. It was sponsored in part by the Jaycees as part of the DARE program, to involve young people in a civic project. We removed a couple of tons of trash. Bob and I were so grateful and proud of our family and community for their input."

In 2009, Oregon resident Frank Masterman revived the idea of a river cleanup, and volunteers hauled out debris from Lowden State Park to Castle Rock State Park. Masterman's vision, however, was to coordinate a river cleanup event that included the entire length of the Rock, from Horicon Marsh to Rock Island. Thus was born the Rock River Sweep (RRS).

“We have now divided the river into 31 sections,” says Steve Rypkema, director of the Ogle County Solid Waste Management department and current treasurer of RRS. “Each year we try to recruit coordinators for the different sections. Last year we covered 14 sections, probably less than one-third of the river’s total length.”

With the help of American Rivers, the Rock River Sweep has created an organizer’s handbook, available at its website, rockriversweep.org, where you can also volunteer to participate in this year’s Sweep on Sept. 10. The handbook covers everything to do in planning, executing and concluding a river cleanup event – even how to recycle the trash collected.

Last year, Frank Schier, editor and publisher of the Rock River Times (RRT) weekly newspaper in Rockford, helped to coordinate and publicize the Sweep for the sections between South Beloit and Oregon, as he has for several years.

“Our sponsors contributed more than \$3,000 in prizes for volunteer recognition,” says Schier. “This year we hope to raise \$5,000.”

The Rock River Trail

Schier has been an outdoor enthusiast and canoeist for most of his life and for many years has compiled an unpublished book about the Rock River. Part travelogue, part epic poem, the work also includes a collection of myths and legends concerning “the Mighty Rock” and its history.

Acquiring the newspaper in 1993 displaced Schier’s attention from his river research, but he returned to it in 2008. By that time, the RRT had published a series of articles by Tom Bauschke about his hiking and biking adventures across America’s National Trail system.

“I got to thinking, why not make the Rock River a water trail,” says Schier.

After gathering information from the Department of the Interior’s National Water Trail system, Schier managed to convene a preliminary meeting at the Clock Tower Resort in 2010, which included representatives from all 37 communities along the Rock River, to discuss his idea.

“I think it was the first time in history that anyone had called all those folks together,” says Schier. “We had a lot to discuss.”

Buoyed by their enthusiasm, Schier continued to research, organize and recruit other stakeholders, eventually establishing the Rock River Trail Initiative as a coalition of the willing. A legislative briefing was held at the Burpee Museum of Natural History on Feb. 2, 2011. City, county, state and federal legislators, and conservation/recreation group representatives were in attendance. It was at this meeting that Greg Farnham, commissioner of the Wisconsin Lake Sinnissippi Improvement District, asked Schier if he could help with the project.

“Saying ‘yes’ to Greg was the smartest affirmative I’ve ever uttered,” says Schier. “He worked almost full time putting the Rock River Trail plan and application together for the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. His expertise and quality work really won the day. Tom Lindblade, president emeritus of the Illinois Paddling Council, has said that Farnham’s trail plan is the most complete plan and inventory in the entire country.

“Farnham became the co-coordinator of the Rock River Trail Initiative (RRTI). He can relate to anyone. His contacts in Wisconsin and now Illinois are extensive, his public speaking ability is superb, and his diligence has been an irreplaceable gift.”

Shortly after that meeting, the RRTI made application to the NPS Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program for their cooperation as consultants. They accepted the application, and also granted RRTI permission

to use the NPS ‘pregnant triangle’ logo for Rock River trail signage. On May 11, 2013, The Rock River Trail was formally recognized by the U.S. Department of the Interior as a National Water Trail.

“It usually takes 10 to 20 years to establish a river trail, but we did it in three,” says Schier. “We were the 10th trail established that year; now there are 18. So far, we are one of the few river trails that crosses two states.”

The National Water Trail system is a grassroots effort that relies on local groups to manage the designated water trails, with the support of the National Park Service. A 20-person council of the Rock River Trail Initiative, a consortium of public and private conservation organizations, oversees the trail. Their mission is to establish and support the Rock River Water Trail along the 320-mile river course, from the headwaters in Fond du Lac County, Wis., to the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Ill., and a separate Rock River route on roads and trails within the river corridor.

“We’re also the only river trail in the country with four ‘legs,’” says Schier. “You can traverse it by boat on the water, by car on the state-sponsored Scenic and Historic Route of connected roads and highways, or by bike and hiking on the on-and-off-road bike route.”

According to the RRTI, there are 199 water access points along the Rock River. Volunteers are currently completing the installation of signs at each point, designating the river as a National River Trail and directing the public to hiking, biking and driving routes along the corridor. The Initiative just received a \$2,500 grant from the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois to conduct an inventory of effigy mounds along the Rock River.

They are also in the process of assembling an inventory of public art and art galleries within the river corridor. By inventorying the natural, scenic, historic and cultural assets of the Rock River Valley, then marketing and promoting their access to the public, The RRTI hopes to encourage people to become invested in the condition of the water quality as well.

“We are bringing together all these riverside communities with the ultimate goal of making the Rock River the cleanest tributary to the Mississippi River by 2030,” says Schier. “Nobody wants to recreate in dirty water. A National Water Trail has to be a clean river.”

To this end, the RRTI hopes to install water quality monitoring stations every five miles along the river within the next few years. They have already investigated several recent fish kills.

“We are the Rock River’s watchdogs,” says Schier.

Although river water quality has improved considerably since the 1960s, when people joked about the river catching fire like Ohio’s Cuyahoga River did in 1952, there are still pollution challenges to overcome. The EPA has listed the Rock River and several of its tributaries as “impaired,” which means they don’t meet the surface water quality standards of the Federal Clean Water Act. Since 1998, no river or stream in the Rock River watershed has improved enough to be “delisted” from this designation, and no riverside municipality takes its drinking water directly from the Rock River.

Water quality in any river is a direct reflection of the activities that take place on the surrounding land. According to the EPA, most pollutants in the Rock River come from non-point sources such as soil and nutrients washing into streams and lakes from urban and rural stormwater runoff. Phosphates and nitrates from fertilizers, and oil and salt from streets and parking lots, all enter the water stream during rainstorms.

“Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) create huge pools of urine and feces which are often sprayed on nearby fields,” says Schier. “They directly affect the quality of our rivers. In my estimation, the EPA is not doing enough to regulate these agricultural practices.”

Pollution from industrial outlets and municipal sewage treatment facilities has diminished significantly but is still a problem in some areas. Another major threat to water quality is spills from railroads transporting toxic

materials along and across our rivers.

“The biggest fish kill in Illinois history was caused in part by the exploding ethanol tank cars at Mulford Road in 2009,” says Schier. “It drained into the Kishwaukee River and eventually the Rock. Coupled with a huge rainstorm during peak farm field fertilization, and the failure of the sewage plant in Oregon, it created a ‘perfect storm’ of environmental disaster. People said the dead fish were three feet deep at the Milan Steel dam.”

According to Karen Rivera, a fisheries biologist at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the overall quality of the Rock River in Illinois has been able to sustain game fish, in spite of some past water quality issues.

“We stock walleye, and have developed a state record fishery in the upper end of the Rock, near the mouth of the Pecatonica” says Rivera. “We also have a quality smallmouth bass fishery, as well as an awesome catfish fishery throughout the river in Illinois. Things are looking good.”

A “fishery” refers to all the members of a population of a particular species. A quality, or healthy fishery means the population is stable and contains a mixture of all ages of fish. To be attractive to anglers, there needs to be an abundance of adult fish as well. If you intend to eat your catch, Rivera suggests you check the “consumption advisory” link at ifishillinois.org for more information.

Rock River Coalition

In Wisconsin, the Rock River Coalition (RRC) has been working to protect and improve the Rock River Basin for more than 20 years. Headquartered in Jefferson, Wis., the organization consists of nine volunteer board members and two part-time staff that work closely with other environmental civic and governmental groups. They work within the entire watershed of the Rock River in the state of Wisconsin, an area of almost 3,800 square miles with 750,000 residents.

Through their website and newsletter, the RRC acts as a clearing house for educational, recreational and field monitoring events related to the ecology and water quality of streams and lakes in the Rock River basin. Dave Hoffman is the community coordinator for Rock County, serves as secretary on the RRC board, and is a member of the RRTI board as well.

“The Rock River Coalition has a long history of training citizens to be part of our basin-wide water monitoring system,” says Hoffman. “We have planned a big 10-day event in May to encourage people to join us in this effort. We’re calling it ‘Testing the Waters: a Paddle and Probe Adventure.’”

Starting in Mayville just east of the Horicon Marsh on May 15, a flotilla of 3 to 4 paddlers in canoes and kayaks will traverse the Rock River all the way to Beloit in one-day segments, ending each evening with a community meeting to publicize the event and educate the public on the importance of water conservation. Mounted on the front of one of the kayaks will be a probe that continuously monitors the water for pH levels, temperature, dissolved oxygen and conductivity, all indicators of potential pollutants. This data will be uploaded via a cellphone and digitally displayed on a web map. Participants also will take periodic “grab samples” of the water for later analysis for nutrients and bacteria.

“The public will be able to follow the flotilla and monitor their findings in real time,” says Hoffman. “We hope this will engage more people into concern for water quality and other conservation issues.”

In addition to finding and reducing or eliminating the sources of water pollution, steps can be taken to mitigate their effects on wildlife and water quality. Filter strips can be created along shorelines by planting trees, grasses and sedges as a buffer between the river and potentially damaging runoff. This also provides increased habitat for wildlife and stabilizes the shoreline to prevent soil erosion.

“In the past five years, we’ve planted more than 51,000 oak trees along the Rock River,” says Schier. “Each

year, Chad Pegracke of Living Lands & Waters has donated 10,000 young trees for our cause. He's the guy who clears trash from the Mississippi River. CNN called him 'Hero of the Year' in 2013. Another 10,000 trees will be available to us on April 13-15. That's 910 oak trees for each of the 11 counties along the Rock River Trail."

When asked about the plausibility of reaching RRTI's 2030 goal of making the Rock River the cleanest tributary to the Mississippi, Schier replies:

"We want to lead by example. If we can do it to our Rock River, anybody can do it to theirs."



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