



It's been 50 years since the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, and the Pine Knot News is continuing a series of environmental stories this month.



The St. Louis River rushes during the spring thaw this month near Thomson. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

A river's revival

St. Louis River tells a tale of ecology

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If there's one lesson to be learned from the history of the St. Louis River it's this: Let us not be complacent.

That Earth Day message comes from Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College Environmental Institute director Courtney Kowalczak, who has also served as the coordinator of the St. Louis River River Watch Program, which engages students in water sampling of the river.

Kowalczak recalls a day not long ago when the river was an industrial dumping ground.

"With the St. Louis River the mentality was you just dumped everything into the river and it was out of sight, out of mind," she said.

Indeed, by the mid-20th century, the lower Saint Louis River became one of the most heavily polluted waterways in the state. In his 1941 book, "Paddle-to-

the-sea," Holling Clancy Holling illustrated the state of the river, and it was a ghastly image revealing layers of pollution floating on the water and rotting fish.

The harsh reality, exacerbated over the years, finally led the river to become an Environmental Protection Agency Area of Concern in the early 1970s.

"In the early 1970s the St. Louis River, before the Clean Water Act was passed, was in really bad shape," Kowalczak said. "The legacy from decades of lumber processing and industry dumping became

far too evident to ignore." Kowalczak recalls the scene, noting diseased fish and signs warning people to not go into the water — an image she never wants her students to forget.

"I remind my students of this so they never let it go back to what it was," she said. "There is some really good news on the progress. What I like to talk about with students is we have come a long, long way since the '70s. I tell them I moved to this area in the mid-80s and Canal Park was still pretty much filled with industry right

there on the shores of Lake Superior. There are pictures from the '60s where there are busted up cars on the beaches in Canal Park.

"I like to tell that story because it says if enough people care, you can make a difference and a change. But it is also a cautionary

tale. We have been working on this for many years and we are still working. Let's not mess it up in the first place. There are some things lost that will never come back, but let's do what we can."

In an effort to "do what we can," the Western Lake

Superior Sanitary District (WLSSD) was established in 1971 to address serious pollution problems in the lower Saint Louis River basin. WLSSD's regional wastewater treatment plant began operating in 1978.

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Photographer Mark Cline captured these pelicans on the St. Louis River last spring near the Fond du Lac neighborhood in Duluth.

River ...

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Within two years, fish populations rebounded and recreational fishing began returning to the river.

“The Clean Water Act went a long way to improve the river as well,” Kowalczyk said. “There was a lot of pressure put on the state to make rivers clean enough for citizens to fish and recreate. Within a couple years of that coming in, the water quality improved. There were no longer signs warning of toxic waters.”

She noted there was a lot of cleanup that had to happen in the Cloquet area as well, as industries were restricted on what

they could dump into the river. Upstream towns could no longer dump their sewage into the river. All of these measures, she said, went a long way to turning the status around.

Today the river is still listed as an Area of Concern, but great progress has been made, Kowalczyk said.

“We were charged with cleaning up a lot of legacy dumping. With all the efforts that have been put in, we are seeing results. Wildlife is back and the fish are safe to eat.”

To continue the efforts, the St. Louis River Watch Program has engaged students to monitor the health of the river.

Kowalczyk was the coordinator from 2003 until 2007, when funding lapsed. At that time

31 schools participated in the program. In 2011 the program relaunched and today 15 schools participate.

“It’s a great program because it gets kids outside to appreciate nature firsthand,” Kowalczyk said. “It is good learning in experiential-type situations. We have some really dedicated teachers who have kept the programs going and the kids appreciate being part of a positive change.”

She noted the students sample the water in much the same way researchers would do. They take chemical and biological samples. They will look at what nutrients are in the water. They also test for the pH values. They take all of those things and then measure discharge and shore land vegetation and do habitat assessment.

They look at water clarity. They take the temperatures.

“They take nets and scoop up macroinvertebrates because that is a great way to gauge the health of a stream,” she explained. “There are some that need really clean water so that indicates what is living on the bottom of the stream. There are some that are very tolerant to bad conditions. The students sort and identify these into groups. By sorting them and using simple mathematical equations, you can gauge the health of the water quality.”

While the river was featured in American Rivers’ “America’s Most Endangered Rivers” in 2015 because of mining pressures at the headwaters, Kowalczyk has great hope for its future.

“As we get our kids near the

shores and in the water, they have that sense of love and stewardship,” she said. “They will speak out.”

It is worth noting, she reminds us, the St. Louis River bordering Minnesota and Wisconsin is an important source of water for the Great Lakes, which as a whole is the largest body of freshwater on Earth. The lakes hold about 95 percent of the surface freshwater in the U.S., and more than 26 million people rely on them for drinking water.

“I go back to reminding students of what the shores used to be, as a cautionary tale,” Kowalczyk said. “We remind them that the progress we see today is because people cared. We engage them so they, too, will care well into the future.”

Kits will help you create a pollinator-friendly habitat

Every year, there seems to be more and more buzz about bees, butterflies, and pollinators. More information seems to come out about their benefits, pesticide alternatives for your plants, or the “top 5” things you can do to encourage more visits to your flower or vegetable garden.

Great as it is to have an abundance of resources, it can turn into quite the task to sift through and turn it into

action. It’s understandable that for many, the process of picking out plants that are well-suited for their yard, meet their tastes, and can provide the best offerings for pollinators can be tasking. All the more, there’s a lot to consider around long term maintenance like annual replanting or perennial thinning and deciding on hybrids and heirlooms.

Now there is a remedy to all this. The Carlton SWCD, in partnership with Oldenburg Arts and Cultural Community and Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, is unveiling its first native plant kit sale. The kits contain all the best species for our

region for a bounty of colors while offering the best benefit to our pollinators.

We have seven kits available with plants for differing focuses: monarchs, songbirds, pollinators,

shade, rain gardens, deer resistance, and under pine trees. The kits all contain 36 plugs of 7 plant species to cover an area of 150 square feet, all for \$60.

The plants are supplied from Minnesota Native Landscapes, which helped us ensure that the kits are designed to be easy to plant, the plants easy to maintain, and provide a mix of colors and plant heights for best aesthetics and function for wildlife.

Orders are being taken now until June 5. Curbside pickup is scheduled for 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. June 19. We will be following social distancing guidelines for everyone’s safety. Visit our website for ordering at www.carltonswcd.org or call 218-384-3891.

Back when the state unveiled the Lawns to Legumes program and provided funding toward habitat for the endangered rusty patch bumblebee,

conversations between the Oldenburg and our office were sparked. We wondered what else could be done to further pollinator prosperity in the area. What came into sight was the goal to make Carlton County the first pollinator corridor in the state.

This corridor aims to provide a network of pollinator habitat through voluntary plantings by residents and private businesses, supported by the partnership of our office with Oldenburg and the Xerces Society.

The idea is to connect dispersed interests in pollinator conservation toward a collaborative effort boosting the overall impact. Not only does this look to expand planting sites but also seeks to record current established plots. If you host a pollinator garden, let us know. If you are interested in sponsoring or hosting a garden — whether as a resident, private business, developer — reach out.

All inquiries regarding the pollinator corridor effort can be directed either to alyssa.Alness@carltonswcd.org (218-384-3891) or Emily Fuerste Swanson at emily@oacc.us (763-226-6828).

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