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Canoeing Humanities
Mississippi River Fish Report

The upper Mississippi River is home to over 119 species of fish that are in danger. The Mississippi River's health is deteriorating. The further downstream you are, the worse it is. It used to be that people could swim, drink, and eat fish from the water without any concern. Water quality is key to the overall health of the web of life in the Mississippi River. Human activities along the river and in its watershed continue to harm the balance of many nutrients and water quality characteristics. The Mississippi River water is poor quality, it is facing decreased biological diversity, and organism contamination. It is being polluted from agriculture in the form of runoff, fertilizer, and animal manure. It also is having industrial waste poured directly into it along with city and sewer runoff.

Each year fish are caught and tested the Mississippi River for chemicals and a contaminant advisory is issued. The precautions recommended can range from removing fat and skin before cooking fish to you should not eat certain types of fish at all. Favorite sport fish include walleye, sauger, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, channel catfish, northern pike, bluegill, and crappies. Some other river species are the catfish, blue sucker, shorthead rednose, and bigmouth buffalo. There are even some ancient fish such as paddlefish, lake sturgeon, and shovelnose sturgeons.

The main contaminant found in the Mississippi River is PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). They were once used in products such as hydraulic fluid, carbonless paper, electrical transformers, and cutting fluid. PCBs do not decompose easily and so they remain in the river sediment for a long time. Fish can absorb this pollutant from the sediment. PCBs are found to cause cancer and impair reproduction in some animals. They have also been linked to developmental and growth problems born to women who regularly eat Mississippi River fish. The Mississippi River contains mercury from human activity such as the use

of coal.

Approximately eighteen million people depend on the Mississippi River for drinking water. There is a connection between river pollution and high death rates from cancer. An example of this can be seen in “Cancer Alley” in Louisiana along the river from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. It has one of the highest rates of cancer in the country along with lots of pollution.

When hearing about a subject such as this it is easy to dismiss it as “not my problem.” It is easy not to care about some threatened fish. If this is something that does not concern you, you have to realize we are connected to the Earth and are directly dependent on it. When we pollute the environment, when we harm the river, we are not only harming the fish, we are harming ourselves.