

Opinion

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We need to continue the Delaware River renaissance



Your Turn
 Gerald McAdams Kauffman
 Guest columnist

Although the 47th anniversary of the 1972 Federal Clean Water Act occurred in October, the cleanup of the Delaware River began more than 70 years ago with the U.S. Navy in charge after World War II.

The Delaware and Schuylkill were so polluted in the years after the war that when the British battleship HMS Nelson docked at the Philadelphia Navy Yard for repairs after being damaged during the D-Day invasion of Europe in 1944, a new paint job turned dark from the polluted river fumes. British officers were given extra allowances to replace gold braid tarnished by poisonous sulfide gasses.

Silver change left on Admiral Milo F. Draemel's dresser at the Navy Yard turned black from the corrosive river vapors.

The July 9, 1949 Saturday Evening Post reported that Pennsylvania Gov. James H. Duff put Draemel in charge of cleaning up the rivers.

He launched a river revival that continued with John F. Kennedy's 100-year Delaware River Basin Commission Compact in 1961, Federal Clean Water Act Amendments in 1972, and approval of the Delaware Estuary Program by Congress and the governors of Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania in 1988.

During the 1960s, a first-of-its-kind economic analysis by the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration concluded a multi-million dollar pollution abatement program would generate \$350 million in annual benefits by improving oxygen levels to fishable standards in the Delaware River.

A century-long water quality record reconstructed in 2010 by University of Delaware oceanographer Jonathan Sharp found the Delaware has made one of the most extensive recoveries of any estuary in the world. Dissolved oxygen (the fishable water quality standard) dropped to zero during the 1960s and improved to 4 parts per million after the turn of the century.

The river revival continues with historic multi-million-dollar investments by Philadelphia's William Penn Foundation in the 21st Century and appropriations from the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act of 2015 co-sponsored by 8 Democratic and 10 Republican members of Congress.

Fishing, boating, waterfront living and commerce are returning to the river from Trenton to Delaware, and this has brought a renaissance and an economic boost to the region.

Research published this year by the University of Delaware concludes that continued investment to improve water quality to a year-round fishable standard for sensitive fish such as the American shad, Atlantic sturgeon and striped bass results in over \$1 billion in annual economic benefits to the Delaware Valley.

Improved water quality brings in 5 million more recreational boating trips with boat sales to the Delaware, an economic benefit to the tune of \$300 million.

Clean water brings in over 4 million more recreational fishing trips and anglers who buy fishing equipment at sporting goods stores at \$75 per day with \$200 million in sales.

When surveyed, the 6.5 million residents in the watershed indicate they value water clean enough to pay \$120 million annually for clean water to boat on and fish in.

A cleaner environment brings in 900,000 bird watchers who spend \$33 million annually in the river basin.

With clean water, Waterfront property sales on 35,000 shoreline acres gain \$30 million in value per year.

Savings in reduced water treatment costs because cleaner water is coming from the river and streams saves a total of \$25 million annually.

Commercial fishing of blue crab and oysters down the estuary and striped bass increase by \$24 million as the cleaner water draws more fish and shellfish.

Better farm practices upstream such as using cover crops reduces soil erosion from 1.9 million acres of farmland in the watershed and decreases river dredging costs for port navigation by \$25 million per year.

This analysis of a billion dollars of clean water benefits along the Delaware River does not include the property tax increase from the waterfront building uptick going on from Claymont to Wilmington, New Castle, Delaware City. If counted, it would add millions of dollars more in annual economic benefits.

The Delaware River cleanup contributes considerable cultural, ecological and economic benefits to the tristate Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey region. But more work is needed to achieve the fishable, swimmable and potable goals of the Clean Water Act and reverse the effects of unchecked river dumping dating back to the Industrial Revolution.

It's time to redouble efforts to fight water pollution and to keep it on track, perhaps put the Navy back in command of the Delaware River.

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