

Editor: Bill Byrns
815-937-3304
bbyrns@daily-journal.com

BOATING • FISHING • HUNTING • NATURE • CONSERVATION

Kankakee River

Sand and restoration

After years of study, only a handful of projects survive

By Bill Byrns
bbyrns@daily-journal.com
815-468-7349

Sand, that age-old nemesis of the Kankakee, continues to ooze into the river choking out aquatic life and habitat and reducing the stream's ability to handle floodwaters.



LAST IN A SERIES

Now, at long last, three Corps of Engineers studies are nearing completion, with work on at least one project expected to begin within the next 22 months. Plans call for creating a new 67-acre wetland on the north side of the river at the state line. The area lies near the heart of one of the worst sand deposits in the entire river. Success here, experts say, could become a model for restoration efforts elsewhere.

Five years ago, surveyors estimated that between 105,700 and 116,270 tons of sand filled the river beneath the state line bridge.

Sand by the truckload

"That's 5,285 semi truckloads," says J. R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership Council. "A semi truck can haul between 20 and 22 tons," Black says explaining his calculations.

"And that's just one sandbar. The state has mapped at least eight major ones between Aroma Park and the state line."

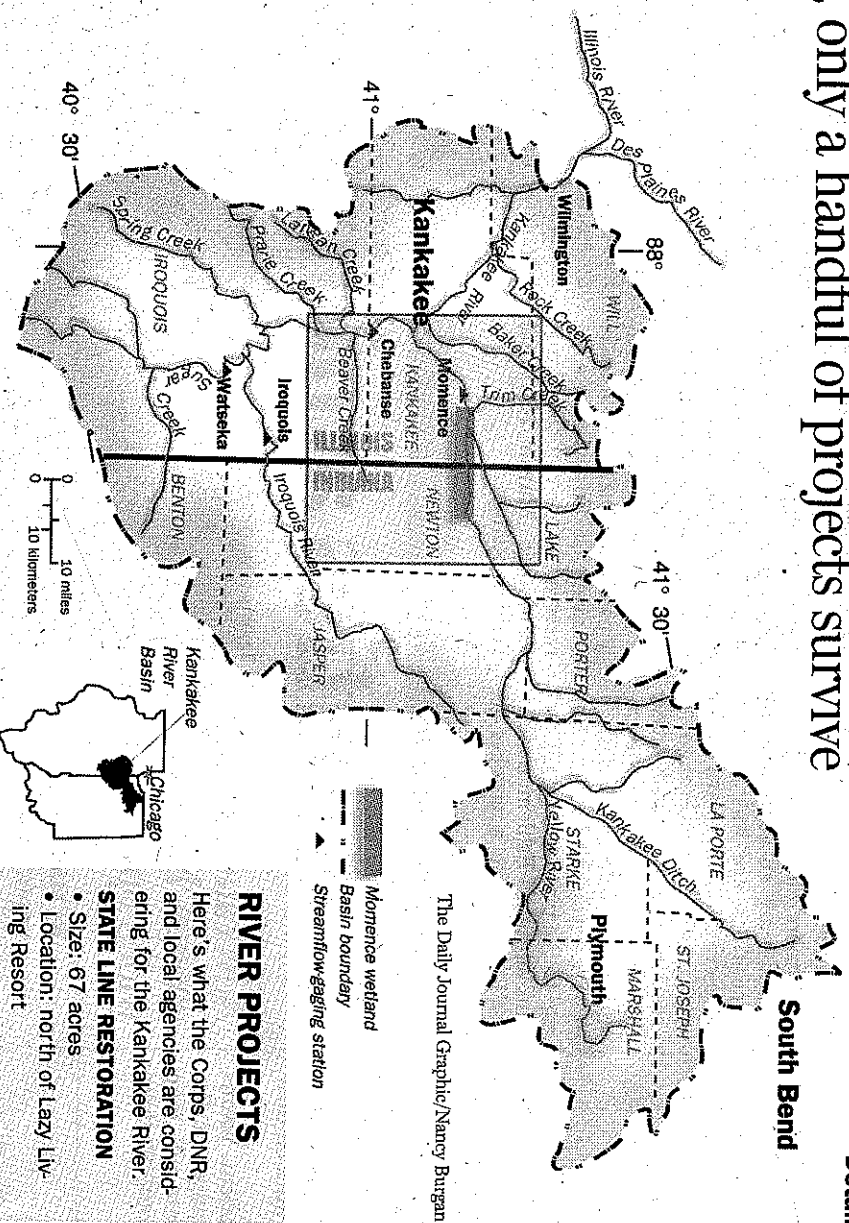
Still, the Corps says the project's real value is habitat restoration rather than sediment removal or flood control. A trial sand removal project at the state line two years ago produced little in long-term benefits, said Brad Thompson who heads the study for the Rock Island Corps.

"What we are looking at moving forward with is wetlands restoration to help reconnect the floodplain," Thompson said. The plan calls for building a waterway to flood 67 acres and breaching a downstream levee to allow water to return to the river.

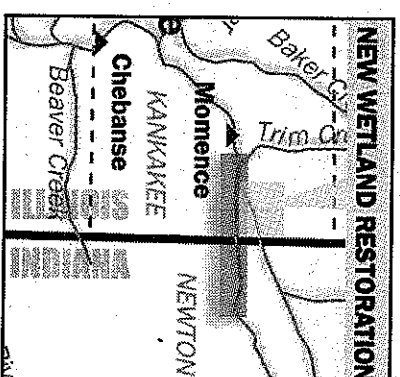
Construction likely by 2007

Actual construction may begin late next year but more likely in 2007, Thompson said. "We are all kind of waiting to see what happens at New Orleans," he explained referring to the Corps' immense task of rebuilding the levee system damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

"With the latest appropriation of \$100,000 in federal funding, the Corps now has around \$211,000 for



The Daily Journal Graphic: Nancy Burgen



Detail

the project," Black said. There is also matching funds from the state. It's enough to get the project started."

Still unresolved is exactly what type of wetland to build. "The Corps favors a marshland plan that would benefit waterfowl. Another plan, favored by Black, calls for a deeper — and more costly — wetland that could provide habitat for fish and other aquatic life. "I've told the Partnership that we should submit a grant request to help support the additional cost."

Black's one fear is that it may delay the Corps project if they are asked to wait for additional funding to arrive.

Sand removal sites

The Corps is also looking at downstream areas as potential sand removal sites.

"The main issue is that Six Mile Pool (between Aroma Park and the Kankakee dam) is filling in, according to the Illinois State Water Survey," Thompson said. "We surveyed this fall... We're seeing that Six Mile Pool no longer traps sediments and the downstream riffles are being degraded. We're still in the early stages. We are looking at the whole reach from the Wilmington dam up to Mokence," Thompson said. He expects the research may run into 2007 before a draft plan is formulated.

Indiana projects

Both Illinois and the Corps are also looking at projects on the upper Kankakee watershed in Indiana. "We're hoping to be able to use some of the Illinois 2020 grants for work in Indiana," Thompson said.

One key area would be working in cooperation with the Indiana Kankakee River Basin Commission at the Yellow River, a major tributary in that state.

"We just have no money from the state and very little interest from the counties in our drainage districts," explains Jody Melton, executive director of KRBC.

Despite little money, Indiana KRBC has established a number of sand traps on both the Yellow and upper Kankakee rivers. "Five that we put in the Yellow at English Lake filled up right away and are now worthless. Another series above Plymouth are still functioning. We have six in the Kankakee between English Lake and St. Joseph's County that are working much better."

The Yellow River runs 50 miles and joins the Kankakee near Knox, at the west end of the Kankakee Fish and Wildlife Area. Most of the area is wetlands bordered by levees along both rivers.

But while the Corps continues their studies, others say time is running out.

Frustrated

"This river is dying," says Don Lambert, president of the Kankakee River Conservancy District at Mokence. "We are looking at a 40-year project to restore the system."

"The state line project is senseless unless you go to the Yellow River first," Lambert says questioning the Corps' priorities.

Lambert also believes more people need a better understanding of the problems facing the river. "The feds just seem to come in here, hold a few meetings to talk about problems and then go away."

Melton goes a step further suggesting the economy of stopping problems before they develop. "A little bit of prevention saves a lot. That's what we've been trying to do in Indiana."

RIVER PROJECTS

Here's what the Corps, DNR, and local agencies are considering for the Kankakee River.

STATE LINE RESTORATION

- Size: 67 acres
- Location: north of Lazy Living Resort

- Purpose: Restore aquatic habitat, provide flood relief
- Cost: \$850,000 federal, \$474,000 other cost sharing

SEDIMENTATION

- Areas: Six Mile Pool and downstream to Wilmington
- Purpose: To determine if dredging is necessary or if other measures like wing dams would be effective.
- Possible removal locations: River Road, Riggs Grove, Kankakee County Highway complex. (Corps sites still in early stages of discussion)

MUD FOR PARKS

- Dr. John Marlin, of the Department of Natural Resources, has developed a Mud for Parks program to recycle sediments dredged from the Illinois River. He is now looking at a similar program for sand from the Kankakee.

KANKAKEE COUNTY

- Developing a Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan for flooding, drainage among other concerns.

INDIANA

- A series of sand traps along Yellow River with 5 filled between Knox and English Lake.
- 6 sandtraps installed on upper Kankakee are working well.
- Bank stabilization and levee repairs along the system.

● Iroquois County

Wetlands key to flood control

County 'inching along' to solution: Eshleman

By Jo McCord
jmcord@dailly-journal.com
815-423-3665

Wetland preservation is the best we can do in this area to combat flooding — and avoid situations of the Hurricane Katrina caliber.

However, expansion of local wetland preservation is "inching along," says Thad Eshleman, the Iroquois County Soil and Water Conservation District resource conservationist.

"We're doing bits and pieces. It would probably take a lot bigger effort to try to help with flooding concerns," Eshleman said.

Eshleman and Mike Keifer, district conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service, have worked together for many years to encourage conserving and restoring wetlands.

Few incentives, volunteers

Farmers' efforts toward such projects are all voluntary and incentives are not all that attractive. Farmers have to give up productive acreage to reclaim wetlands and create side inlet wetlands on the Iroquois River and tributaries.

"We haven't had anyone step up to the plate and say: 'That's me, all right,'" Eshleman said. "I don't have a number on

how many wetland acres we have. Most have been tiled out. We've put in water control structures to help hold back some of that water flow. We're breaking down farmers' tile in a wetland restoration project. Obviously, we don't do any of that if it's gonna screw up somebody's drainage," Eshleman said Friday.

Old oxbow channels

The watershed planning group has talked about side inlet wetlands along the river to hold extra flow. But, it all depends on land owner willingness.

"Along the river around Watsika we have old oxbows. If we could clean those out we could help ourselves out a lot," Eshleman said.

Currently the channels are mostly dry. When they flood they fill in with sediment and can't hold as much water.

Grasslands hold water

Marianne Hahn, vice president of the Friends of the Kankakee, says grasslands sop up water like a sponge to the benefit of wildlife, farmers and developers. Grassy swales retard the flow of water so it doesn't rush down to the Illinois and Mississippi loaded with silt and chemicals.

That's why her group recently paid \$65,000 for 4.4 acres in Beaverville Township to be reserved as part of the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

In Hahn's opinion, more water control structures are needed to allow farmers to hold back water for much of the season and release it when needed. The benefit is in raising the water table to keep the nutrients back where needed.

Are we doing enough? "I don't know. We'll know soon enough when we get 17 inches of rain. You can't build a levee high enough, or strong enough. People who have built in the floodplains will be hurting," she said.

But she doesn't agree that the government is just paying lip service to the Clean Water Act. She says the situation in New Orleans is totally different.

Floodplain impact

New Orleans was built below sea level. Our area is the floodplain of major river systems like the Illinois and Kankakee. Watsika, however, also sits at the bottom of a former glacier lake in that floodplain.

"They are following the plan and the regulations, I think," she said of the government.

The system is supposed to be designed to hold so many acre-feet. However, it's not working. "What we need is a better plan. That's one thing. Another

factor is most of Illinois is underlaid with drainage tiles. It sends millions of water to our creeks and rivers," she said.

River facts

- Flooding impacts 106,150 acres in Indiana including 86,060 acres of croplands according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.
- The Iroquois River is the major tributary in Illinois.
- Hardwood forest of white oak, ash, hickory and black walnut originally lined both rivers.
- Today's woods are second-growth trees with some over a century old and cover only 3.1 percent of the area.
- The Iroquois River is considered to be one of the states best for channel catfish. Top areas include the lower river and Beaver Creek watersheds.
- Wetlands comprise only 0.5 percent of the region today.
- Only about 236 acres of pre-settlement wetlands remain with only about 6 acres considered to be high quality wetlands.
- More than 10,000 acres of floodplain forest survive; the largest is the 1,600 acres of the Mornence Wetlands.
- The Kankakee is home to at least 249 of the 299 birds species found in Illinois.
- 84 species of fish, 14 crustaceans and 37 different mussels are found in the river.
- Six species of fish are listed as threatened or endangered.
- Most common clams include the muskell, pimpleback and three-ridge mussel.
- Crayfish are the most common of the crustaceans found here.
- Two-fifths of all plants found in Illinois can be found in the Kankakee area.

—Source: Illinois Department of Natural Resources

● Outdoor opportunities

Minorities avoiding wilderness

Advocates seeking change, hope to widen opportunities

By Michael Hill
Associated Press writer

Bunyan Bryant has camped by the shores of Lake Huron for decades and usually sees the same thing: green trees, blue skies and white people.

"I seldom see other African-Americans or even other minorities camping," said Bryant, director of the Environmental Justice Initiative at the University of Michigan. "Sometimes they might be with another church group or something like that but truly speaking it doesn't happen."

It's the same story from New York's Adirondacks to Arizona's canyons: There's a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the outdoor areas where people hike, camp, mountain bike, paddle and picnic.

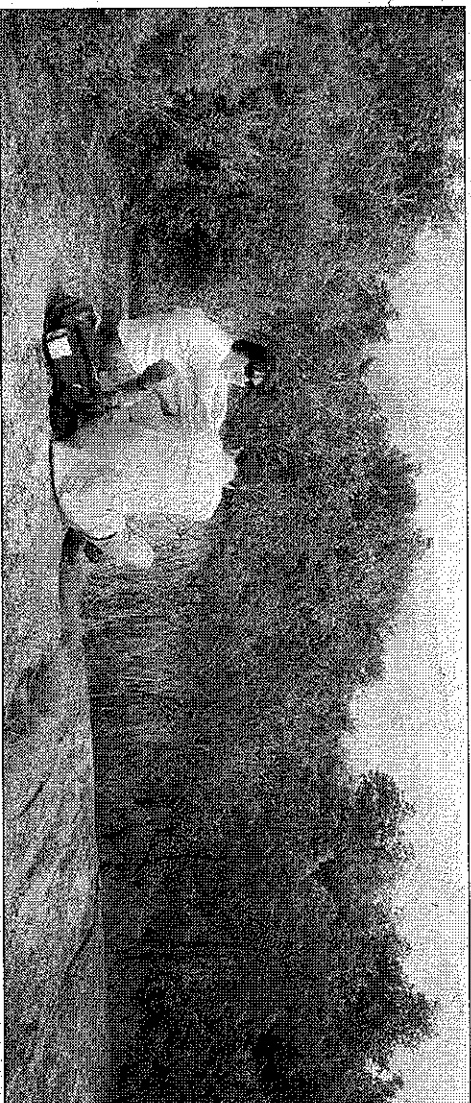
Reaching out

At a time when minority populations are growing, wilderness advocates and administrators are reaching out to blacks, Hispanics and Asians.

"We're only serving part of the public now and we aspire to represent many, many people who are not using all the public lands," said Neil Woodworth of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The Outdoor Industry Foundation this summer reported that only 6 percent of people taking part in outdoor activities such as hiking and kayaking last year were black and 4 percent were Hispanic — while blacks and Hispanics combine to make up 27 percent of the U.S. population.

The U.S. Forest Service found similar trends in Arizona, where



Associated Press

Natasha Cook from England and Rory Mulligan from Ireland sit on the top of Hadley Mountain at Hadley, N.Y., looking toward the Scandaga Reservoir. The Outdoor Industry Foundation this summer reported that 79 percent of people taking part in outdoor activities like hiking and kayaking last year were Caucasian, 6 percent were black and 4 percent were Hispanic. Blacks and Hispanics combined make up 27 percent of the U.S. population.

whites accounted for 88 percent or more of the visitors to the six national forests in that state.

Factors involved

Economic and geographic conditions have something to do with it — think of a city dweller who lacks a car, or even the money to buy a tent. But money has become less a factor as more blacks and Hispanics enter the middle class, said Alan Spears, associate director of cultural diversity programs at the National Parks Conservation Association.

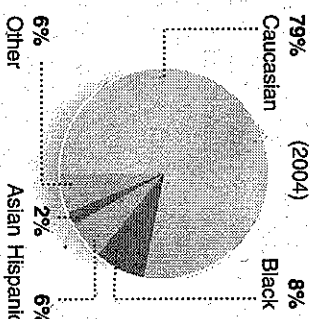
Advocates and academics say cultural factors can play a large part. Marta Maldonado of Iowa State University's sociology department said the concept of "wilderness" is a western European idea, not one necessarily shared by minority groups. As U.S. Forest Chief Dale Bosworth noted in a speech early this year, "The face of conservation has traditionally been rural and white.

"For blacks descended from sharecroppers, camping might

Who enjoys the great outdoors

There is evidence of a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in participation in outdoor activities such as camping, hiking and canoeing in the U.S.

Participation in outdoor activities by race and ethnicity



SOURCE: Outdoor Industry Foundation AP

sites with a direct cultural relevance to blacks, such as the Frederick Douglass home in Washington, D.C., tend to be in urban areas.

people take advantage of natural areas, the Adirondack Mountain Club's Woodworth noted that minorities represent a growing constituency that will be weighing in on land-use policies.

Outreach begins

Woodworth's group has a number of programs aimed at introducing minority kids to the outdoors. The Breakfree program run by its mid-Hudson Valley chapter takes high school students in Poughkeepsie out to climb mountains, camp overnight or paddle up the Hudson.

"We have to make the effort to say 'You're welcome here,'" said Breakfree's Tom Lint.

Similarly, the National Wildlife Federation's Earth Tomorrow program targets inner-city kids in Houston, Atlanta, Detroit, Seattle and elsewhere. The kids fish, hike or listen to talks on endangered species.

Federal officials also have been trying to make parks more hospitable to a wider array of people.

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