

Riverkeeper Knows Value of Preserving Waterways



Earl L. Hatley,
Grand Riverkeeper

By Tom Lindley, 12-21-2003, NewsOK.com

TWIN BRIDGES STATE PARK -- About 20 miles upstream from here, something orange and eerie flows under a mere footstool of a bridge called Douthit in a land turned inside out by urgency and the sweat of man. About 20 miles downstream, Sailboat Bridge welcomes all to Oklahoma's most enchanting playground, its concrete pillars spread wide to allow the big boats and the big bank accounts that have helped float them to savor another spectacular sunset on Grand Lake. On a chilly late-December day, Oklahoma's first designated riverkeeper has launched his 16-foot boat somewhere in the middle in what some would consider an unthinkable attempt to build a bond between two worlds that seem to hold nothing in common. But it is as good a place as any for Earl Hatley to start his journey, probably better than most because his arrival is greeted by seven pelicans who had assumed standing-room-only positions on a half-submerged log at a point where the Neosho and Spring rivers intersect. "This is already a good day," Hatley said, ignoring the fact that his cantankerous 50-hp, two-cycle Mercury outboard motor is reluctant to take him where he wants to go. A large triangle of flickering light bobs on the murky water as Hatley points his boat into the sun. For a moment, it blinds him, causing him to look toward the shoreline, where bare trees and dead limbs have turned the bank of the river into a winter graveyard. Above the top of the tallest tree, a figure cuts across the pale blue sky. It follows the outline of the river for 50 yards and circles back, revealing the white on its throat and head. The bald eagle then tucks its majestic wings and maintains a regal pose on a tree branch as the boat passes below.

Now, Hatley, who grew up hunting and fishing along the river with his father almost 50 years ago, knows he finally is home. As a member of the Cherokee Nation, Hatley thinks it is highly appropriate for him to take up residency on Grand Lake O' the Cherokees, a 66-mile-long body of water that includes 1,300 miles of shoreline, much of it crowded with beachfront homes. He also is here because environmentalists, property owners, state officials and Robert Kennedy Jr., whose environmental group recently bestowed the "riverkeeper" designation on Hatley last month, realize Grand Lake needs a strong advocate. Like all of Oklahoma's man-made lakes, Grand Lake wasn't built to last forever.

Its expected 100-year life span has been threatened by a buildup in toxic heavy metals and sediment from the north, and from wastewater contamination from municipalities and poultry producers from the east.

"There are parts of the lake that are degrading, but if we work together we can fix that," Hatley said, sounding more like a consensus-builder than an unrelenting activist. "I haven't changed, but I think the climate for protecting the lake is better than it's ever been, although some won't want me and would prefer that we not discuss the problem. "But if we don't deal with what we know, people one day will stop coming."

A decade ago, Hatley's attention was focused upstream on the old lead and zinc mining site around Picher and Cardin. This is where the heavy-metal contamination from Tar Creek was severe enough to elevate the whole 40-square mile site to the No. 2 position on the Environmental Protection Agency's original list of Superfund sites.

For more than 50 years, Tar Creek miners, their mules and their equipment carved caverns deep enough and wide enough to swallow a whole baseball field and any home run hitter's biggest rip. It was a hard living that brought a premature death for many, but the miners did not die in vain as their efforts are credited with helping provide the tons of lead and zinc necessary to fight and win a war -- the big war.

Once the mines closed for good in the 1960s, the aquifer beneath the surface flooded the abandoned shafts. Toxic water went to the surface and created an environmental nightmare that was worse than anything the name "Tar Creek" could have conjured up on its own. The mountains of lead-laced rock hoisted from below ground also have been blamed for contributing to the high lead levels among the children of Picher and Cardin. Tar Creek flows into the Neosho River, a tributary of Grand Lake, which leads to the obvious question: How much trouble is the lake in? An alarm was sounded last summer when the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality warned against eating some fish caught in the Neosho and Spring rivers in Ottawa County. Tests indicated that the level of lead and cadmium present in some bottom-feeders exceeded safe levels. The fish in Grand Lake remain as plentiful as the tourists and the retirees, meaning it's too early to panic. But the reality that one of the state's most precious resources lies unavoidably downstream from the contaminated Tar Creek mining district is a point that was not lost on former Gov. Frank Keating. More than three years ago, he commissioned a task force to focus on the broader issue of water quality in northeastern Oklahoma.

"This lake is a microcosm of Oklahoma," Hatley said. "What we learn here is applicable everywhere. I want Oklahomans to know that the fish they catch are clean to eat and that the water is safe to swim in." Hatley won't be the first to study the lake. As he was launching his boat Wednesday, two representatives from the Eastern Shawnee Tribe were pulling into the dock with water samples they had taken that morning. But Hatley will do more than sample the lake's water quality and map where sewage discharges into the lake. He hopes to become a consistent voice on the water, one that will rally the tribes, lake residents and businesses who owe their existence to the lake in a fight against pollution.

"My job isn't to patrol the lake and take down the license numbers of those who do something wrong on the water," he said. "The lake needs a riverkeeper because someone needs to assess the state of the lake and to make sure people are not just using the lake but are helping it." If nothing else, Hatley promises to be a voice of hope. "I want to get a lot of pictures of the blue heron, the ducks and all the other wildlife on the lake to show people what we're protecting." With that, the eagle soared again before disappearing over a ridge. In that moment, the chill of the afternoon was forgotten and the need to build a bridge to tomorrow became more real.

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