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NewsStreams

Because Clean Water Can't Wait - Fall 2023



NewsStreams

Fall 2023

P R O T E C T
R E S T O R E
C E L E B R A T E



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A Message From Michael Washburn

Executive Director, Kentucky Waterways Alliance

Dear Friends,

One of the great pleasures of working at KWA is the way in which people respond to us and our work: Kentuckians' response to KWA is more like a light switch than a spectrum. Folks either support us or they haven't heard of us. This has much to do with our focus. Find someone who doesn't approve of clean water, and you'll know who to keep your distance from.

But the more important part of it is this: Kentuckians retain clarity of vision about how the world should look despite the shifting environmental and ecological odds that we so often seem up against. This kind of engagement is required of us: pragmatic, with the knowledge that restoration tomorrow starts with preservation today.

And what a series of "todays" we have seen in 2023. In the Ohio River, which is discussed later in this publication, we've contended with the East Palestine railroad disaster and the designation of the river as the second most endangered in the nation. The devastating floods that rampaged through eastern Kentucky a year ago found their sequel in western Kentucky this year. On a national level, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Sackett vs. EPA puts Kentucky's 90,000 miles of waterways at risk because our wetlands are no longer protected by the Clean Water Act.

But it has also been a year of accomplishment - for KWA and our state. With leadership from KWA and partners, the Ohio River is, more than ever, a state, a regional and national focal point. KWA secured funding to expand our education, outreach, and septic work in Eastern Kentucky. We have convened our first annual Watershed Network summit. We secured funding for seed grants that we will award to watershed groups around the state, and we removed a dam in Hardin County. And we pulled hundreds of pounds of trash out of waters.

There are a boatload of additional accomplishments, but I want to stress that this work was accomplished during a year of transition for KWA. We have finalized a new strategic plan, which emphasizes issues of equity and justice while also redoubling our commitment to working substantively in all of Kentucky's seven major river basins. Not bad for a 30th anniversary year.

As we near the end of the year KWA and many other worthy organizations are asking for your annual financial support. You'll see our request for support in this newsletter and delivered to your mailbox. This is essential. But also, might I ask you to do your part to turn on that KWA light switch? Please share this newsletter or one of our emails with someone who might not be aware of us. It's going to take a wellspring of support across this state to ensure that our waterways are protected for the communities and wildlife that depend on them.

Let's keep moving forward.



Inaugural Kentucky Watershed Network Collaborative Summit was a Splash!

By Laura Gregory

On November 2 and 3, KWA hosted the Inaugural Kentucky Watershed Network (KWN) Collaborative Summit at Lost River Cave in Bowling Green. The event was a huge success, with attendance reaching the maximum 70-person capacity. The Summit created an opportunity for KWN to come together with the purpose of increasing our collective impact on improving

water quality throughout Kentucky. The Summit provided valuable networking opportunities while establishing priorities and resources. KWA announced our upcoming seed grant program – request for proposals and applications will be available in January 2024.

Highlights of the event were the Successful Community Project Collaboration Panel, site visits, and wonderful speakers including Jordan Lubetkin, the National Wildlife Federation's Director, Ohio River Restoration. Watershed leaders shared success stories, lessons learned, and funding opportunities. Breakout groups dove deeper into topics like project collaboration, advocacy and activism, forming a watershed group, broadening diversity, and the Community Education & Action for Clean Water Playbook.

Thank you to all the watershed stewards who were able to attend and contribute to the Summit. You are what makes KWN a success. Want to learn more or stay up to date about KWN? Join the KWN email list by contacting KWA's Watershed Program Director, laura@kwalliance.org.



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KWA and Partners Form an Ohio River Coalition

By Michael Washburn



Photo: Susan Griffin Ward

Any discussion of Kentucky's waterways must include the Ohio River. Ninety-seven percent of the water in the Commonwealth drains into the Ohio River. Similarly, you can't talk about the histories, economies, and cultures of the United States without highlighting the impact that the Ohio has had, and that it continues to have, on our nation. The Ohio River Basin includes all or part of 14 states and spans more than 200,000 square miles. It provides drinking water to over five million people, nurtures diverse ecosystems, and underpins our cultural and economic identity. Yet, the Ohio River has long been neglected. The Ohio, along with its tributaries, faces a multitude of challenges, from

sewage overflows and toxic pollution to habitat loss and the looming specter of climate change.

Over the past several years, KWA has been working in collaboration with a group of regional and national partners, such as the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the Ohio River Basin Alliance (ORBA), and the Ohio River Way (ORW), on a plan to restore and safeguard the 14-state Ohio River Basin.

As we have stated in these pages before, our objective is to present a comprehensive plan to the U.S. Congress and the Biden Administration. This plan will seek federal investments to support on-the-ground restoration efforts in the region, similar to successful programs in the Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, Delaware River, and other major water bodies. While other waterways receive substantial annual appropriations for restoration, the Ohio River Basin lacks a dedicated program for federal restoration investments.

This year has been a pivotal year for the Ohio River. 2023 saw the East Palestine derailment and the designation of the Ohio as the second most endangered river, to name only the most highly visible developments.

Steps forward to a healthier river have also been taken this year. KWA and our partners finalized



Photo - Ted Wathen

a report from the community listening sessions. This report details, with force and concision, what our communities desire when it comes to the restoration of the Ohio.

Earlier this fall, KWA partnered with the NWF to host the first meeting of an advocacy coalition that will work with communities to see that the Restoration Plan will have broad community support when it is unveiled. Meeting over two days in Louisville, advocates from forty-one organizations held the first gathering of what will surely become a regional powerhouse for waterways restoration and protection.

In September, KWA and the NWF also hosted a Congressional Restoration Tour. A cross-sector group of 70 toured several sites in Kentucky, which demonstrated best management practices on such issues as wetland management and restoration; stormwater management; agricultural runoff, and other topics. The tour illustrated the great work being done in Kentucky, and that with a broad, federally funded plan for the Ohio River Basin, a successful restoration is possible.

Time is of the essence. Recent events, such as the historic flooding in Eastern Kentucky and Appalachia, underscore the critical need for action. Furthermore, clean water protections are under threat, making our project even more vital. The Kentucky Waterways Alliance and its partners are committed to making this restoration plan a reality, but we need a unified effort from the Ohio River Basin community to secure the necessary Congressional funding.

Together, we can make a profound difference for the Ohio River and the countless individuals who rely on it for clean water, public health, employment, and their way of life.



Photo: Holly Gallager

Federal support for an Ohio River Basin restoration plan, driven by science and community input, will:

- 1 Restore wetlands and wildlife habitats to ensure clean water and promote outdoor recreation.
- 2 Support farm conservation to enhance soil and water health while reducing toxic algal blooms.
- 3 Remove old, unsafe dams to increase fish habitat and create safe recreational opportunities.
- 4 Update drinking water and wastewater infrastructure to safeguard public health and ensure water affordability.
- 5 Implement reforestation, wetland restoration, and nature-based solutions to mitigate flooding and pollution.
- 6 Address toxic pollution to protect public health.
- 7 Invest in workforce development and job training to boost local economies and support workers.

Funding KWA's Mission to Protect and Restore

By Susan Griffin Ward

KWA is excited to announce that we have received the following grant awards in support of our mission to protect and restore our waterways. Thank you to these funders for supporting KWA's mission.

Patagonia Wholesale Grant supported by Quest Outdoors



KWA has been awarded a Patagonia Wholesale Grant for general operating support. This grant was approved by Patagonia's employees review council following a nomination by Quest Outdoors. We are grateful for the support of the good people at Quest Outdoors, a locally owned Kentucky business, and the commitment of Patagonia to organizations like KWA.



Ohio River

Mosaic Grant



Mosaic is an initiative that invests in supporting people working for clean air and water, a safe climate, healthy and just communities for all, and thriving natural systems. Mosaic has provided funding to KWA to assist in the creation of an Ohio River Coalition to incorporate, and advocate for, community-inspired clean water priorities into the regional restoration and protection plan.

EPA 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution Management Program Education & Outreach Grant from Kentucky Division of Water



This funding will help KWA develop the Kentucky Watershed Network to provide technical training and support on nonpoint source pollution issues to communities in all seven major river basins. These funds will enable KWA to offer seed grants for water quality improvement projects to support the work of watershed groups across the state! Seed grant applications will be available in January 2024. At least one project will be awarded for each of the seven major river basins in Kentucky for up to \$4,000 per project.

River Network Wild & Scenic Stewardship Partnership Grant



Funds granted from River Network and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) will support our work with Red River watershed groups, allowing KWA to continue cleanups in the USFS area, and complete the Upper Red Cleanup mini documentary.



Red River



Red River

Photos: Susan Griffin Ward

EPA 319 Red Bird River Septic & Education Implementation Project



KWA will manage the newly (re)funded Red Bird River Septic & Education Project in Leslie and Clay Counties, enabling the third phase of the Red Bird River Watershed Plan to be implemented. We will use this funding to support a local watershed coordinator, provide educational opportunities for residents of the counties, and install approximately 13 septic systems to improve impaired water quality.

Kentucky Association for Mitigation Managers Community Mitigation Grant



This Grant will fund operating costs for community cleanups, educational events, and septic work that will soon take place in the Red Bird River Watershed in Leslie and Clay Counties.

Successful KWA and KARF Restoration Projects

By Susan Griffin Ward

Kentucky Waterways Alliance (KWA) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service have been working together for 15 years to restore habitats, and conserve and recover threatened and endangered aquatic species through the Kentucky Aquatic Resources Fund (KARF). Two exciting successes to note this year are the reclassification of the relict darter and a dam removal.

The Relict Darter: No Longer Endangered!

The relict darter, a species found only in the Bayou de Chien stream system in western Kentucky, has been reclassified from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). While this means the relict darter is less at risk of extinction, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also implementing a 4(d) rule that continues to provide protections for the species.



Photo: Dr. Matthew Thomas

It was listed as endangered in 1993 due to habitat deterioration, water pollution, and siltation caused by stream channelization and poor land use practices. Since that time, the Service has worked to recover the darter with multiple agencies and

private partners, including KWA through our management of KARF, as well as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Southeastern Louisiana University, and the Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves.

KWA Removes Brushy Creek Weir Dam

Sometimes it is good to destroy things, especially if it is a dam that is dangerous, no longer needed, and impairs a stream! This KWA led stream restoration project, funded by KARF and managed by KWA, removed a dam on Brushy Creek, a stream that flows into Otter Creek in the Salt River Basin. Built in the 1930's, this dam has not been utilized since 1990 when Vine Grove, Kentucky, began to purchase water from Hardin District No.1. KWA supports removal of dams wherever feasible because they impound



Before removal



During removal



After restoration

water and alter the flow of the river, resulting in many negative effects. Weir dams damage local ecology and are dangerous for people using streams recreationally. Weirs can impede the movement of fish and other animals up and down a river, reduce the water oxygen content and smother invertebrate habitat and fish spawning sites, and can be extremely dangerous places to boat, swim, or wade, as the circulation patterns on the downstream side can cause drowning.

Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of KWA

By Susan Griffin Ward

We celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Kentucky Waterways Alliance with an unforgettable evening of friends, music, film, food, and art! The evening was generously presented by Owsley Brown II Family Foundation and made possible by our wonderful sponsors. Joan Shelley, a longtime friend of KWA, assembled an incredible honkytonk band and invited Will Oldham, AKA Bonnie Prince Billy, to perform as a guest vocalist. Other highlights included a screening of our 15th annual Wild and Scenic Film Festival, an installation by artist Al Gorman, and guests enthusiastically joining in the water line dance! KWA was able to hold this special anniversary celebration



because our members and community partners have joined us over three decades to advocate for clean water. This gathering offered a chance to reflect on and celebrate what we have accomplished together, so that we can continue the work that remains. Thank you to everyone who made the sold out 30th Anniversary Celebration so incredible.

Clockwise from top: Attendees at Waterfront Botanical Gardens celebrating KWA's 30 years, Will Oldham, Joan Shelley, U.S. Representative Morgan McGarvey



Photos: John Nation



Restoring the Red Bird River

by Laura Gregory



This winter KWA will begin managing the Red Bird River Septic & Education Project. This project was previously run by the U.S. Forest Service and Daniel Boone National Forest, as part of a watershed plan completed in 2016 by Kentucky Waterways Alliance, with the help of many community partners and stakeholders. This funding will allow KWA to employ a local Red Bird River Watershed Coordinator whose responsibilities will include overseeing the repair or replacement of 13 septic systems and providing educational opportunities for residents of the counties.

The Red Bird River, named for Cherokee Chief Red Bird, rises as Red Bird Creek in northeastern

Bell County, becoming the Red Bird River in Clay County, forming the boundary between Clay and Leslie counties. Eventually the Redbird comes to a confluence with Goose Creek and Bullskin Creek to form the South Fork of the Kentucky River. The Redbird is 34.3 miles long and drains an area of 195.7 square miles.

The geography of the Red Bird River Watershed (RBRW) adds to the beauty of the area, but also contributes to the current water quality issues. The RBRW is remote; the landscape consists of steep slopes and narrow valley bottoms. Many of the residents have settled close to waterways because floodplains offer most of the flat areas conducive to home construction. Research shows the lack of municipal sewers and absent or failing onsite wastewater disposal systems contribute to



Photos: Dr. Claudia Cotton

poor water quality issues, resulting in a higher incidence of stomach illnesses and dental problems for the people who rely on this water.

For years the entire Red Bird River has been listed as an impaired waterway because it has too much fecal coliform. After years of implementing KWA's watershed plan through education, outreach and septic system improvements, new water quality data led the Kentucky Division of Water to propose delisting a 15-mile segment of Red Bird River for primary contact recreation due to reduced e.Coli impairments in 2022. This is good news for people who want to use the river for recreation, as well as for three species that live in the Red Bird River watershed that are considered at risk under the Endangered Species Act: the threatened Kentucky Arrow Darter, the endangered Snuffbox (a freshwater mussel), and the Gray Bat.

KWA is excited to continue working with our community partners with the hope that eventually the entire Red Bird River will be fully restored to water that is drinkable, swimmable, and fishable.

