

# How dirty is it?

## The good news is, it no longer burns

By Tori Banas  
staff writer

The pollution problems of the Rouge River have made for telling tales over the years, one of the most bizarre of which occurred in the 1960s when bubbling natural methane gas rose to an oily-slick surface and literally made the river "catch on fire."

While frightening, the story serves to demonstrate the point of an environment turned hostile because of neglect and abuses from an ambivalent public, unchecked development and lax public officials.

But today new investigations are probing the contents of the 126-mile waterway with an eye toward improving the water quality and the quality of life in the 42 communities in the Rouge Watershed Basin.

But first, what does constitute the makeup of the Rouge River?

RAW SEWAGE was found to be the principal cause of pollution in heavily populated downstream areas of the basin, according to a 1973 federal Environmental Protection Agency study compiled by the state Department of Natural Resources. The report, which covered the biological and chemical makeup of the river, was the last comprehensive study of the river. The study provided clear evidence that the Rouge is an international water quality threat.

According to Rouge Project coordinator James Bredin, a water quality specialist with the state DNR, that study found that while DNR and EPA standards were being met then in the headwaters area, that was not the case farther down the river.

An estimated 6 billion gallons of human waste is sent into the river each year, state sources said, from some 185 combined sewer outlets — sewers that carry both storm water and raw sewage from homes and industry. About 25 percent of the river basin is drained through these combined sewers. Today they are recognized as outdated forms of drainage, which is better performed by separated sewers that send cleaner rainwater directly into the river while diverting sewage water into processing facilities.

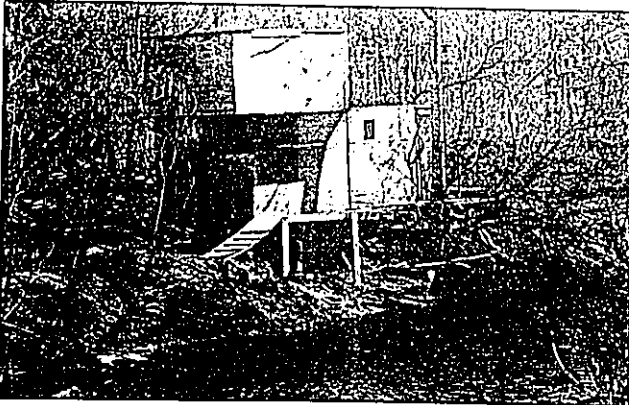
**WATER SPECIALISTS** check for fecal coliform counts to determine health risks. This substance, microscopic forms of bacteria that indicate human waste, is the source of "biggest risk" right now to human health in bacterial and viral infections, said James Murray, the chairman of the state's Water Resources Commission and a proponent of the Rouge River Rescue Project.

Currently, the only place where the river is routinely and regularly monitored is at the mouth of the Detroit River in Melvindale at the Detroit Treatment Plant. But Murray said attempts are being made today to coordinate with the DNR and health departments from Wayne and Oakland counties to conduct strategic checks for these counts and determine the "hot spots" throughout the river. It has been suggested that Michigan Youth Corps work on this project this summer.

Diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever may be picked up from water-borne micro-organisms or pathogens, said one water quality specialist. County health officials



photos by DAN DEAN/staff photographer



A fort/club house perches on the edge of the Rouge River in Southfield.

In Beverly Hills, tree stumps and branches threaten to slow the flow of the Rouge as it makes its way southward to Southfield.

problem in the Rouge is compounded by the river's inability to properly cleanse itself. It is relatively narrow and shallow and consequently slow moving. Compounding this, it is jammed with hundreds of log jams (estimated as high as 450 throughout the basin) and other objects — discarded signs of civilization such as cars, concrete pieces, picnic tables and shopping carts. These carts make for especially difficult removal because they quickly fill up with dirt and sand and become imbedded in the river bottom.

One particularly obnoxious site is in Detroit's Eliza Park where cars frequently are driven off a bridge.

Bruce Monson, the new director of the Rouge River Watershed Council, described the ecological effects of these discards.

"These log jams and everything else cause a real hydrological problem. It impedes the flow of water, which causes erosion; trees start falling into the river and the cycle's compounded."

"There's also more water going into the river now because of development, asphalt parking lots, and the whole thing sort of feeds on itself."

**WHAT ELSE** is found in the river? Metals, which at high levels are considered tox-

typically tell people with open sores, breaks in the body's outward protective skin, to stay out of the water to prevent infection.

**JOHN HARTIG** was a DNR water specialist when he compiled a 1984 status report about the river for the state Water Resources Commission. In that report, still used by local governmental and environmental people, he noted that pollution problems were causing fish kills and stench, particularly from CSO sites, and were marked by visible signs of tissue-papered raw sewage. The biggest problem was in the downriver communities of Melvindale and Detroit.

Today, he is with the International Joint Commission on Great Lakes between the United States and Canada and says the raw sewage in the river is a "very major concern," not just in this area, but internationally.

"It's a very polluted environment, probably one of the worst in the Great Lakes Basin," said Hartig, who grew up in Allen Park in the 1960s.

Today, state officials consider some 40 miles of the Rouge River, mostly the section called the Lower Rouge, to be in violation of federal and state standards.

**ENVIRONMENTALISTS** say the pollution

Continued on Next Page