

Restoring the Wisconsin River

by George Becker

THE 1960s WERE FRUSTRATING times for those of us who cared about the lakes and rivers in Wisconsin. Even though Wisconsin had a long history of good environmental regulations, we could see how ineffective these regulations were in preventing pollution arising from rapid population and industrial growth during those years.

I spent a good part of my life as a fish biologist and professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The Wisconsin River was at our doorstep. We could see the decline in water quality during the fifties and sixties. The river was brown and lacked its former clarity. It had a terrible odor. Massive fish kills were occurring, including a remnant sturgeon population. We saw a dramatic reduction in the number of species and individual species. Contamination of fish was so bad that by 1968 fish from the river were no longer edible. We were turning the river into a sewer and I knew something had to be done.

At that time CNRA was one of the few citizens groups making their voices heard about water pollution. One spokesperson for the group was a new CNRA member, Reginald Richie. Richie, a resident of West Allis, wanted it known that he was not a biologist, just a citizen concerned about pollution. He owned a cottage on Lake Wisconsin. For years he, too, watched the water quality of the lake gradually worsen. Fishing fell off, odors increased, the water lacked clarity, and a greasy scum covered the surface. Richie considered

moving to another lake, but most of the lakes he knew were experiencing the same problems.

Richie felt the same way I did: too much talk and not enough action by regulatory agencies, politicians and industries. He thought it imperative to get citizens involved in water pollution issues. In numerous letters to newspapers and state politicians, he spelled out the seriousness of water pollution problems and cited the backing of a statewide environmental group of well-known citizens—CNRA.

To support Richie's efforts, CNRA established a Water Pollution Fund at its 1969 annual meeting, authorizing acceptance of \$1.00 trial memberships and additional contributions toward a pilot study of the Wisconsin River. This study, conducted by a private consultant, would collect data on pollution in the river, pinpoint sources and recommend solutions. The intent of the study was to supplement and augment work already being done or planned by the DNR.

As word of the potential study spread, it was gratifying to see how much support Richie, Fred Ott, Roy Gromme, and other CNRA members were able to generate for the Water Pollution Fund. Hundreds of new members joined CNRA, some contributing \$1 for trial memberships, others making larger donations. Meanwhile, the DNR continued to conduct water quality studies of its own, collecting extensive data on the river. Richie, other CNRA members, and I attended public hearings on these studies. The advice given to us by agency people and local politicians was not to

waste money on another study; rather, they suggested that CNRA publish the results of existing studies in an easily understood format so that the general public would become better informed about pollution issues.

Around this time, I heard Richard M. Billings, an executive of Kimberly Clark Paper Company, tell representatives of the paper industry they would have to spend a larger share of their profits on pollution control if environmental contamination is going to be reduced. Billings said, "If all the known available practical technology were to be installed in the realm, the pollution problem would be very much reduced. . . . In other words, we'll have to admit that we are not doing everything that can be done."

From Lac Vieux Desert to Prairie du Chien ... this great Wisconsin River valley must become a model of cleanliness. (1970)

What I seemed to be hearing from almost everyone was a need to get reliable, substantive information to the general public about the seriousness of the pollution problem; then develop a plan and find sufficient resources to do something about it. Therefore, in 1970, under the auspices of CNRA, I formed the Wisconsin River Restoration Committee dedicated to "spread the word up and down the Wisconsin River Valley, from Lac Vieux Desert to Prairie du Chien, that this great valley must become a model of cleanliness." I wanted to encourage the active help and leadership of businessmen, educators, industrialists, law enforcement officers, politicians and citizens.

I chaired the group; Richie was vice-chair. Eight others served on the Steering Committee. Members of the committee testified at public hearings and submitted numerous resolutions and petitions to various branches of government to clean up the river. We backed these actions with extensive

scientific data and thorough analyses of existing standards and regulations. In 1972, with funds from CNRA, we compiled these actions and other pertinent material into a special report: *Stream of a Thousand Isles: The Wisconsin River: Its History and a Plan for Restoration*. We distributed this report widely.

As an introduction to the report, Sylvia, my wife, wrote a poetic piece telling the story of an earlier Wisconsin River that was the hub of life for Indian tribes and immigrants who settled near its banks; a river loved by many throughout the years, a haven and refuge for fish and wildlife, now polluted beyond belief.

The first petition in the report, dated January 23, 1971, was a copy of one we sent to the U. S. Attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin under the 1899 Refuse Act. We asked for immediate action against nine major industries to force them to desist from dumping harmful wastes into the Wisconsin River. We also asked that any portion of fines to which CNRA was entitled be remitted to CNRA to

- The Wisconsin River Restoration Committee:**
 Chairman: George Becker, Stevens Point
 Vice-Chairman: Reginald Richie, West Allis
 Secretary: Arthur Meeks, Wausau
 Steering Committee:
 Koby Crabtree, Wausau
 William Howe, Prairie du Chien
 Carla Kruse, Loganville
 Al Krzykowski, Wisconsin Rapids
 Sherman Stock, Milwaukee
 Tom Tompach, Wausau
 Florence Tuttle, Nekoosa
 Douglas Witt, Stevens Point

“promote environmental quality wherever needed.” As a result of this petition, Consolidated Papers of Rhinelander was fined \$1,000. CNRA received \$250 as its share.

The report also contained a copy of the committee’s petition to the Secretary of the DNR to review and revise water quality standards and zones as they apply to the Wisconsin River. In addition, we included an analysis I wrote on the dangers of environmental contamination by mercury. This paper was written to support the Wisconsin River Restoration Committee’s decision to go on record in June 1970 requesting the state of Wisconsin to establish a standard requiring total elimination of mercury and its components from all effluents discharged into state waters.

The centerpiece of the report was a plan I developed to restore the Wisconsin River. My friends called it “George’s Pipe Dream.” Proposed was a Wisconsin River Sanitary Authority, which would implement a plan to place all man-derived wastes into a closed system. This system would

eliminate, by stages, all discharge of municipal and industrial wastes into the Wisconsin River and its tributaries. The plan called for the most up to date treatment systems. The clear, reusable water coming from centralized plants along the main stem of the river would be piped back for reuse to industries and municipalities. With this system, the river would be returned to a near-pristine state; the value of fishing and recreation on the river would rise; and property values would increase substantially.

This plan was also published by CNRA in another format called *The Wisconsin River: A Plan for Its Restoration*. The first section contained my plan. The second section, by John Holland, an engineer from J.R.L. Industries, included working plans for the Wisconsin River Basin sewage disposal system and implementation costs. I have a 1972 letter from Al Berkman, CNRA’s president at that time, confirming CNRA’s willingness to publish this report. In the letter Al says, “George’s Pipe Dream may not come true, per se, but something akin to it will.”



The smiling faces of members of the CNRA Council in 1971 belie the seriousness of the issue that was before them: clean-up of the polluted Wisconsin River. From left: Jeffrey Rill, George Becker, Russell Rill, Katherine Rill, Trudi Scott, Marguerite Baumgartner, Carla Kruse, Fred Baumgartner, Fred Ott, Ethel Princl, Reginald Richie, and Orié Loucks.

I guess Al Berkman was right, because everyone I talk to now says the Wisconsin River is in its best shape in memory. Shortly after the report was published, the national 1972 Clean Water Act set the goal that all waters were to be swimmable and fishable by 1983. The DNR divided the Wisconsin River into three segments: Upper, Middle and Lower, and developed comprehensive water quality management plans for each section. Preparation of the plans included extensive participation by local citizens, communities and industries, similar to Reginald Richie's earlier planning concept. And just as I recommended new state-of-the-art treatment plants, so too most municipalities eventually had new plants, and all industries updated their treatment methods to meet the requirements of their legally assigned discharge permits.


I recently obtained a copy of a 1987 speech given by Bob Martini from the DNR Rhinelander District Office. He says that after 1980, when waste discharge permits were implemented under the Clean Water Act, less than 30,000 pounds of BOD a day were being discharged into the river. This compared to over 500,000 pounds of BOD discharged daily in 1972 when I wrote my plan. He goes on to say: "Several stretches of the river showed dramatic improvement. Oxygen levels increased, flavor and odor problems decreased, foam and aesthetic problems disappeared and biological diversity returned to the river. Game fish became a dominant segment of the fishery.... Fishing increased, boating, kayaking, swimming, water skiing and other water sports became commonplace on a river that had been avoided by most residents for decades."

We know toxic waste continues to be a problem in the river. Substantial quantities of mercury, PCBs, dioxins, furans and other toxic material still can be found in sediments and fish. These will be there for a

long time. But in a recent telephone conversation with Martini, he says he is optimistic about efforts by the state to be the first state in the nation to regulate air-borne mercury emissions from coal-burning plants. The DNR has scheduled hearings on these regulations this summer—30 years after CNRA's Wisconsin River Restoration Committee requested that the state of Wisconsin set standards for the total elimination of mercury from its waters.

Not too long ago, George Rogers, a sports writer for the *Stevens Point Gazette*, sent me a note about the status of fish in

the Wisconsin River near Stevens Point. He said the river now has a thriving population of channel catfish; muskies planted a few years earlier are doing quite well; and there's an excellent small mouth bass population. Sturgeon were reintroduced in 1991 but the jury is still out on their success. He concluded by saying, "To sum up, the river is in better shape than it has been in decades, so your efforts weren't wasted."

I can easily say the same for the efforts of Richie and numerous other CNRA members who worked to achieve the goal of a cleaner Wisconsin River. I think we would all agree with the way Bob Martini ended his speech, quoting Aldo Leopold in *Round River*: "There is as yet no social stigma in the possession of a gullied farm, a wrecked forest, or a polluted stream." Bob Martini then responded: "This may have been true in 1945 but the Wisconsin River story illustrates that the public, the state and even private industry are no longer willing to accept the social stigma of a polluted stream in Wisconsin." 

The river is in better shape than it has been in decades, so your efforts weren't wasted.
— George Rogers, 2000

Dr. George Becker, professor emeritus of the UIW—Stevens Point, is the author of Fishes of Wisconsin, and served as CNRA president from 1972 to 1974. George and Sylvia retired to Arkansas.