

The Passing of a Marshland

Recent ceremonies in Kenosha County that opened Highway Q - from Highway H to the Interstate I-94, brought back memories when the area was mainly marsh and wetlands. This section of pristine land was then known as Holt's slough.

During the 20's and 30's I remember the slough and Des Plaines River as a veritable haven for wildlife. In the fall thousands of waterfowl would follow the ancient river flyway, some would swing into the inviting slough to feed and rest.

For many years sportsmen engaged in the traditional fall hunt when the migrating waterfowl would wing over the marshland. In those days ducks and geese was meat on the table. Like the American Indian waterfowl was a source of food, as indicated by finding stone arrowheads in the adjacent farm fields. Trappers also used the marsh and surrounding land to collect muskrat, mink, fox and skunk fur for extra pocket money.

In the spring I watched, from a vantage point on Ivy Island, the Canada geese, swan and many species of ducks resting and feeding on vegetation and crustacea. Large flocks of waterfowl returned here each year in their flight north to the Canadian nesting grounds. Fall and spring migrations are still an ecological mystery.

Occasionally, I observed jacksnipe "scalping" from cover to fresh sprouting flag and smartweed. Ornithologists came here to compile a check list of birds at the marsh, wetlands and woodlot. Listed birds included mallards, teal, pintail, wood ducks, blue heron, white egret, bittern, yellow headed blackbirds, kestrels, marsh hawks, killdear, sandpipers, woodcock, owls and a variety of warblers and other insectivorous birds.

The slough was like a large retaining basin from water that connected to the Des Plaines River. Big northern pike could be seen during the spring splashing their way in the marsh vegetation to spawn

This was the lush wildlife corridor of the river valley. Each spring I make an on-site visit to see the returning waterfowl. Migration is a constant factor of bird life, with its roots leading to the distant past.

Wetlands of the area continue to shrink and bird life lessens each year. In the 40's the rivers east bank was diked and deep channels were dug to pump the slough dry. Corn was planted which produced a poor crop. In the 60's gravel was discovered and a large scale mining operation continued until 1988. The gravel pit lands north of Highway Q will become a recreational park with a man-made 130 acre lake. South of Highway Q tentative plans are to dedicate these land as a wildlife refuge. These wetlands are on the North edge of Halter Wildlife Inc.

Wetlands serve important environmental functions by storing flood waters, supporting bird life and spawning grounds, reducing erosion, recharging groundwater, filtering sediment and controlling pollution.

The Des Plaines River has suffered many abuses and it is an unknown factor what the impact will be on the rivers ^{future} ecology. It can be expected that each spring flooding will occur because of the shallow stream bed.

Starting at the rivers source, in Paris Township near the Racine - Kenosha County line, springs and water run-off fed the wetlands known as William's slough. In the 40's the slough was channeled to drain the land for farming.

The wetland valley was a meca in the spring for migrating ducks, geese, swan and shorebirds. With planted crops and a now channeled ditch it no longer is a waterfowl flyway. Sediment, fertilizers and chemicals have leached into the river channel contaminating the stream and destroying sensitive plant life. Some leaching may come from a land fill and Brighton Creek.

In Bristol Township, again nutrients and chemical run-off has a drastic effect on the waters. Silt from a former gravel mining operation once drained into the river. As the river flows east it picked up an overflow from the Bristol treatment plant. Near Interstate I-94 faulty

septic systems have leaked into the river.

In Pleasant Prairie Township, after passing under I-94, the river bends and flows south. Silt has choked the river just north of the bridge at Highway C. During the past summers prolonged drought the river totally dried up. All fish and aquatic life was destroyed, clams with their white shells lay exposed in the sun. Undesirable and salt tolerant weeds filled the river with nutrient rich silt. For a naturalist it was a tragedy to see this disturbing and ugly sight.

Plant life such as white and yellow waterlily, arrowroot, sweet flag, pragmites and other sensitive plants have disappeared. South of Highway C willow shrubs are encroaching on the river and succession is narrowing the entire river. The watershed area consists of some 223 square miles of drainage, and the river needs width for water run-off.

The Des Plaines River has become an open sewer, in mid-summer green water stench could be encountered by sight and smell. The entire river corridor must be cleaned-up from further pollution. Farm silt has decreased the depth of the river and spring floods will expand beyond the normal river flow. Storm waters from the Highway 50 and I-94 complex will add an additional charge of run-off water, salt and chemicals into the river basin.

Urgent action must be taken to control the deteriorating river by state and county departments. The use of the river for recreational purposes has great advantages. A river where I once camped, fished, swam and canoed should be revitalized to its near primitive state so all outdoor enthusiasts can enjoy this natural area.

It may never be possible to completely restore a marshland and river. Restoration is infinitely complex and costly - but the urgency of "Clean Waters" requires a vigorous crusade of all citizens to prevent continued pollution and soil erosion of our heritage - "The marshlands and the Des Plaines River".

by Phil Sander
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