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# An Endangered River Runs Through Us

Barbara Eckstein

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BARBARA ECKSTEIN

## *An Endangered River Runs Through Us*

*A speech given at the 2008 Writing Science Conference at the University of Iowa*

In the dead of winter a few bald eagles fish in the Iowa River at the Burlington Street Dam. From a narrow window on the third floor of the riverside building where I work, I occasionally look up from my desk and into the intimate design of a six-foot wingspan. On other occasions, deep in thought, I stare with empty eyes at the brown eddies emerging from under the Iowa Avenue bridge until a fuchsia or foamy substance erupts from the drainage pipe across from me. When I'm being a good river citizen, I call Environmental Health Service, quietly demand an answer, and get one. For more than fifteen years, I dwelled in this way beside the Iowa River.

In the summer of 2007, I changed. That summer, I saw a list of the ten most endangered rivers in the United States issued by the American Rivers organization. The Iowa River was third on that list. Even though this ranking was as much political strategy as scientific fact, I knew without a doubt that the dangers to the river were real.

Borrowing Norman Maclean's lovely title, *A River Runs Through It*, a bioregional politics of watershed jurisdiction, and a lot of fine people's good work on this and other rivers, I organized three river tours and traveling lectures that I called "An Endangered River Runs Through Us." My fond hope was that in organizing docent-informed bus tours, on-site presentations at locations such as creek testing stations, water treatment plants, and hydrological dams, as well as public lectures in the Iowa River watershed, I could instigate the formation of a citizens' watershed alliance. The Iowa River runs through a university campus that harbors the expertise to protect it—and it runs through a score of towns and perhaps hundreds of farms from above the city of Iowa Falls in Hardin County to below the confluence with the Cedar River at Columbus Junction. My aim was to set that scientific and technological expertise in motion and bring it to a public that has its own local expertise to give back. From the summer of 2007 through the spring of 2008, two students (Cory Sanderson and

Matt Low) and I worked to secure the services of three expert lecturers and the aid of two docents, devise the bus routes, synchronize the stops, communicate with local people, get Iowa Citizens on the bus, and find a good cook to make them box suppers.

On a rainy October afternoon, the first busload of university faculty, students, and staff, together with other interested citizens and one guest lecturer, visited Iowa Falls. We stopped along the way at a Clear Creek water monitoring station that was collecting data analyzed by the University of Iowa's Hydrosience and Engineering unit. The farm dogs on that single-lane, gravel road had never seen such a big white bus. In this, Iowa's deep country, we passed mountains of corn bulldozed like gravel, destined for ethanol production. As we followed the river north and west, our docent from the U.S. Conservation Service pointed to grazing practices good for creek water quality and grazing practices bad for water quality. He drew our attention to fields that could retain rainwater and those that could not. For our guest lecturer, environmental historian Ted Steinberg, a New Yorker now teaching in Cleveland, this was exotic and mysterious country.

The en route education included copies of historical information provided by Mrs. Valde, who owns a farm along the river in Hardin County. She had researched Iowa Falls's 1920s hydropower dam for us, at the local library. So we knew about the controversy surrounding the destruction of its predecessor, the milldam that had drawn grain farmers from multiple counties and promoted a nice hotel trade in the town. Even armed with this historical information, those of us who know the lazy Iowa River in Johnson County found the falls of Iowa Falls an exhilarating surprise, all muscle and noise, still generating electricity.

As the light faded, we climbed up the limestone bluff and back into the bus for a short trip to our last stop, the Iowa Falls Public Library. There, about ten local people met us at the door; another fifteen or twenty waited inside; one stood at the podium ready to speak. It was as though they had been positioned just this way for years, waiting for a busload of people from Johnson County to listen to them. Like older siblings, they were upriver informants with knowledge to pass downstream. They told us, in brief, that there are 17,000 people in Hardin County, 7 million hogs, and 25 million chickens. It is a beautiful county, arguably Iowa's most beautiful; its

geological and archeological history make it a treasure of the North American continent. The Iowa River that runs through it has been a source of life and pleasure for almost as long as humans have inhabited the continent. And it's being destroyed by large animal confinement facilities, far from the eyes of consumers of bacon and eggs. Among the degradations to the river and soil, and indeed to the animals, is the heavy use of antibiotics used to keep the animals alive in factory conditions. Iowa City's water treatment plant information officer, our bus compatriot, told us that these pharmaceuticals pass into the river and are not removable by a new plant like Iowa City's, let alone by the antiquated water treatment facilities in many of the small towns that are shrinking in size and losing the tax base and income they could use to build better ones.

Ted Steinberg offered a historical narrative of Henry David Thoreau's attempt to find beauty and avoid industrialization on his journey up the Concord and Merrimac Rivers. For Steinberg, Thoreau's story is a way to explain how the meaning of "corporation" was changing well before the Civil War and how that change affected the nonhuman world. In Hardin County, we learned how "corporation" had changed agriculture—and the Iowa River basin in the bargain.

At the Iowa Falls library those of us off the bus from Johnson County and those at home in Hardin County began to define a watershed coalition of concerned citizens, activists, and scholars. One Iowa Falls citizen leader joined the next two bus tours of Johnson and Louisa Counties and invited me to the Iowa Rivers Revival conference, held at the Ellsworth Community College in Iowa Falls. It was there that I heard the most moving testimonies in support of the river from farmers who opposed the farm bill, the ethanol craze, the destructive overuse of soil, and the abuse of waterways to maximize the profits of high-priced corn and soybeans. These were not outsiders with "hippie" ideas. They were what remains of long-time Iowa farm families sustaining diversified family farms. They were men (they happened to be all men) with twisted knees and crooked gaits, stained and gnarled hands. People with voices used to booming through church basements to argue with fellow farmers about the farm bill or factory farms. When a young man from Des Moines asked one such farmer what he could do to convince other farmers to oppose the farm bill, the farmer responded without malice that

though he had spent a lifetime arguing with his friends, it was not they who would change the farm bill. We taxpayers and consumers pay for the farm bill. We are the ones who should say no.

In frigid February, the bus tour stayed close to home, observing the workings of the Coralville Dam as well as Jim Throgmorton's photographic journal of the river, and attending a lecture on a dark winter evening at the Iowa City Water Treatment Plant. Before the lecture, we toured the plant and learned that well water, not river water, is now used for Iowa City's drinking supply; we also learned that the city's water usage has decreased through education and incentive—even though the capacity of the new plant is greater than that of the old. The evening lecture by Jacques Leslie took us to southern Africa, India, and Australia to observe how very large dams have altered the lives of millions.

In April we were on the road again to Louisa County and the confluence of the Cedar and Iowa Rivers at Columbus Junction; we also traveled down to the confluence of the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers. The Louisa County conservation officer extolled the beauties of the Mississippi backwaters—and the paddling did look appealing. Yet the lecture by Nancy Langston of the Gaylord Nelson Environmental Institute at the University of Wisconsin spelled out for us the effects of one particular pharmaceutical on the health of a river; its inhabitants, the fish; and all humans who use the water or eat the fish.

It would provide neat closure to my remarks to say that if I changed in the summer of 2007, the Iowa River changed in the flood of the summer of 2008. Standing in a university parking lot, watching the river flow into the campus bus barn and inch perceptibly toward the fueling pumps, having yet to see the water gushing from a manhole and into the new art building, I tried to imagine that the river was angry, endangering us. But it was, on the one hand, only doing what rivers have always done, though we seem to have forgotten this—and, on the other hand, impassively reflecting back to me my own and other humans' actions or inaction. The problems of the river's excess quantity this past summer have only intensified the effects of its water's quality. A watershed citizens' coalition from both the Iowa River and Cedar River basins remains a necessity for me and for many I have met on river tours, in river meetings, and on flood mitigation task forces.