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Delaware Estuary needs renewed focus, protection

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Recent news about climate change and rising sea levels from the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary and Rep. Mike Castle's proposed Delaware River Basin Conservation Act highlight the need to protect the river that has been the region's life source for 400 years. In 1968, Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior who advised JFK on the DRBC compact declared: "Only the Delaware among the nation's river basins is moving into high gear in its program to combat water pollution."

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Recent news about climate change and rising sea levels from the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary and Rep. Mike Castle's proposed Delaware River Basin Conservation Act highlight the need to protect the river that has been the region's life source for 400 years.

A recent report by University of Delaware, Cornell, Penn State and Rutgers scientists illustrates the importance of this historic economic and environmental resource. The Delaware Basin covers just 0.4 percent of the U.S. yet supplies drinking water to 5 percent of the U.S. population and the first and sixth largest U.S. cities. Most Manhattan residents drink water from the Delaware, not the Hudson. The river is the largest freshwater port in the world yet sustains recovering American shad, striped bass, and blue crab fisheries.

The hardworking Delaware is a jobs engine. The estuary contributes over \$30 billion in annual economic activity and is responsible for over 400,000 Delaware Valley jobs. The ecosystem services value of estuary goods and services in Del., NJ, and Pa. exceeds \$10 billion annually. The Delaware is home to the third largest US petrochemical port and the largest North American port for steel, paper, and meat imports. Over 65% of South American fruit and banana imports arrive through Delaware Estuary ports such as Wilmington.

The Delaware Basin is one of the most historic watersheds in America. Over 400 years ago, Henry Hudson discovered a pristine Delaware Bay on August 28, 1609 after the Half Moon got stuck on a sand bar off Cape May during his unsuccessful quest for an inner trade route to Asia. William Penn founded Philadelphia in 1682 on the Welcome and wrote about 6-inch oysters too big to be eaten whole and large sturgeon that played in the river all summer. In 1739 Benjamin Franklin petitioned the Pennsylvania General Assembly to remove the tanneries and slaughterhouses near his Market Street print shop and wrote in the Pennsylvania Gazette that Dock Creek was choked with "hair, horns, guts and skins" and fish "soon floated belly up." In 1776, George Washington crossed the icy Delaware to beat the Hessians at Trenton and reverse the tide of the Revolution.

By the 20th century the Delaware was dead as the largest population of American shad and sturgeon along the Atlantic seaboard collapsed from overfishing and pollution along the Delaware. During World War I, ship builders dumped untreated sewage into the "American Clyde". The collapse of the sturgeon fishery left bayside Caviar, NJ a ghost town. During World War II at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, British officers on HMS Nelson were given extra allowances by the Admiralty to replace gold braid tarnished by the river gases. By the 1950s, the Delaware was among the most polluted rivers in the world with zero oxygen levels that lead to near extirpation of American shad with genetic origins in the river.

The river revival began in 1961 when JFK signed the Delaware River Basin Compact, the first ever Federal – state watershed accord. In 1972, Congress overrode Richard Nixon's veto and passed the Clean Water Act resulting in \$1.5 billion invested in Delaware River wastewater plants. In 1973, the Clean Water Act was a year old when a pessimistic official concluded the Delaware would never achieve fishable water quality standards.

By 1988, historian Richard Albert called the Delaware River cleanup a premier US water pollution control success story. In 1996, Congress named the tidal Delaware to the National Estuary Program. By 2005, dissolved oxygen along the river rose to 4 parts per million, the fishable standard, as shad and striped bass returned in numbers not recorded in 100 years. Over 50 bald eagle pairs returned to the cleaner waters of the Delaware. Delaware and New Jersey planted 500,000 shells as part of oyster restoration in the bay. Blue crab landings are up, a lucrative \$7 million economy.

JFK and Congress were ahead of their time in 1961 when they appointed the Governors as DRBC commissioners to spearhead the basin cleanup. In 1968, Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior who advised JFK on the DRBC compact declared: "Only the Delaware among the nation's river basins is moving into high gear in its program to combat water pollution."

In 1996, William Ruckelshaus, Nixon's first EPA Administrator remarked: "Looking back, the DRBC was the vanguard in the Johnny-come-lately march to manage water resources on a watershed basis."

The Delaware River is a priceless treasure, just as it was for Henry Hudson who discovered the "great bay" in the name of the Dutch East India Company 400 years ago. Actions by the Delaware Estuary Partnership and DRBC and proposed Federal legislation reemphasize the need to focus on economic and environmental revitalization through a comprehensive river basin approach. The great Delaware River revival has only just begun.

Gerald Kauffman is director of the University of Delaware Water Resources Agency.

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