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Rhinelanders Revisited: Water quality issues resurface

Stephanie Kuski River News Features reporter

The Northwoods is blessed with an incredible array of natural resources, yet these vast stretches of forests, lakes and rivers have not always been appreciated for their interconnectedness and finite value.

Long before railroads were established in the Northwoods, cruising logs by way of the river was the only means to get timber to market during the initial logging boom. To facilitate those log drives, dams were created to hold back the flow of the river in order to maximize the river's current when driving those logs downstream.

But the erosive force of those log drives actually reconstructed stream channels and altered fish habitat, in addition to displacing tremendous amounts of sediment from those logged areas into nearby waterways. Logging dams also dramatically altered the topography of the Wisconsin River. When all of that water was held upstream of the dam, that created flowages like the Rhinelanders Flowage as well as nearby lakes that feed into that chain like Boom and Thunder Lake; a feature of our town that would be difficult to imagine being without today.

Even with the seemingly endless supply of water from the Wisconsin and other nearby waterways, protecting those resources was an afterthought at the time. Similarly, the early logging boom was a free-for-all on the part of the forestry products industry; only when those timber resources were depleted did regulation come into play, and the same is true with water quality.

This moment in history reflects a time with little regulation to begin with. "The solution to pollution is dilution" was the accepted waste disposal strategy of the day, which meant massive amounts of industrial waste from the paper mill and other industries were dumped directly into the Wisconsin River: from paper pulp and fiber to heavy metals like mercury, arsenic and dioxin.

But this wasn't happening just in Rhinelanders. Industrial mills stretched the length of the Wisconsin and each dumped their waste into the river, where it collected downstream and eventually journeyed to what is now a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. What's more, this philosophy didn't end with industries - it was common for regular residents to dump their waste directly into the river as well.

Today the Wisconsin is known as the "hardest working river in the nation" due to the large amount of dams along its shores in addition to the municipal and industrial waste discharge.



Photo courtesy of Frederick Fisher

Sludge at the Hat Rapids dam, circa August 1966. At one time, pollutant discharge from the Rhinelanders mill was so bad that paper fiber accumulated downstream where a sludge formed so thick, small animals could walk across the Hat Rapids flowage. Cleanup crews tackled the worst of the pollution in the summer of '66, but it wasn't until the early '70s that industrial waste discharge was regulated by the Clean Water Act.

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Even though the river was heavily polluted because of this dumping, Rhinelanders residents siphoned their drinking water directly from the Wisconsin until the early '30s. The transition to drilling deep wells for municipal drinking water supplies was prompted by public health concerns driven by local boards of health which recognized that many diseases like typhoid fever and cholera resulted from drinking contaminated water.

Those pollutants also had dramatic effects on aquatic species. Oxygen sag was the result of all that waste being dumped into the river, causing fish kills for miles downstream. Residents may remember the putrid smell and taste of fish that came out of the Wisconsin River during the '60s and '70s. Because the mill used mercury as a slime reducer and dumped those heavy metals right into the river, and because that mercury bioaccumulates up the food chain, mercury contamination also continues to be a problem in local water bodies.

One of the worst examples of this industrial pollution in Oneida County occurred at the Hat Rapids flowage to the south of Rhinelanders. For years, paper fiber was discharged from the Rhinelanders mill where it settled to the bottom of the Hat Rapids flowage downstream. In the summertime, that organic material decomposed anaerobically, creating gas bubbles and eventually a thick sludge that rose to the surface and dried as a crust. At one point that sludge was so thick, small animals could walk across the flowage.

The sludge at Hat Rapids was a visible reminder of our city's poor water quality to both residents and tourists. In the summer of 1966, the paper mill hired cleanup crews to collect the sludge off the surface of the water and pump it out of the river, across the road and eventually to trucks that hauled the containments off to another site. Even though the mill was working to clean up the worst of the pollution, that didn't stop it from happening in the first place.

Worst of all, this was happening in cities across the United States. The dumping of pollutants into local waterbodies went on for decades, unchecked and unregulated. Soon, problems with water pollution became an issue for virtually every city in the nation.

In June of 1969, these issues received nationwide attention when an oil slick caught fire on the Cuyahoga River southwest of Cleveland, Ohio. Images of the "river that caught fire" prompted citizen outrage and public concern about the widespread lack of environmental protection.

Less than a year later, Wisconsin state senator Gaylord Nelson established the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970 as a mechanism to force these environmental protection issues onto the national agenda. This grassroots movement did not go unnoticed: millions of Americans participated in rallies, marches and educational programs, laying the foundation for nationwide change.

By December of that same year, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established by a special presidential order to regulate and enforce national pollution standards. To facilitate that mission, the EPA amended the Clean Water Act in 1972, a crucial piece of federal legislation that established the basic structure for regulating pollutant discharge in U.S. waterways and gave the EPA sweeping authority to implement pollution control standards.

One major goal of the Clean Water Act was to make all U.S. waters fishable and swimmable in a 10-year period. This federal legislation was twofold: not only were industries and municipalities required to clean up polluted waterways, but it also established industry standards to prevent that pollution from happening in the first place. By 1974, Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act to protect and regulate the nation's drinking water supplies.

While these regulations were meant to safeguard our country's natural resources, not everyone was on board. At the time, the Rhinelanders mill was the city's largest employer so there were major concerns that regulating the industry to such an extent would cost jobs and negatively impact the local economy.

Fortunately, however, that didn't happen.

Although the Rhinelanders mill and others along the Wisconsin River spent millions complying with the new regulations, that investment was made back in spades. Economic and tourism development along the river in Rhinelanders and cities downstream simply wouldn't be possible to the extent we currently know under the old polluted river system.

But the reason why the Rhinelanders mill was so successful in complying with these regulations had to do with their seat at the decision making table. When stakeholders were tasked with figuring out how to implement these new regulations, three committees were formed: (1) A technical committee made up of paper mill consultants and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, (2) a policy committee with elected officials from the entire Wisconsin River Valley and (3) a citizen committee comprised of fishermen, concerned citizens and riverfront residents. Because all of these committees provided insight into their sphere of expertise, the system that resulted over several years of consultation was one everyone agreed on.

As a result, the Rhinelanders mill installed a wastewater treatment facility to filter that water before it's dumped back into the river. Dozens of by-products and additives that were previously discharged into the river as waste are now marketed and sold as products. The Rhinelanders mill was also actively engaged in cleaning up legacy pollutants, a task that took many years to complete and is still ongoing in many respects.

Once the unregulated dumping of pollutants ended, the river largely healed itself by flushing contaminants downstream. By 1983, Wisconsin became one of the only states in the nation to meet the Clean Water Act's goal of fishable, swimmable waters.

Locally, we can thank the hard work of environmental stewards across Wisconsin who helped bring attention to

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these environmental issues. From John Muir and Aldo Leopold to Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin has produced some of the best spokesmen for environmental conservation in the nation. Today, cities across the Wisconsin River Valley enjoy not only clean water, but abundant fishing capabilities and recreational tourism in addition to the industries which employ so many local residents.

But the story doesn't end here. Rhinelanders' history of water quality issues lends itself to current conversations about a family of man-made chemicals called per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, better known as PFAS.

According to an article published in February 2021 by Wisconsin's Green Fire titled "PFAS - Forever Chemicals in Wisconsin," thousands of these chemicals have been used in a vast array of products since the 1950s and are found in everyday items like firefighting foam, carpeting, coated paper, nonstick cookware and a variety of food packaging.

When these compounds were developed, detailed studies testing their long-term environmental and human health effects were largely neglected. Emerging science has linked high-level PFAS exposure to the risk of some cancers, decreased vaccine response in children, changes in liver enzymes as well as fertility and pregnancy complications in women.

PFAS are called "forever chemicals" because of their ability to resist decomposition, persist in the environment and bioaccumulate in organisms up the food chain. In the last 15 years, PFAS have been found in groundwater, surface water and drinking water wells across Wisconsin.

In 2019, two Rhinelanders wells were taken offline when PFAS was discovered in municipal drinking water supplies. Even though these water samples showed PFAS levels well above Wisconsin's recommended standard of 20 parts per trillion, there are currently no nationwide standards. This means cities are not required to test for PFAS nor are there enforceable standards for maximum levels of PFAS contamination in drinking water supplies.

As a result of local PFAS testing and subsequent suspension of those wells, Mayor Chris Frederickson organized an independent, solutions-based citizen advisory group called Water Action Team Rhinelanders (WATR) whose mission is to empower the community through education about PFAS research. Every month, the group organizes educational forums about emerging research and potential solutions. Although there is no clear consensus as to how PFAS got into Rhinelanders' drinking water, the goal of WATR is to find solutions to the problem rather than pointing the proverbial finger.

It's important here not to underestimate the power of individual action. In a similar way citizen concern prompted federal legislation to clean up U.S. waterways decades ago, our community's ability to find solutions to combating PFAS starts with the average citizen. Residents concerned about PFAS issues can take pride in knowing that engaging in dialogue, becoming informed and taking note of these issues on a local, state and national level are all important aspects to finding a greater solution. To take part in the conversation, start by joining the Water Action Team Rhinelanders - WATR group on Facebook.

This installment was written with the help and expertise of Rhinelanders locals, conservationists and historians. Special thanks to Bob Martini and Tom Jerow, board members of Wisconsin's Green Fire; Kerry Bloedorn, Pioneer Park Historical Complex director; and Frederick Fisher, former member of the Rhinelanders papermill clean up crew, 1966.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series. Visit rivernews online.com to read previous installments.

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Reader Comments

Posted: Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Article comment by: **Richard Rollman**

Having grown up on the banks of the Wisconsin River south of Rhinelanders beginning in the 1950's, I can attest to the remarkable turn around and improvement in the water quality of the river. Dead and dying fish, malodorous smell, chunks of floating sludge, were the condition of the river back then. Now it is a popular float trip for kayakers, tubers, and fisherman. A remarkable achievement by all who contributed to it's recovery. Let's hope these lessons were well learned and we don't slip back into complacency.

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