

Straight TALK

by John A. Arway

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The Right Track

Over the course of my 30-year career with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission I have seen dramatic changes in the quality of our Commonwealth's streams, rivers and lakes. Although we've inherited miles of polluted waters from our parents, grandparents and great grandparents, I am pleased to say that the changes have been for the better. I don't hold those before us accountable for these polluted waters, nor should you. They lived in different times by different means. They survived off the resources provided to them by the land—for food, drink and employment.

The Industrial Revolution required them to log our forests, mine our coal,

drill for our oil and natural gas, harness the power of our rivers for electricity, aggressively farm our fields and work in factories to produce the food and energy that our society demanded. The laws that did exist did not protect our rivers and streams, because we needed those goods and services to see us through the Great Depression, two World Wars and several conflicts. That was their legacy, and it was about making America strong for us—the future generation.

Our nation has grown into the most prosperous country in the world, and we can now afford to purchase our products from other nations. Those nations now cut down their forests, exploit their oil and natural gas reserves, destructively farm their landscapes and export their goods and services to feed and clothe us. We can now afford to protect our environment and work to clean it up.

Thirty years ago the Three Rivers in Pittsburgh would not freeze in the winter because of chemical and thermal pollution—the same place we just hosted a national bass tournament. The Delaware River near Philadelphia was so polluted from untreated sewage that a dissolved oxygen block in the river's water prevented American shad and striped bass from migrating up the river to spawn. This year, we had one of the best shad migrations in the last 20 years. Have you seen the pictures of the stripers being caught?

I remember vacationing in Lake Erie as a child, and I couldn't see my feet in three inches of water. Now, I can see the bottom of the lake in 30 feet of water. Thanks to our Congress and our General Assembly, we have created a set of laws and regulations that insure that our water is protected for today and generations to come. These actions are consistent with the intent of Section 27, Article I of our Pennsylvania

Constitution, which I have included at the end of this article for your reference. I encourage you to read it.

Pollution will still happen even in today's society; however, we have learned much from prior generations and cannot let history be repeated. We have highways extending our cities into landscapes that were previously isolated, causing a condition known as urban sprawl. We still struggle with how to provide enough energy to fuel our nation's demand, and Pennsylvania is at ground zero with Marcellus natural gas drilling and other natural gas deposits yet to be explored. Our human population is now competing with fish and other aquatic life for the water in our streams and rivers, and I am not sure who is winning in certain parts of the Commonwealth. We over fertilize our land with nutrients, which has changed the Chesapeake Bay and now threatens the smallmouth bass population of the mighty Susquehanna.

We use new age antibiotics and other drugs to live longer, but they find their way into our rivers and are causing our fish to become transgender. Our climate is changing. While we debate the cause and solution, we are being invaded by aquatic species that never before have been able to live in Pennsylvania's waters.

These are the challenges that we all face, and it's up to us to decide what legacy we will leave for our children and grandchildren. I believe we are on the right track, but we need to work together to make sure that we continue to make progress. Otherwise, our children will need to repair our mistakes and there will be no excuses.

Have a happy holiday, and I'll see you on the ice.


Your Director
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photo - Dave Putnam

On May 18, 1971, Pennsylvania's voters by a four-to-one margin ratified what is now Article I, Section 27, of our state constitution, the Environmental Rights Amendment:

The people have a right to clean air, pure water and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment.

Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people.

