

Missouri's Resources

Today, Missouri is known for its scenic beauty. Its wildlife, colorful forests, sparkling rivers. But 70 years ago, this land was noted for timber, lumber for the east's growing cities, ties for the western railroads stretching across the plains. In the early 1900's the Ozark forests meant jobs, backbreaking manual labor for men with few other options. It's a time dimly remembered in a few archival films, but it's still alive in the memories of the men that worked the big timber.

Missouri's natural resources are something we kind of take for granted. I mean today we have lots of forests, clean streams and loads of wildlife. But it wasn't always that way. In the early 1900's the demand for resources grew quickly and our knowledge of how to manage our natural resources couldn't keep up with the demands placed upon them. Deer were nearly wiped out. The Ozark forests cut bare and the lowland swamps were drained. Fortunately some forward-thinking Missourians saw the problem and took action, and the results—well, they're astounding!

We're going to take a look at the history of natural resources in Missouri. What we have, how we almost lost them, and what was done to protect them. But first, let's stop in on some kids from Advance School, in Missouri's boot heel region to see what they're doing to learn about and protect the environment.

Liana Jenkins and the students from Advance Public Schools are on an environmental journey. Their mission: to explore the Mingo National Wildlife Area. Their tools: binoculars...nice view...some field guides...I'm an insect professional...and a very knowledgeable naturalist....Any questions?

The boardwalk is just sort of a walk back into the Mingo area as it was during the time before the settlers came in. And the kids really start to realize what life was like, just really during the times of their grandparents; and how much life has changed here in southeast Missouri since those days.

Mingo has a unique history. It contains remnants of the original wetlands that once covered Missouri's boot heel. In 1945, lands, though scarred from improper use, were purchased by the federal government for use as wildlife refuge. Today the area consists of 21,676 acres designed as primarily as food and shelter for migratory water fowl. But also providing plenty of adventure for curious students.

Guys, sometimes it's said that in Mingo, six inches in elevation, which means if you're just six inches up, will make a difference between having wet feet or dry feet. And if you look at the floor, the swamp is drained right now, but you can still see the floor of the swamp and it looks pretty flat, but if you look...

But the kids are excited about where they're from; there seems to be an excitement about who they are too.

Wow! Look at that! Neat! ...Look at it, see how it's moving....

Just to see them learn, just to see them get excited, that's one thing that's probably the hardest thing to teach is the love for learning. You can teach anybody anything, but if you teach them to just ...the thrill of learning something new, then they'll take that with them the rest of their lives.

While much of the environment in Mingo Swamp is still as it would have been a hundred years ago, essentially, it's just a small remnant of what the landscape was like.

Approximately 4.8 million acres of wetlands once covered the state, half of which was in the southeast, or boot heel region. A vast forested swamp extended from Cape Girardeau to beyond the Arkansas line. This wetland was periodically inundated by the great floods of the Mississippi, which deposited rich and fertile soil as the floods receded. To the early settlers, these lands were mysterious foreboding places,

useless for any practical purpose beyond the occasional hunting or fishing foray, for those bold enough to enter. In 1850, the United States Congress changed all that. The passage of the Swampland Act granted title to nearly 64 million acres of wetlands to 15 states, with the understanding that these lands would be drained and developed for agricultural use. The states in turn, eventually, turned these lands over to private individuals, and the wholesale destruction of Missouri's wetlands began.

The destruction of Missouri's wetlands created some of the nation's most fertile, agricultural lands. Decades of necessary and beneficial economic development of the boot heel was the result. Still, we have to mourn the loss of these magnificent swamps. It's a portion of Missouri that will never be the same.

In the Ozark uplands, the story was much the same. The demand for timber for the nation's railroads and cities was simply too great.

In the 1920's, the Ozarks buzzed with activity. Mill towns sprang up overnight. Railroad trams snaked through every hollow. It was known as the era of the Big Cut. And for the local inhabitants, it meant back-breaking labor for very little pay.

In the very best of times back then, you worked 10 hours for \$2, that was the going wage, if you could get that, you might work for less. But, I worked many a day for 50 cents, from daylight till dark. You don't think you'd do that, but you go to getting hungry and you might do it.

This was the time of the cross cut saw and the broad axe. Hacking a log into a railroad tie was an art. Though, the going rate was only 25 cents per tie. This was also the era of the great river drives. Huge rafts of ties were rafted down the Ozark streams to the marketplace. People worked hard, because they had to.

They were out of work, they got a claim on a creek somewhere, and was trying to get a living out of what little ground they had along the creeks, and when someone came in with a saw mill, why they were ready to go to work.

Unfortunately, they did their jobs too well. By the 1930's the Ozark hills were bare. Gravel and silt choked the Ozark streams, fires burned unchecked over already barren landscape. The paradise Missouri had once been seemed gone forever. In 1935, Missouri was in the grip of one of the worst droughts in recorded history. The heat and lack of rain dried up lakes and streams and fires burned the Ozark woods unchecked. Though the State's Game and Fish Department had been in existence for over 25 years, they were doing little to stem the devastation of Missouri's wildlife. Missourians were fed up. They wanted a system for managing game that worked. On September 10, 1935, a group of nearly 100 sportsmen from around the state, met at a hotel in Columbia to create a different system. They wanted to take the politics out of wildlife management. Through a citizens' group known as the Conservation Federation of Missouri, a petition was established to create a Conservation Commission. A non-political, six-member commission to bring scientific resource management to Missouri. The result was the Missouri Dept. of Conservation. Responsible for the fish, forest and wildlife resources of the state, our Conservation Department is nationally recognized as one of the best in the nation. Deer and turkey are back in abundance. Fish are once again plentiful in Ozark streams. And forests once again tower over Ozark hillsides. In 1974, the State of Missouri created another agency, the Department of Natural Resources. This agency, designed to consolidate several different existing government functions, now oversees air and water quality, solid waste, toxic substances, land reclamation, history preservation and the state park system. The concept of a system of state parks and historic sites has a long history in Missouri. In 1913, Governor Hadley set aside "some of the natural wonders and beauties of the state for purchase as parks." And from this small beginning, a magnificent system of more than 80 parks and historic sites is enjoyed by thousands of Missourians every year.

I believe that state parks are the best examples that we have of our natural and cultural heritage in this state. That they need to be preserved for our own enjoyment and also for future generations for their enjoyment and for their understanding of what made Missouri and Missourians the place and the people they are.

Together, these two agencies, the Missouri Dept. of Conservation and the Missouri Dept. of Natural Resources continue to preserve and protect Missouri's resources for future generations.

Speaking of future generations, let's see what our crew in Mingo is up to as they continue their exploration of Mingo Swamp.

We're from one of the most unique areas, of the world, really. So, I guess I got really excited about where we live, and I wanted the kids to feel that same excitement.

Ew! Look at the slime! Ew, what is...

We study food chains and food webs, and different ecosystems and the aquatic environment of course, here in the swamps is a large part of any wetland area. So, we get a chance to, when we think about wildlife or animals, we tend to think of the large things that we can just see, and this gives a chance for the kids to really look in the water and realize how precious a resource our water is, and that there's a lot more going on in that little drop of water than they ever realized.

...Thought it was either a dragonfly or a may fly? Yes....I think this is what it is....

In my eyes, anyway, the refuge is a chance for us to visit back and remember what this area was at one time—it's a part of our heritage—a very important part of our heritage.

Missouri's beautiful natural environment is really something special, thanks to a few forward-thinking individuals, it's still all around us, healthy and thriving. Check out your local state park or conservation area. It's a part of your Missouri heritage.