

Life along the Rouge:

The neighbors are nature and unnatural nuisances

Jim McCook, Beverly Hills

Every spring Beverly Hills resident Jim McCook puts on his hip boots and wades out into the Rouge River in his back yard to clean out the debris collected there.

The haul typically includes old tires, plastic foam cups and a collection of logs, many of which are cut. But he's also removed items such as a garbage can, a chair and bottles.

The job takes three weekends, although "this year, it's worse than it's ever been," said McCook.

But he views it philosophically.

"I look at it as part of the cost of living where we live," he said. "We enjoy living on the Rouge, and that enjoyment gives you some sense of responsibility as well. It's not an awesome task."

Still, McCook is upset by people who dump trash into the river. The solution, he said, is a large-scale one.

"IT GETS to be a cultural change. People have got to feel a sense of responsibility. If you're bent on throwing a tire in the river — you're going to do that. I think people who do that are irresponsible. Someone downstream has got to take care of it for you."

The problem is perhaps compounded by the fact that the Rouge twists and turns shallow in their yard, becoming a dumping site for articles that float downstream. Giant logs often collect and create dams in the river, he said.

"When you talk about pollution — I don't

think it's real bad.

"We don't see raw sewage flowing down — but we suspect that the sewer systems in the times of high water overflow into the Rouge."

Nevertheless, McCook says he doesn't view the water as a health threat.

THE FACT that the Rouge would be in their yard played a part in McCook's and his wife Aldamarie's decision to buy their house on Riverside seven years ago. The house is on a hill and the stream runs through a meadow at the bottom.

The benefits of living there have outweighed the problems, he said.

For instance, there are the geese.

The geese live out in the swamp along the



Every spring, Jim McCook pulls logs, tires and other debris out of the section of the river that flows behind his house.

river. When their eggs hatch, the McCooks are treated to watching the geese teach their young to fly.

"As they get bigger and bigger, their parents teach them to fly as they go off the bill."

"If you want to enjoy the wildlife, you have to go along with the effort that it takes."

"It's pretty to look at," said his wife. "I love it — we both love it."

Susan Steinnmueller

Mark Calice, Troy

If Mark Calice's Troy home is his castle, a part of the Rouge River is his private moat.

"I view it as mine. I own property 30 feet beyond the river," he explained. "Kids go back there periodically and fish. I don't mind that."

"I'm glad the river's there. I find it peaceful to look at . . . to just go out and listen to it."

Calice, senior vice president of investment for First of Michigan, built his Beach Road house on the banks of the Rouge tributary in northwest Troy five years ago. The creek and its wooded, park-like setting offered "country living" less than five minutes from Troy's Big Beaver office corridor.

"There are a lot more pluses than minuses. We've got turtles that live down there. We have a big grey bird that comes back every year. It's neat watching the ducks float up and down."

"We have twin daughters. We'll go out and fish with them. It's a great ecological (learning) place for the kids. They're able to see wildlife up close."

But animals aren't the sole inhabitants in Calice's section of the river.

"You also see crud coming down. It looks like housing material, Styrofoam and lumber. That seems to come when we get the flooding."

THE RIVER SWELLS, spilling over its grassy banks, during heavy rains in early spring and late fall. Calice doesn't build makeshift sea walls to keep the water at bay, although he did lose sleep over the



Mark Calice enjoys the natural beauty of the river, which occasionally is marred by pollution and eroded by flooding.

problem during his first year in the house.

"I didn't know what to expect. One night I stayed up to watch it. Since then, I've learned to sleep through it."

Calice's house is about 70 feet from the river, which at its worst has flooded some 20-25 feet of backyard lawn.

"The only change is that it seems to be getting wider through erosion," he added.

At its peak, the river measures about 6 feet wide and 3 to 4 feet deep in some areas.

Sharon Dargay

Jon Heinrich, Southfield

Jon Heinrich has a long-time dream of some day going into his back yard with a fly rod and catching Sunday breakfast.

Heinrich and his family for 17 years have lived on their three-acre wooded property along the Rouge River in Southfield.

And it was Heinrich's deep concern for

water quality that prompted him in 1976 to become a member of the Southfield Planning Commission.

"The river used to look like chocolate milk," Heinrich said. "But since 1970, volunteers in Southfield every June have waded down the Rouge to clear log jams and other debris."

HEINRICH FOR years was one of the most enthusiastic of those volunteers. Because of a physical disability, he no longer slogs through the river but he still helps with administration of the cleanup efforts.

"We used to see silt, bacteria, gravel and sand in the river," he said. "But there has been a remarkable change in the water quality and in a heavy rain, we can see to the bottom."

Every day Heinrich drives to work at the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn. Coming home to the Rouge is like taking a vacation in Northern Michigan, he said.

"IT'S GREAT living in the city and being in the country," he said. "Walking through the flood plains, enjoying nature, observing wildlife, building a fire for cookouts and the kids camping out overnight along the river is really serene and gratifying."

Heinrich in the mid-1970s was a member of the Rouge Basin Coalition that fought the proposed \$6.2 million Pernick Drain. The result was a victory for the group.

As an alternative to replacing natural watercourses in the upper Rouge basin with a system of enclosed concrete drains, detention ponds were approved by the city to handle 25-year floods, while allowing the river to take its course.

Jackie Klein



Jon Heinrich walks along the portion of the Rouge that runs through his property in Southfield.