

Fact Sheet

Captina Creek

Coal slurry threatens water quality and wildlife

Overview

Captina Creek is one of the many streams meandering through the hilly coal country of eastern Ohio.

Like many streams, Captina Creek attracts its fair share of visitors. Anglers come for the bountiful bass and pan fish. Nature lovers seek out its beauty and diverse

plants and wildlife. Kids skip stones on its shimmering surface.

While most visitors laze about this creek for just a few hours at a time, there is one creature who makes this pristine stream its home. Unfortunately, that creature's future is in danger.

Eastern Hellbender



The Eastern Hellbender salamander is an amphibian known to grow to more than a foot long. It is native to North America and inhabits large, swiftly flowing streams with rocky bottoms and high water quality.

Once found in streams throughout the eastern U.S., today the Eastern Hellbender is so rare that scientists consider it to be facing a very high risk of extinction due to habitat destruction caused by stream blockage and pollution. Five states, including Ohio, count it as endangered.

Although fewer than 250 individual Hellbenders have been documented in Ohio, Captina Creek boasts one of the largest and most important populations.

Ongoing surveys have found not only large numbers of Hellbenders in Captina Creek compared to other sites, but also evidence of successful breeding.

At last count, about a third of the Hellbenders in Captina Creek were juvenile, a greater proportion than in any other surveyed Ohio waterway.

Damaged by Coal Slurry



Captina Creek full of coal waste slurry.

The good news is that the Hellbender seems to be making a resurgence, but this is tempered by the threat of another local presence - waste from coal mining.

Like the Hellbender, coal deposits are also naturally occurring in eastern Ohio. The coal is mined for electric power production.

Unfortunately, coal mining has had devastating effects on Captina Creek and the Hellbender population. In 2005, a fist-sized hole ruptured in a pipeline carrying coal slurry (water and coal dust

left over from washing newly mined coal) from a mining site to a massive slurry pond (or impoundment) to be stored.

State regulators estimated that 30,000 gallons of thick, black slurry traveled nearly half a mile down Captina Creek before it was contained.

The slimy liquid turned everything it touched jet black until cleanup crews could control the spill. Literally overnight, the affected stretch of Captina Creek went from a natural wonder to resembling a freshly tarred road.

Damaged by Coal Slurry (con't)



A crayfish covered in coal slurry.

In its wake, the 2005 coal slurry release left a massive amount of fish and other wildlife dead. State regulators from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) fined American Energy Corp. \$50,000 for the release and resulting damage to fish and wildlife.

In 2008, as Captina Creek was still recovering from 2005, another destructive coal waste release occurred.

According to state inspectors, a pump used to remove clear, decanted water

from the top of a giant waste pond slipped into the impoundment used to contain the waste.

Eyewitnesses reported that the creek ran black with coal slurry, eventually draining into the Ohio River, 22 miles downstream.

Some scientists remain concerned that sediments from the slurry release may have clogged the undersides of large rocks and other crevices in the stream - habitat for the Eastern Hellbender and other stream life.

The OEC's Solution

The OEC considers the repeated release of coal waste into local waterways to be an avoidable and unnatural disaster.

Coal companies argue that ending slurry projects would threaten thousands of much-needed jobs. The companies also want to dam other pristine creeks to build new waste ponds.

The OEC continues to call for a series of reforms to tighten oversight of Ohio coal mining, including a substantial boost in state inspectors and an end to slurry ponds.

We urge state regulators to require mining companies to inject coal slurry into abandoned mines, under strict

guidelines to protect against groundwater contamination, or use modern waste water treatment equipment.

Some states require these disposal methods and no longer permit new slurry impoundments.

After a billion gallon coal waste spill (this time coal ash) in Tennessee in December 2008, the OEC again called on ODNR to increase the number of inspectors of coal waste storage ponds in Ohio. They agreed and also pledge to review past inspections of 20 Ohio coal ponds.

The OEC is committed to finding solutions before Captina Creek and the Eastern Hellbender are irreparably harmed.

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