

Introduction: Destroying



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

NO SIGNS OF LIFE
FOLLOWING THIS CORPS'
FLOOD CONTROL WORK
ALONG FULLERTON CREEK
IN CALIFORNIA.

A review of the Most Endangered Rivers lists for the past 16 years reveals a startling statistic: one single organization has been directly responsible for, or has contributed to, almost 60% of the listings. Astonishingly, this organization works for you. It's a federal agency — the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Most people may not appreciate the degree to which the Corps of Engineers has a grip on our rivers. The Missouri, Mississippi, Ohio, Illinois, Snake, Columbia, and smaller rivers too numerous to name, all fall under its direct management. In addition, the agency is charged with issuing permits for private construction in rivers and wetlands, and its actions — and inactions — profoundly affect the health of every river in the country.

The Corps carries out these responsibilities with an unshakable faith that its engineers can improve upon nature. The agency has trapped rivers behind hundreds of locks and dams. It has cut rivers off from their floodplains with 8,500 miles of levees. It has

gouged out 11,000 miles of channels. The agency built thousands of “wing dikes” and other instream structures to straighten and deepen our rivers, and buried riverbanks under rock and concrete armor. Through its ongoing dredging operations, the Corps scrapes out hundreds of millions of cubic yards of material each year from our rivers and harbors, continually destroying key habitat. It buries other sensitive habitats under the mountains of dredged spoil that must go somewhere.

This stunning transformation of our nation's rivers is a leading reason why North America's freshwater species are disappearing five times faster than land-based species. Two of the rivers on this year's list provide especially dramatic examples of how the Corps' ongoing activities are damaging rivers across the country:

- Operating dams on the Missouri River (#1 on this year's Most Endangered Rivers list), the nation's longest and most historic river, to keep water levels steady for a trickle of barge traffic has pushed three species to the brink of extinction and crippled the river's tremendous economic potential for tourism and recreation.
- The agency's futile attempt to maintain a commercial barge channel by dredging and drastically manipulating the flow of Florida's Apalachicola River (#11), is destroying the habitat of the river and its floodplain, causing fish populations to plummet.

While there is a role for the Corps' navigation and flood control programs, the problem is that the Corps has constructed countless projects that have done more harm than good. The Corps frequently pursues large construction projects without seriously looking at alternatives that would be less expensive or less destructive to rivers. The agency's project justifications are frequently self-serving, claim economic benefit from environmental damage, and result in numerous projects that aren't truly necessary and fail to produce the promised benefits. Its flood control projects

Your Rivers, Wasting Your Money

have created a false sense of security that lures residents and businesses into harm's way.

Far too often, Corps projects serve a special interest, not the public interest. Once built, these boondoggles frequently require continued infusions of tax dollars for operation and maintenance, a dependence that becomes nearly impossible to break no matter how few public benefits the projects provide or how much they damage the environment.

How does this happen?

The Corps of Engineers has a unique structure. The agency is part of the Department of Defense, but its civil works program has a civilian construction mission. The agency receives much of its funding from Congress on a project-by-project basis — creating a mentality the *Chicago Tribune* once summarized as, “If we don't build, we don't eat.”

The agency's deep-seated bias for construction projects — the bigger the better — results in an eagerness to encourage and indulge Congressional interest in delivering federal dollars to members' districts. On more than one occasion, independent investigators have found that the Corps has overestimated — sometimes astoundingly — the economic costs and benefits of some projects presented to Congress.

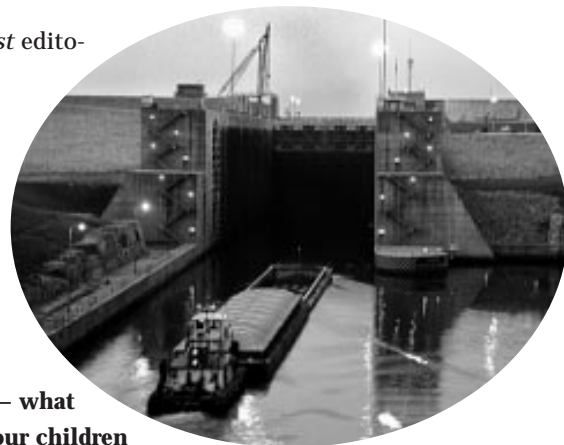
A 1987 *Washington Post* editorial criticizing the Corps' work on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway made the point without sugarcoating:

“The waterway was justified over the years by egregiously skewed cost-benefit estimates — what you would call lies if your children told them instead of the Corps of Engineers.”

In 2000, the Army Inspector General found that the Corps had deliberately and deceptively manipulated data in an effort to justify a \$1.2 billion expansion of locks on the Upper Mississippi River. After conducting extensive interviews, the Inspector General also reported that the “overall impression conveyed by testimony of Corps employees was that some of them had no confidence in the integrity of the Corps' study processes.”

Additional problems with the Corps' planning process abound. Two National Academy of Sciences panels have concluded that the Corps has an institutional bias for building large construction projects and that its planning process lacks adequate environmental safeguards. Consider these two examples from this year's endangered rivers list that illustrate the agency's disregard for the environment as it seeks to build new projects:

- The Corps hopes to receive \$181 million federal tax dollars to build the Yazoo Pumps near the mouth of Mississippi's Big Sunflower River (#2), even though the project will damage 200,000 acres of wetlands and



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ABOVE: THE CORPS EXAGGERATED THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF BARGE TRAFFIC ON THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY.

LEFT: CONSTRUCTION OF THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY.



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THE CORPS SPENT \$180 MILLION TO RE-ROUTE THIS RIVER IN KENTUCKY.

- two federal agencies have urged the Corps to abandon it.
- The Corps is also awaiting funding to complete an enormous irrigation project on Arkansas' White River (#5) that will pump 100 billion gallons of the river's water each year to a small number of farms — providing a \$400,000 subsidy to each one.

As this report goes to press, the Corps is building more than 1,400 projects across the country — and has a \$50 billion construction backlog. New projects will certainly be added to that list when Congress takes up the Water Resources Development Act this year; 195 new projects were approved by Congress in 2000.

What can be done

A growing number of environmentalists, outdoor enthusiasts, and taxpayer watchdogs have joined together to demand fundamental changes in the way the Corps of Engineers does business, and Congress has started to take

notice. Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI), Sen. Bob Smith (R-NH), Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI), and Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) all have introduced bills in recent months that would subject Corps projects to greater scrutiny. Each of these bills provides important reforms, such as requiring independent peer review of key Corps studies; preventing the Corps from counting any profit from the destruction of wetlands towards its analysis of the economic costs and benefits of the proposal; and requiring full and timely mitigation of all environmental harm caused by Corps projects.

These proposed reforms reflect years of experience and lessons learned from fighting bad projects around the country. They are tailored to prevent the Corps from building projects that destroy rivers and wetlands when alternatives are available, and to prevent the Corps from using faulty science and self-serving economics to justify its requests for tax dollars.

In his budget, President Bush has acknowledged concerns about the credibility of the Corps' environmental and economic analyses, but Congress thus far has resisted his proposals to cut funding for some of the most egregious projects. With our rivers and their wildlife in continued decline and many worthwhile federal programs tightening their belts, it would be wrong to allow the Corps to continue business as usual. This is a year when Congress will be called upon to exercise great leadership, and we hope that our elected representatives will look carefully at these proposals to protect our rivers, conserve tax dollars, and restore the Corps' battered credibility.



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