



Paint Creek Watershed Awareness

Past, Present, and Future

A watershed is the region that is drained by a river or stream. The Paint Creek Watershed covers approximately 38 square miles throughout Paint, Scalp Level, and Windber Boroughs; and Adams, Ogle, Paint, and Richland Townships. Paint Creek, which is a smaller watershed within the Stonycreek River Watershed, has three major streams running into it: Babcock Creek, Little Paint Creek, and Seese Run. These once clean and beautiful streams are polluted from past mining operations and human disregard. Now, conservationists interested in restoring the Paint Creek Watershed to its natural state are taking action to improve water quality and to inform and engage residents within the Watershed.

Untouched Beauty

Before the 1900s, the Paint Creek Watershed was so majestic with its expansive forests and cascading waterfalls that it inspired the heart of a



"Scene on Paint Creek in Scalp Level"
Source:
Artwork of
Cambria County -
Johnstown Area
Heritage Association

Pittsburgh artist named George Hetzel. Hetzel, along with other painters, became the "Scalp Level Artists" who preserved the local landscape forever in their works of art. Many nature enthusiasts came to photograph the area and others used the untouched beauty of the landscape for literary inspiration. Although it seems fitting that Paint Creek was named for the artists that painted there, this is not the case. Paint Creek is speculated to be named for the colors of the minerals present in the layers of soil in the area.

Booming Economy

In 1897, the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company set up mining operations in the Paint Creek Watershed and created the town of Windber. Interestingly,



the name *Windber* was derived by rearranging the first and last syllables of the name *Berwind*. While Berwind-White opened dozens of mines across the Watershed, Babcock Lumber Company began logging operations in the forested headwaters of Paint Creek, which is now part of the Gallitzin State Forest. In addition to mining and logging, the Scalp Level Railroad was built to transport these new products. By the introduction of mining, logging, and the railroad, the economy in the Paint Creek Watershed boomed, but as the old adage says, "what goes up must also come down." By the early 1960's, all of the Berwind-White coal mines had closed, leaving the area economically and environmentally



devastated. Nearly 8,000 people moved out of the Windber area in search of new jobs. The environmental ramifications of mining are still seen today in the area's orange streams, which are impacted by a form of water pollution know as abandoned mine drainage, or AMD.

Pollution Problem

Abandoned mine drainage is the largest pollutant in the Paint Creek Watershed. It is formed when groundwater fills an empty mine void and chemically reacts with pyrite, or "fools gold," to form iron oxide, sulfate, and acid. Iron oxide accounts for the orange coloring seen in the streams, and the sulfate is to blame for the foul odor, similar to that of rotten eggs. This polluted water flows from the mines into local streams where it decimates stream life. For example, of the 61.3 miles of Little Paint Creek, only a 3.2 mile section is listed as approved trout waters by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Hopeful Future

In 2000, the Paint Creek Regional Watershed Association (PCRWA) was created to "restore, enhance, and protect the Paint Creek Watershed by engaging the public, fostering partnerships, and monitoring water quality." The PCRWA, along with local organizations and government agencies, are focused on:

- Identifying, reclaiming, and controlling AMD affected areas;
- Promoting wise land use and management of natural resources;
- Organizing and participating in stream cleanup efforts to remove tires and other litter from the creeks and stream banks;
- Revitalizing and expanding the suitable fishing areas by promoting and protecting clean waterways;
- Maintaining sustainable habitat for game animals;
- Creating environmentally friendly hiking and biking trails to help promote tourism within the watershed and surrounding areas; and
- Advocating awareness, appreciation, and respect for environmental issues through community education to insure an ecologically healthy future.

(Source: *Paint Creek Restoration Plan*)



Photo:
Tom Clark

Babcock Creek Scenery

Get Involved

Please take a proactive approach to conserving your watershed by joining the Paint Creek Regional Watershed Association. They welcome new members and volunteers.

JOIN PCRWA !

Meetings are held at 6:00 pm
on the third Monday of
each month in the
Windber Borough Building
1409 Somerset Avenue
Windber, PA 15963

Call 814-467-9014
for more information!

To learn more about the conservation activities in the Paint Creek Watershed and to view the Paint Creek Restoration Plan, please visit the Kiski-Conemaugh Stream Team website at www.kcstreamteam.org/paintcreek.htm.

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