

Jul 21, 2016

Rebirth of the Cheat River

acid mine drainage, non-point source pollution, recreational water

By Jon Capacasa



Photo credit: Kent Mason, Friends of the Cheat

I vividly remember my experience rafting the Cheat River in West Virginia. It was in the early '80s and I recall a beautiful river valley with steep slopes, lushly forested hillsides, and the tremendous rush of water propelling us along.

Once we got started, there was no turning back. A train track along the river beckoned as the river ran wilder and wilder, and a spill into the cold, churning waters came as a bracing, not to mention harrowing wake-up call.

Along the way, I also saw some of the impact to the river of pollution from old

abandoned mines, such as discolored rocks with an orange coating reflecting acid mine drainage waters coming to the surface and oxidizing in the open air.

And this was even before the mid-'90s when on two separate occasions, polluted water from an illegally-sealed underground mine blew out a hillside – pouring pollution into Muddy Creek and on into the Cheat, causing catastrophic harm not only to the river, but also to local recreation and the businesses that depended upon it.

Though these were difficult days for the river, thanks to years of Clean Water Act funding and the cleanup efforts of a local non-profit group, the state and others, the raging waters of the Cheat today represent a major success story. The orange scour still remains in spots, but the mainstem of the river has been restored – serving once again as a haven for whitewater rafting and smallmouth bass fishing.

While work treating acid mine drainage from the river's feeder streams continues, the restoration has been so successful that it's getting harder for local roads to accommodate all the traffic from outdoor enthusiasts hoping to experience the Cheat's wild wonders.

Since 2000, Cheat River restoration efforts have received more than \$5.1 million in support, including \$2.6 million in funding from EPA's Clean Water Act § 319 nonpoint source program through the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, and additional funding from the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and the state. These funds have largely been used by the non-profit Friends of the Cheat for "passive treatment projects" that use limestone beds and other techniques to neutralize acidity and reduce metals.

State statistics show that between 2000 and 2013, restoration work reduced acid mine drainage-related pollution to the Cheat watershed by more than 1.7 million pounds. In 2014, the Conservation Fund and the Nature Conservancy purchased 3,836 acres of the Cheat River Canyon for preservation and public recreation.

Today, the Cheat plays host to bass fishing tournaments, as well as a robust perch population and even pollution-sensitive walleye – an amazing development considering the condition of the river just two decades ago.

Tell us about your experiences on the [Cheat River](#).

About the author

Jon Capacasa is the Director of the Water Protection Division in EPA's Mid-Atlantic Region.

Editor's Note: The opinions expressed here are those of the author. They do not reflect EPA policy, endorsement, or action, and EPA does not verify the accuracy or science of the contents of the blog. Please share this post. However, please don't change the title or the content. If you do make changes, don't attribute the edited title or content to EPA or the author.