

Pollution in Our Local Watersheds

Of vital importance to Michiganders, and of vital importance to everyone on earth, is our supply of fresh water. Not only for drinking, but for the health of the many ecosystems that exist in and around our rivers, is it important that we minimize the pollution that is contaminating our watersheds. ‘Watershed’ is a word that many people hear, and when heard, sometimes forces an individual to imagine a picturesque nature scene. All too often, people do not truly grasp the significance of what a watershed actually is. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a watershed is “the area of land where all of the water that is under it or drains off of it goes into the same place.”¹ Essentially, watersheds are the sources of our rivers, or they are important with regards to multiple rivers because multiple rivers flow from one watershed. Therefore, it is within all of our best interests to actively preserve the waters that are so very important to all of us.

One type of pollution that is actively destroying Michigan’s clean water is coal ash pollution. Michigan has a long history of mining coal and other fossil fuels, and while it has helped to make our economy productive, it is very dangerous for our water supply. In an article published by *The Voice*, a Macomb and St. Clair based newspaper, coal ash is defined as “the general term referring to byproducts of burning coal in boilers to generate steam used to make electricity and to power other industrial processes.”² This is a real problem and puts Michigan citizens in a predicament. Michiganders, and specifically, their elected representatives, have to make the decision as to whether or not to support these industries, or actively work to keep the environment clean and risk making their jobs much harder.

Coal ash pollution in Michigan is kept largely unregulated. The aforementioned *Voice* article also states that “the majority of coal ash is disposed of in unlined landfills or in impoundments (often called ash ponds) while the rest is used as construction-fill or recycled in some other form.”³ These coal mines are responsible for producing over a million tons of coal ash a year, and that is definitely not something that the ecology of Michigan thanks us for.

Coal ash is not the only pollutant that is threatening our watersheds here in Michigan. There are a great many pollutants ranging from waste created by heavy industry, to fertilizers and pesticides, and not excluding household waste (which really could be managed better in many cases). Our watersheds have a scope that extends far beyond just a few rivers. If we allow pollution to corrupt our watersheds, then we are facing an outcome that includes the pollution of most of the fresh water in Michigan. Yes, that would take time, but it is really not a reality that most individuals would like to come to fruition.

¹ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Watersheds,” accessed 13 February, 2014, <http://water.epa.gov/type/watersheds/>.

² “Clean water action report: Coal ash is polluting Michigan’s water,” *The Voice*, November 08, 2013, <http://www.voicenews.com/articles/2013/11/08/news/doc527ce5fd1261d422920926.txt?viewmode=fullstory>.

³ “Clean water action report.”

In a research paper setting, I would like to explore the Huron River Watershed more deeply. The Huron River Watershed is the chief watershed for my home county (Oakland County) and it has tributaries close to my home. I would like to pursue more knowledge about threatening pollutants that could possibly be corrupting this particular watershed. This is an issue that extends beyond the Huron River, and Oakland County, but it is necessary to study it on a small scale to see what different levels of pollution can do to the many and varied ecosystems that depend on the waters of the Huron River to be clean and pollutant-free for their survival. This is a topic with a scope that extends to all of us; whether directly or inadvertently, everyone will feel the lasting effects of pollution if we do not actively seek to end it.

References

“Clean water action report: Coal ash is polluting Michigan’s water.” *The Voice*, November 08, 2013. <http://www.voicenews.com/articles/2013/11/08/news/doc527ce5fd1261d422920926.txt?viewmode=fullstory>.

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