

Guardians of the West Fork Watershed

April 2011



PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE

Lythrum salicaria L. (Lythraceae) this is another invasive species brought here to America unwittingly. It is of European origin and most likely got here initially as a contaminant from the water used as ship ballast. This weed was well established by the 1830's along the New England seaboard. It degrades the many wetlands that are found in North America. This degradation consists of reduced water flow, and choking out native species of plants. Purple loosestrife is faster growing and more competitive than our native wetland plants. Growing along rivers, streams, and even the early canals used to move supplies westward; loosestrife with no enemies has managed to cover all of our states with the exception of Florida. Nine provinces in Canada are also infested..

Purple loosestrife can reach a height of 4 to 6 feet. Leaves are 1 ½ to 5 inches long, with pink-purple flowers with five or six petals. Mature plants can develop a root heavier than 2.2 pounds, and can produce upwards to thirty annual shoots. These plants can bear more than 2.5 million seeds each yearly growing season. The millions of seeds are easily spread by wind, water, wildlife and humans. Seeds can lie dormant for several years before sprouting. It is sometimes spread by unsuspecting who admire loosestrifes tall purple boughs of blooms. Make no mistake this weed is a true wetland killer.

There are no native or accidentally introduced herbivores that can potentially control this plant. My guess is this weed tastes so bad that even goats will not eat it. Surveys for potential control agents and natural enemies were conducted in Europe, with some success. The selected insect species were the root-mining weevil, two leaf beetles, two more weevils and a gall midge. Of course no one knows the long-term results of bringing the European insects to America.

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GUARDIANS



Why are Marcellus executives so obstinate? By Thomas Bond, President of the Board of Directors

A recent article in the Oil and Gas Journal begins "Misrepresentation building in the eastern US threatens to limit a technology-based, multiple-location gas play that's reshaping energy markets in ways that benefit US interests such as national security, air quality, employment, and tax receipts. It's the allegation that drilling and completing wells in gas-bearing shales threaten subsurface supplies of drinking water. If not discredited, repeated falsehoods will coalesce into a political force able to stop the most promising development in generations for US energy supply."

My question is "Why can't the executives see the forest for the trees? The notion that waters on the surface and in aquifers do not get contaminated has been disproven over and over again. The "easily *imagined* menace" as the author of the article calls it, is a fact on the ground. There is a regular constellation of problems that occurs everywhere horizontal wells with hydraulic fracturing occur. It not only includes water contamination and damage to stream by moving too much water, but also air and noise pollution, large disturbed surface areas, rural roads crowded and destroyed, and demands on local services that the drilling companies do not pay for.

Wildlife on the West Fork River

Jeff Reichel

"Lions and Tigers and Bears, OH MY!" Dorothy might have met some of these creatures during her stroll down the yellow brick road, but had she canoed along the West Fork River, on her way to The Land of OZ, she might have said, "Muskrats and Turtles and Otters, OH BOY!".

During my eleven years canoeing on the West Fork River, I've seen many creatures. Never, have I been on the river and not seen some kind of aquatic wildlife that depended on the healthy fishery that is the West Fork. My main haunt is the stretch between the dam in West Milford and the bridge in Good Hope. This stretch of river is especially wide and deep and contains all of the components necessary to maintain an active and ample wildlife population.

My four favorites are the Common Snapping Turtle, River Otter, Soft Shell Turtle and Muskrat.



When seeking the Common Snapping Turtle, keep an eye out for some of the giants that live on the river. These animals are Omnivores, feeding on, both, plants and animals. The snapping turtle is an aquatic scavenger, feeding on leafy vegetation, fish, frogs, reptiles and the occasional baby duck. They can get up to 20" long and weigh between 10 and 35 pounds.

They are most commonly spotted basking on floating logs or suspended just below the surface, using their long neck and nostrils as a snorkel. These turtles are a bold and aggressive hunter that will actually strike at it's prey. Their massive jaws are sharp and powerful.

Older snapping turtles can be identified by their smoother shell. The younger turtles have three rows of spines that run front to back along the shell. All can be found partially imbedded in the river mud, waiting for a meal to come close.



Musk rats are very common along my stretch of the river. I can sit on the porch and watch them swim along the river's edge with a mouthful of reeds. Their homes can be found in a deep burrow located on a steep section of river bank. The burrow is always above the water line and connected to an exit tunnel that enters the river below water level.

Their shiny brown fur has a silvery, dense undercoat that makes the pelts valuable to clothing makers. Musk rats have a body that can grow to a length of 10" to 14", adding another 8" to 10" for the tail. Average weight is 2 to 3 pounds.

Musk rats are solitary creatures, but in large numbers can become a serious pest. Their long, underwater tunnels can undermine a river bank. Sometimes they will build a dome shaped home, made with local vegetation.

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The cure may be worse than the loosestrife. Approval to introduce the flower-feeding weevil was granted in 1994 in New York and Minnesota. It is hoped that the impact of the biological control agents will reduce loosestrife by as much as 80 per cent much as 80 per cent.

The other control options consist mainly of manual removal or the use of chemical herbicides. The use of chemical herbicides has the risk of contamination into our water ways.

The manual uprooting and removal of all vegetative parts would eliminate purple loosestrife. The problem with this idea is that this hated weed has spread so extensively, there isn't enough available manpower for the complete eradication. Controlling the spread of purple loosestrife is crucial to protecting vital fish, wildlife and native plant habitat. The best time to control loosestrife is when it is in its flower stage before the seeds are mature.

Possibly the only good thing about purple loosestrife is it can be used as a medicinal herb for treatment of diarrhea, dysentery, bleeding, wounds, ulcers and sores.

Jim Nedrow

The executives don't seem to realize truth comes upward from observations, rather than down from lofty heights by decree. Their plans included excluding oil and gas drilling from the Safe Drinking Water Act, The Clean Water Act and the Brownfields Act by the 2005 Energy Act. What is the Brownfields Act? It is the law that makes an industry responsible for cleaning up after it has made a pollution mess. The Vice-President, Dick Chaney, once a Halliburton executive, was the leader in writing and getting that law passed. There is probably no better indicator that the industry knew what it was putting on the public than these provisions of the energy bill.

New York City has prevented Chesapeake from drilling in the watershed that provides its drinking water. New York State has postponed Marcellus-type drilling until it can be further investigated. EPA is taking a leisurely two years while the industry grows explosively) to make its evaluation.

The financiers and the drillers have their eye on the ball, the wealth ball. They are splashing money around to influence opinion and local power leaders, not least among them politicians. In Pennsylvania, they caught a big one! Governor Tom Ridge has a second job: as a consultant to the Marcellus drilling industry. His repetition of the litany "Science has to drive the conversation" is heard over and over. Of course, the only "science" they are interested in is the "science" paid for by the industry, which is hardly likely to find fault, environmental, or other kind, with the executive's goal.

The goal is not to "help America." Capital investment is allowed in from elsewhere, notably China, India and Norway, which will hasten the project but take away a chunk of the profit, and plans are underway to ship out quantities of gas in liquid form to other nations. Marcellus drilling has put a very low cap on the price of gas so other conventional drillers have lost out. The only real plan is to make the financiers and the drilling executives wealthy. Any other consideration has to be stepped on.

We need appropriate legislation to make companies responsible for what they do. We need regulation to assure maximum recovery of the resource. We need regulation to assure people living in the area are protected. And, most of all, we need regulation to prevent damage to the surface resources in the drilling area.



My first Soft Shell Turtle sighting was a real surprise. I thought I was sneaking up on a snapping turtle that was sunning itself on the low, slope of the river bank. As I got closer, I was surprised to see a long, "snake like" neck and pointed nose.

They are called soft shell because their carapace does not contain the horny scales found on other turtles. The shell is leathery and pliable, especially at the edges. Female Soft Shell Turtles can get to be several feet in diameter, while the male remains much smaller. In both, their necks are disproportionately long in comparison to their body size. This allows them to hunt, remaining suspended, up to a foot below the water surface and still breathe.

Soft Shells are mostly carnivorous, feeding on fish, crayfish and snails. Their color is a pale, medium brown. Like the Common Snapping Turtle, they, too, utilize their long necks and powerful jaws to strike out at their prey. Many a four-fingered man can tell stories of the speed, sharpness and flexibility of the Soft Shell's extremely long neck.

Of all the creatures I've seen during my time living on the West Fork River, including the Great Blue Heron, Osprey nest and occasional swimming squirrel, the most incredible sighting was that of the River Otters. On two, separate occasions, I spied three large, River Otters playfully swimming along the opposite bank of the river.



River Otters are an amazing creature. They mate for life and, in the late summer and early fall, can be seen swimming in family groupings. The average life span is 8 to 10 years. The head and body can grow up to 31" long, adding 12" to 20" more for the powerful tail.

They hunt mainly at night and will eat whatever is available. Their favorite foods are small turtles, fish, frogs and crayfish. Otters are a member of the weasel family and live in burrows dug into the river bank. Burrows are connected to the river with a number of tunnels that exit above water level.

A long, mud, slide can be seen leading from the tunnel entrance, into the water. Once in the water, an Otter can hold it's breath for up to 8 minutes. They swim by flexing their tail and long body, and will remain active year round, even in the winter.

Unfortunately, the River Otter is especially sensitive to habitat loss and water pollution. Their North American range is somewhat reduced, but we can be considered lucky to have a population of Otters on the West Fork River.



As I mentioned earlier, all of this wildlife exists because the West Fork River is wide and deep, with a healthy and diverse abundance of aquatic life. If the dams are destroyed, my four, favorite wildlife will be gone forever. If Dorothy returns after the dams are removed, she might say, "Mollusks, Mussels and Mud, OH NO!".

Get out on the river and enjoy what Nature is providing, before it's gone. You will be amazed. I know I am, every time I venture out.

Some of the photos used are for reference only and were not taken on the West Fork.

A Flawed Environmental Impact Statement on Dam Removal

We local people realize that removal of our West Fork dams will cause serious problems. However, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a part of the United States Department of Agriculture, there will be "No Significant Impact" from removal of the West Fork Dams. That's the conclusion of their Final Impact Assessment issued late last year.

The fact that this conclusion is based on mistakes, misstatements, ignorance, and bogus science seems to be completely irrelevant to our government servants at NRCS. They issued a preliminary draft of their Impact Statement last summer. The Guardians group was shocked with the errors, omissions, sloppy work and poor science in this preliminary document.

Members of the Guardian's Board responded with a 15 page single-spaced reply of our concerns and corrected scores of errors and omissions. The NRCS simply ignored the vast majority of our comments—and those of other responders as well. They proceeded to issue a Final Impact Statement that corrected just a few errors and left the bulk of the dubious document intact.

The main justification NRCS has for squandering federal money on dam removal is the belief that getting rid of the dams MIGHT benefit a few species of mussel. Supposedly, the dams have caused a decline in the variety of mussels over the past century. The fact that a dam has existed at West Milford for nearly 200 years, and thus 100 years before the supposed mussel decline, seems to have been ignored. The massive environmental damage, from decades of unregulated coal mining in the West Fork watershed, is not even considered as a possible cause of mussel species decline. Even more disturbing, there has been no recent scientific survey of the river to even determine what species of mussels are now present. The last mussel survey they use as evidence of mussel decline was taken at the old V.A. bridge shortly before its removal. The massive duck population at this location probably guaranteed a scarcity of mussel varieties since ducks are quite fond of eating young mussels. We can't be sure that dam removal will actually benefit more mussels than will be destroyed.

There was no economic benefit-cost analysis in this document. There was no consideration at all given to a loss of swimming opportunities. No consideration was given to the West Milford Dam as an important historic structure dating back to 1817. There was no acknowledgement of any net loss of fishing or boating activities. No provisions are made for cleaning up the trash and debris that have been thrown into the river for nearly 200 years. No study was made of the sediment accumulation except within the immediate proximity of the dams. No thought was given to any effect on agriculture. The list goes on. It took 15 pages for us to document their errors and NRCS simply ignored most all of our comments.

Back when the Guardians were actively seeking to take over ownership of the Dams, we looked into the cost of liability insurance. We were given a price by a local agency of less than \$3000 a year for the first million in coverage for all the dams together. In order to somehow justify spending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars for dam removal NRCS vastly inflates this insurance cost and claims that the Clarksburg Water Board is paying \$137,000 per year for liability insurance on these dams. The Water Board may spend this much to insure all its entire operations but certainly not for just the dams. When this wildly inflated insurance cost appeared in the initial draft of the impact statement, it could have been a simple mistake. However, for the same inflated figure to be retained and used in the final document, even after we advised NRCS of the error, this is inexcusable.

The impact document is so deficient, so inaccurate, and so inadequate that it probably cannot withstand judicial challenge. The federal agencies pushing Dam Removal, which include NRCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service, have been able to scrape up the money for removal of our dams. However, the approval for this funding was based on a seriously and perhaps intentionally flawed assessment.

The Guardians group has submitted further written comments to the latest Statement and finding of No Significant Impact. We pointed out all the uncorrected errors and weakness of the original assessment which were not addressed or corrected in the final document and commented on further matters which have been the grounds for successful litigation in a challenge to impact statements in situations similar to ours.

For example, no consideration has been given to the cumulative impact of the continuing loss of aquatic recreational facilities in southern Harrison County. It was just a few years ago that the public lost Buffalo Lake. Now, for all practical purposes we are about to lose three additional "lakes" with the draining of the deep water pools behind the dams. The loss of just one of these sites may not be highly significant, but cumulative loss is a serious blow to the community. This failure to address "Cumulative Impact" has resulted in court losses for government agencies in similar cases. The document is very weak in many respects and extremely vulnerable to court challenge.

Perhaps we should lobby congress to cut back funding for the NRCS. Congress is looking for ways to cut spending. NRCS is mostly devoted to handing out subsidies for farmers. I'm a farmer, and I know first-hand that there is a lot of waste in this agency. Surely, with all the pressing needs in this country, our government can find better ways to spend money

Successful challenge of the Impact Statement only means they will have to do it over again. That can delay removal, but does not insure preservation of the dams. For that to happen, we must find or form an organization committed to preserve the dams.

The Guardians group is committed to preserving the West Fork dams and is willing to contribute financially. However, our organization may not have the resources to take over ownership. The people who value these dams and benefit from their continued existence may have to form a separate organization specifically to own and maintain them.

The expenses would not be insurmountable and would probably average between five thousand and ten thousand dollars a year. I have done some preliminary work toward formation of a waterfront association but have been sidetracked lately. There are 400 different parcels of property along the portions of the river that will be affected by dam removal. A few thousand dollars a year can save these dams. Help or suggestions will be appreciated.

By: John Stenger

Congratulation to Peggy Sue Miller and family



Dylan and Dmitry

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Mark your Calendars

Monthly Meetings

Meetings are held the third Tuesdays of the month, 6:30 p.m., at the Nutter Fort emergency services (911) building, about 200 feet south of the Joyce St./Rt. 98 intersection, on the right.

April 19, 2011

May 17, 2011 (Board Mtg)

June 21, 2011

July 19, 2011

The Guardians alternate general meetings with speakers and refreshments and board meetings where business is discussed. Feel free to attend any meeting and also bring interested friends and family.

To Join and Receive this Newsletter ...

If you would like to join and receive a mailed copy of our quarterly newsletter, you can join Guardians of the West Fork Watershed for \$5.00 per calendar year (or at a voluntary, higher level). Send your membership check and address information to Elaine Lucente, membership coordinator, (Her address can be found on the Officers and Board Members page.), or simply join during one of our monthly meetings. To receive a free e-mail copy of the quarterly newsletter, please e-mail John Eleyette, at JMELEYETTE@rocketmail.com
GWWF MISSION STATEMENT

Guardians of the West Fork Watershed is a volunteer 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the preservation and improvement of the ecological integrity of the West Fork River, its tributaries, and its watershed. It will monitor and assist agencies in monitoring the biological, physical, chemical and cultural characteristics of the watershed to identify sources of degradation and suggest their elimination. It will publicize the status of the watershed and encourage education and recreational enjoyment of the watershed. It will seek wide membership and outside funding to support its activities.