

Mackinaw River Watershed

The Mackinaw River has been referred to as a “river of contrasts”. If one were to float down the Mackinaw River, you would be able to see areas of astonishing beauty: prairies blooming with colorful wildflowers, cool woodland glades with massive trees, crystal clear water with brilliant darters and rare mussels. You would also see however, horrible scars of streambank erosion. Trees ripped from the banks and piled in huge log jams filled with debris and garbage. Tires, automobiles, and refrigerators. Huge slabs of concrete dumped along the banks. Pipes in which untreated human sewage flows into the river. Yes, the Mackinaw River can be described as “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” Even with the bad and ugly though, this river is still considered one of the higher quality streams in the State of Illinois. It is able to support a relatively high level of biological diversity, and the water quality overall is pretty good. Because of this, preserving and enhancing the natural resources of the Mackinaw River is one of the primary goals of the Mackinaw River Watershed Project.

In 1994, The Nature Conservancy, with funding from Illinois EPA, began a process to develop a watershed management plan, based on scientific research and with the input of watershed residents. Volunteers from throughout the watershed joined together to learn about the river and form committees which eventually (it was a long and arduous process) resulted in the official “Mackinaw River Watershed Management Plan.” This plan, completed in June of 1988, contains strategies specifically geared towards solving the diverse problems which affect this watershed.

The major problems identified are altered hydrology, as evidenced by an increase in flood peaks and streambank erosion, increased sedimentation, and an increase in nutrients and fecal bacteria. The plan's objectives are to reduce water volume and velocity of extreme flood events, reduce bank erosion, sediment loads, nutrients and fecal bacteria, and to increase the biological diversity in the watershed. Specific goals and strategies are directed towards achieving these objectives, which include restoration of wetlands, forests, and prairies, implementation of agricultural best management practices such as filter strips and rotational grazing, streambank stabilization, wetland treatment of sewage, etc.

Currently, the project has completed ??? demonstration projects which have put these types of practices in place. Because the watershed is so large (744,00 acres or 1,136 square miles), it is going to take a consistent and long term effort to show a significant impact. However, funding incentives are available from a variety of sources, and it is hoped that more and more landowners will take advantage of these and start doing something, be it large or small, that will improve this river and watershed.

For this voluntary effort to continue to be a success, The Mackinaw River Watershed Project will need to continue its efforts towards education and outreach. Attitudes towards our rivers and streams may need to be changed. We need to work with the tools that we have currently available, and look towards future new ones. We need to avoid pointing fingers and placing blame and work together to get the job done. Hopefully then, the “ugly” will disappear, the bad will diminish, and the good will just get better.

