

# NEEDED: A 50-YEAR PLAN TO PROTECT STREAMS AND RIVERS

*What Good is a Stream or River? The Question has been Evaded.*



*A family with children joins our family to enjoy a Flint Hills stream on our land near Manhattan.*

Imagine a countryside without streams and rivers, and where they do occur they are phantoms of their former selves—streambeds of sand and dust where there were once necklaces of flowing water and peals of deeper pools.

On a larger scale, Imagine Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn without the *Mighty Mississippi*, the Lewis and Clark expedition without the Missouri River, the Grand Canyon without the Colorado. Without the big rivers, our literature, collective culture, natural environment, and our continent's scenic splendor would all be immeasurably diminished.

Imagine if you grew up in a place with a stream nearby--where kids could wade in shallow places, and deeper holes were for swimming and fishing. Where the water was reasonably clear most of the time, and almost always flowing. Not so long ago streams were integral to the *quality of life* enjoyed by many, especially for families throughout rural areas.

This was true even in western Kansas. I've never forgotten the inspiring

*"A river seems a magic thing. A magic, moving, living part of the very earth itself."*

Laura Gilpin

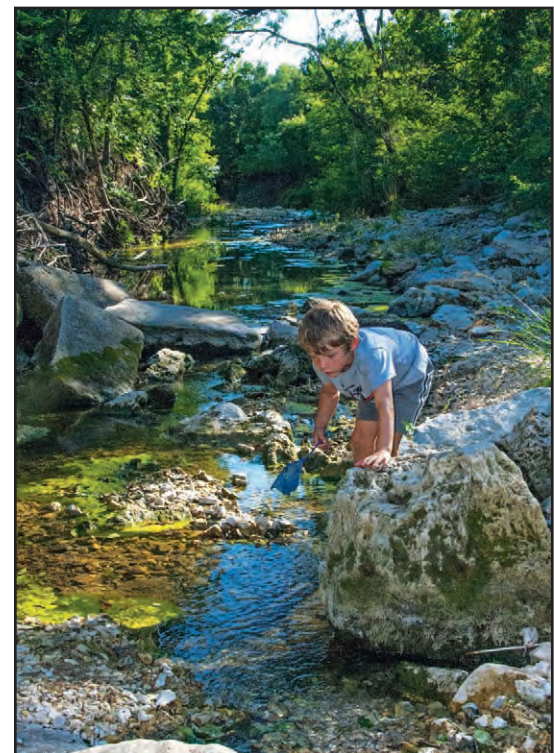
remembrances of such activities as described by Dr. Gerald W. Tomanek in a speech he gave at a conference at the Rock Springs 4-H Camp in the early 1970s. Jerry grew up in Trego County to the west of Hays. He was a renowned professor of biological sciences and served as president of Fort Hays State University from 1975-87. But during that evening presentation, he talked of the deep swimming holes, handsome catfish and treasured values that he enjoyed as a youth, and his

concern that they were dramatically diminished and were disappearing.

We took streams for granted in other parts of the state – like the sky and the soil. But the decline in perennial flows, with the accompanying disappearance of aquatic and associated life was undeniable in central and western Kansas by the early '70s,

Historically, streams and rivers teamed with life in the Great Plains, and many watercourses were sustained even in droughts by springs. Were it not for these streams, rivers and playa wetlands in the prairie plains there wouldn't have been great herds of Bison, Pronghorns, Elk, Mule Deer and the legendary abundance of

waterfowl and shorebirds. Collectively these streams were the arteries of life.





**"A good river is  
nature's life work  
in song."**

Mark Helprin,  
*Freddy and Fredericka*

Life for indigenous peoples was sustained for thousands of years near these waterways. And without water for people and livestock, European settlers would have faced conditions far worse than the harsh challenges they recorded. It would have more closely resembled the *Great American Desert* – a label assigned by Major Stephen Long, a government surveyor and leader of an 1820 expedition. He couldn't see the richness of the prairies because of the absence of forests.

Fast forward two hundred years and we do not have to imagine western Kansas, a landscape expanse of 15 to 20 million acres, with little more than remnants of streams and rivers that were once blessed with water in most years or for some, all year round. Today most springs are extinct. For aquatic and riparian life, and for a lot of associated terrestrial wildlife, this is ecological desertification of the Great Plains. The added tragedy of manmade desertification is the elimination of flora and fauna and critical elements of the habitats upon which wildlife depend. Even if the streambed grows up in vegetative "cover," the habitat may not even be adequate for terrestrial animals—such as Wild Turkeys and deer—that require a readily available source of water.

Gone are all prospects for River Otters, Beaver and Muskrats, water birds and most fish. Stream banks that once housed nesting Belted Kingfishers are no longer hollowed out by these birds. These species are iconic symbols of the many losses.

## The Land Remembers

Of course *the land remembers*. It remembers where there were streams and wetlands—playa lakes as many are classified on the high plains. When there are those rare downpours of several inches

of rain in a matter of hours, runoff rushes toward the traces of streams and gathers in the imprint of former wetlands. But it usually doesn't last long.

Word has been passed along that sometime in the 1970s there was such an event or an otherwise source of water released upstream into the Arkansas River in southwestern Kansas. Stories are told of anxious recreationists taking to the river with innertubes and other flotation devices somewhere near or west of Garden City. The flow was fabulous at the port of entry into the river -- but reportedly only for a distance less than a mile. There it penetrated into the *permeable sand and gravel streambed*, and seeped into the unsaturated zone where the water table had once been higher and in equilibrium with surface flows.

Because of the loss of perennial flows, stately cottonwood trees that once lined

riparian corridors are now dead or dying. They are like wooden reminders, not unlike the markers reflecting deeds of violence at Boot Hill in Dodge City. West of Great Bend, the Ark River streambed is used mostly for ATV traffic.

Although the State of Kansas has engaged in lawsuits to secure flows in the Arkansas River from Colorado, the flows do not restore or maintain riverine ecosystems. They are simply secured to be diverted immediately for irrigation. The same is generally true for required water flows from Nebraska in the Republican River near the state line. That is often about as far as it flows. Other stakeholders and values are not recognized by antiquated water laws, policies and "special interest" politicians.

The only promising prospects for the future of streams and rivers is for more -- many more -- people to take an interest in stream protection, become advocates



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***"The river is such a tranquil place, a place  
to sit and think of romance and the beauty  
of nature, to enjoy the elegance of swans  
and the chance of a glimpse of a  
kingfisher."***

Jane Wilson-Howarth,  
*Snowfed Waters*



and be involved in water policy meetings. Conservation organizations also need to form alliances and work for enforcement of Minimum Desirable Streamflows (MDS). In most other states, public access to rivers and streams results in greater appreciation for their ecological and recreational values. But that is not true in Kansas. The Kaw, Arkansas and Missouri rivers are the only rivers classified as legally “navigable” and generally accessible in Kansas. All other streams are privately owned and permission must be obtained before using the river or stream for recreation.

Every stream and river worthy of protection needs advocates, ideally an effective friends group. Examples include Friends of the Kaw and the Arkansas River Coalition in Kansas, and Friends of the Niobrara River in Nebraska. During the past forty-five years many people and organizations statewide and nationally have come to the defense of the Platte River in Nebraska. By forming coalitions, they were able to defeat a dozen dam and diversion schemes that would have rendered it barren like the Arkansas River in western Kansas. Audubon and the Wildlife Federation at various levels were critical to the cause. The great migrations of Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl, along with Bald Eagles and Whooping Cranes, all utilizing critical migratory habitat provided by the Platte, are a reflection of what was at stake.

Spectacles of this magnitude cannot be showcased for every river, but the collective ecological values provided by rivers and streams are monumentally important throughout the Great Plains. As stated by David Brower: ***“We must begin thinking like a river if we are to leave a legacy of beauty and life for future generations.”*** His leadership was instrumental in stopping construction of a big dam destined to block the Colorado River and inundate the Grand Canyon.

Since very little access to rivers and streams is afforded to Kansas residents, it is important that landowners who value and own sections of streams provide opportunities for others, especially families with children, to enjoy and learn to cherish these magical places.

- Article and Stream Photos  
by Ron Klataske



*These photos portray the Arkansas River south of Larkin in September 2014. Due to excessive stream flow diversions and groundwater exploitation, this “river” and many other streambeds in western Kansas are totally dewatered/dry for months and years at a time. Because the Ark River is “navigable” and open for public transportation, it has become a trail for ATVs.*