

Lee Wulff Chapter of Trout Unlimited

February (2003) Chapter Meeting Speaker Helen Sarakinos Described River Alliance Efforts to Remove Small Dams to Benefit Rivers, Communities and Fisheries

Helen Sarakinos, Small Dams Program Manager for the River Alliance of Wisconsin, joined us at our February meeting to “give a voice to our rivers.” She discussed the dam removal programs assisted by the River Alliance, a non-profit, non-partisan group of citizens, organizations and businesses dedicated to advocating for the protection, enhancement and restoration of Wisconsin’s rivers and watersheds. This ten year old organization has a six member staff and over 1800 individual and organizational members (including the Lee Wulff Chapter of Trout Unlimited.)

Wisconsin has 44,000 miles of rivers and streams, and nearly 3800 dams, one for every 43 miles of river. Of these dams, only 200 can generate hydroelectric power, though only 100 do so. Another 200 provide flood control. The rest of the dams range from outmoded to decorative to dangerous. Typically, dams are designed to last 50 years. The average age of dams in Wisconsin is 55 years. Though many dams are owned by municipalities, half the dams in Wisconsin are privately owned. Ecologically, dams damage rivers and the flora and fauna they rely on them. Economically, many dams are nearing an age where maintaining or restoring them costs more than removing them. The challenge for the River Alliance is to identify dams that could or should be removed, then facilitate the process required to make that happen.

Helen described several dam removal efforts, in both warmwater and coldwater streams. She showed dramatic before and after slides of the improvements made when three dams were removed from the Baraboo River in the city of Baraboo. Removing these dams opened 120 miles of river. Wisconsin DNR electroshock studies showed a marked increase in species of fish after the dam removal. Where only 11 species were present prior to removal, dominated by carp and bullheads, 24 species were found 18 months later. The number of smallmouth bass jumped from three in the first study to 87 in the second sampling, including young of the year fry, indicating that healthy reproduction was occurring.

Eighteen Mile Creek was prime brook trout habitat when it was dammed in Colfax in the 1880s to power a mill for grinding grain. The 13 foot high concrete structure not only prevented spawning brookies from moving upstream, it also also created an impoundment that had high water temperatures, excessive silt and low oxygen levels. This was poor habitat for many fish but especially trout. Helen described a joint effort of the landowners of Colfax, the WDNR, and local TU chapters to remove the dam and return 18 Mile Creek to its status as a fine brook trout stream. Among the most noteworthy efforts was removing 7000 cubic yards (500 dump truck loads) of sediment from the impoundment and creating a park in the land uncovered by the dam's removal. The whole process took about a month to finish, and according to the WDNR, "the brook trout were back in the channel as soon as the dam was removed."

At the conclusion of her talk, Helen was made an honorary chapter member, complete with Lee Wulff TU mug, vest patch, and key chain. We also renewed our chapter membership in the River Alliance and donated an additional \$200 from the funds raised by our Christmas Conservation Fundraiser to benefit the work of this worthy organization.

Biographical Material:

Helen joined the River Alliance in mid-July 2001 as the new Small Dams Program Manager. The goal of the Small Dams Program is to help improve the dam repair or removal decision-making process in communities by providing information that enables dam removal to be considered on its merits. Helen, a native Canadian, completed a Master's of Science degree in aquatic ecology at McGill University. She has worked on numerous river-related issues including the effects of point-source discharges on river ecosystems, impacts of sediment on spawning habitat of endangered Coho salmon and steelhead trout and she has recently completed a scientific assessment of the state of water quality and aquatic ecosystems in the San Joaquin Valley, California. Helen also has experience with FERC re-licensing issues.