

Ecologist leads projects to protect, preserve the Eel River

By CARSON GERBER - 11/22/20 12:02 AM

DENVER, Ind. — Over the last eight years, the Eel River in northern Miami County has undergone a stunning transformation.

Four low-head dams have been removed, making the river safer than ever before for paddlers. Fish and other aquatic animals are thriving that haven't lived in the stream in decades. The water quality has vastly improved, thanks to efforts to curb the amount of nutrient runoff from farm fields.

And behind all those changes is Jerry Sweeten, a 67-year-old stream ecologist who has partnered with universities, government agencies and nonprofit groups to improve the river he's come to love.

Sweeten, who lives right beside the Eel River in northern Miami County, has spent nearly a decade implementing projects to improve the river's quality, safety and biodiversity. Those conservation efforts in 2016 received national attention, when the Eel River was named one of the top 10 improved watersheds by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But transforming the nearly 100-mile river, which runs from Allen County to Logansport, wasn't something Sweeten set out to do. It all fell into place when he accepted a position at Manchester University as a professor of biology and environmental studies.

Sweeten said he was looking for a good way to give his students some hands-on experience, and saw his opportunity with the Eel River, which runs beside the campus.

"A textbook only provides very limited information," he said. "In our field, to train a biologist, you need applied experience and understanding on how research works. This provided a great laboratory for us. It was right here in our backyard. It was just like an open book in terms of research."

The first research effort was studying how water quality affected the spawning habits of smallmouth bass. But the first major project that would eventually transform the river came after Sweeten helped secure federal funding to take out the low-head dams at North Manchester and Liberty Mills.

It took two years to get the proper permits in place; no one had ever used federal money to take out low-head dams in Indiana. But after cutting through the red tape, the dams came down in 2012.

"We decided if we were going to do it, we wanted to study how the stream would respond," Sweeten said. "What happens when you take out a dam?"

The answer, he discovered, was everything.

“We said, ‘Holy cow, things have changed so much,’” Sweeten said. “Dams being gone make the river safer and makes the water cleaner.”

It also opened up large portions of the stream to fish that had been cut off from migrating up and down the river. After the structures were removed, smallmouth bass ended up moving upstream and spawning for the first time in decades.

The success of the project spurred Sweeten to go after funding that would eventually pay for the removal of the dams in Mexico and Collamer, where a 31-year-old Warsaw man died in a kayaking accident in 2017.

Now, Sweeten is working to remove the low-head dam in Logansport. He said the city’s utility board just voted to allow them to move forward on the project.

Once the structure is gone, the entire river will be open from top to bottom to the fish that previously couldn’t move up and down the stream. That means, for the first time since the dams were installed, people will be able to fish for walleye at Stockdale Mill near Roann.

Sweeten made another huge contribution to improving the river’s fish population when he helped find funding to build a one-of-a-kind fish ladder around the dam at Stockdale Mill.

The device allows fish to bypass the structure and migrate up and down the stream. He said there are 57 species of fish in the river, and they’ve documented 47 species using the ladder.

“It’s been wildly successful,” Sweeten said.

But his efforts to boost the biodiversity of the stream didn’t end there. In 2016, he and government partners reintroduced a species of mussel into the river they knew had once lived there because they found their shells in the river bed. They brought in 150 of the animals and tagged them with tracking devices.

“It was like dropping a canary in the coal mine, because there’s no way of telling how many decades it’s been since they’ve been alive here,” Sweeten said.

A year later, they discovered all but one of the mussels had survived. The experiment was a huge success, so they brought in 3,000 more to place throughout the river. Today, the mussels have the highest survival rate in the Eel River compared to any other stream in the nation where they’ve been reintroduced.

On top of removing dams and reintroducing wildlife, Sweeten also has worked closely with local farmers through the U.S. Department of Agriculture on conservation initiatives to prevent nutrient and chemical runoff from fields. He's currently working to restore native eelgrass into the river to improve water quality.

Sweeten retired in 2018 from Manchester University, where he spearheaded most of the restoration projects on the river. He said his initial plan was to take it easy and go fishing with his wife, Melinda.

Instead, the two founded Ecosystems Connections Institute, a private company dedicated to managing, preserving and studying waterways around the state. And through the business, Sweeten is carrying on his mission of restoring the Eel River.

In the end, he said, it's impossible to restore the stream to what it once was before the arrival of Europeans, who would irrevocably change the waterway for centuries to come.

But that's not the point, Sweeten said. Instead, much of his research aims to show that humans can coexist with waterways without polluting or damaging them, and showing that a stream like the Eel River is valuable in its own right.

"People have to value that resource as more than just a place to dump," he said. "Rivers are a living system that are full of life, that are responding to what humans allow it to be. If you try to look at it through the lens of the river's eyes instead of the lens of a human's eyes, then you begin to understand some of those things."

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Source: [Kokomo Tribune](#)

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