

Ripple Effect #94

Freshwaters: Commodities or Living Systems?

Our freshwater resources in North America are immense.

They include 3.5 million miles of rivers and streams in the United States alone. That's enough to extend from Earth to the Moon 12 times over.

Our five Great Lakes occupy 94,000 square miles, and there are another 100,000 lakes larger than 100 acres in mainland US. This is not to mention the millions of additional lakes to the north in Canada, or the several million in Alaska.

And between these open waters and dry land are almost 300 million acres of wetlands.

It may seem that the vast extent of these freshwaters makes them invulnerable. But we forget that, like ourselves, waters are living systems whose health depends on how they are treated. And today, unfortunately, 40% of American rivers and streams have bad bills of health.

As just one sign of the problem, the four species most at risk in the US today all inhabit and/or depend on fresh surface waters. This should not be surprising, since surface waters have to put up with everything from excess sedimentation and nutrients to directly poisonous pollutants and torturous manipulation.

The Red River Basin and surrounding area are no exception to the degradation. At least 150 segments of rivers in Minnesota and North Dakota have waters diagnosed as impaired. And half of our natural wetlands are gone, with their many functions not replaced or mitigated.

Yet we continue to depend on these stressed living systems of surface waters, here and country-wide.

They provide drinking water for half the population.

They allow us to manufacture goods and process foods – in the US alone, this takes more than 13 trillion gallons of water each year.

Waters help grow crops, generate electricity, and transport goods and raw materials. In the form of wetlands, they provide flood protection. And they still manage to offer some of the best recreation to be had.

How much longer, we might ask, can these stressed systems do the jobs we've given them while continuing to be treated as a commodity rather than the living systems they are?

After all, freshwaters can't help being vulnerable. But we can choose how to treat them.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

