

The Dowagiac River in Southwest Michigan is currently being targeted for major changes. The Pucker Street Dam on the north side of the City of Niles is old, non-functional and a liability. It has been on the short list for removal for many years and the powers that be have decided they want the dam gone.

I have pondered this over the years and especially the past few weeks. There are a host of opinions on this matter, and while I agree with many friends and peers on certain aspects of removing this dam, I whole-heartedly disagree with some of their opinions as well. Whether you're an angler, recreational paddler, resident/landowner or, in my case, professional fishing guide, the opportunity to say your piece on this matter is quickly coming to a close. Comments must be received by Thursday, April 28th, email Marcy Hamilton [colcloughm@swmpc.org](mailto:colcloughm@swmpc.org). [Click Here](#) to read the official proposal. Read my comments below.

While many of you are well aware of the unique background of the Dowagiac River and Pucker Street Dam, some are not. I think it's important to cover some basic history and, in the process, explain to some degree, the reasoning for my decision on this matter. My opinion is based on a scientific perspective honed by over twenty years of guiding on the Dowagiac. Brevity has never been my strong suit and, in this case, being succinct is hardly advisable. While I encourage you to read my detailed comments, if you'd prefer not to, simply skip below to "The Bottom Line".

Here goes...

*Historically, the Pucker Street Dam held back sediment that had accumulated over the course of many decades in the small impoundment upstream. Sixteen years ago the gates that controlled the river's flow were unceremoniously opened and the impoundment was quickly drained. The consequence of this was one of the most horrifying things I've ever encountered as a conservationist and an angler: Much of the loose silt and sand held back by the dam migrated into the lower Dowagiac, covering the riverbed with several feet of muck. I will never forget standing on the bank and witnessing the catastrophic result. My eyes welled with tears as I took full stock of the "new" Dowagiac.*

*For months, a slurry of sediment and water slowly worked its way down to the St Joseph River. Inevitably, the Dowagiac cleared, but for years afterward periodic use of a "dragline" to remove sediment immediately above the dam would turn the water the color of mud in a matter of minutes. Eventually, after several years, the*

*stream stabilized to some degree and began the lengthy process of finding its new identity.*

*As the Dowagiac healed, cold-water species such as resident brown trout, as well as migratory steelhead and salmon, responded well and began to spawn in the gravelly stretches within the three miles or so of river they could access below the dam. It wasn't long before wild trout, salmon and steelhead parr filled the quiet, woody edges of the stream in the new "rearing habitat" created as trees collapsed into the river - their roots scoured by unrelenting "run of the river" flows. I would often update Michigan DNR biologists with my observations, which were by and large positive.*

*These species are not native to the Dowagiac watershed, and while "browns" were originally stocked in the late 1800's, steelhead and salmon did not gain access to this stream until the late 1980's, when fish-ladders that allow fish passage were installed on the Buchanan and Berrien Springs dams (interestingly, fish and wildlife personnel claim that Brook Trout are not native to the Dowagiac watershed either though I question this assessment). All of these species currently exist within the watershed to some degree, including an abundance of naturally-reproduced, wild fish.*

*Currently, the lower-river is far from "sediment starved", as has been claimed by officials in the past who have spent virtually zero time on the stream prior, or for that matter, after the dam gates were opened. In fact, this statement could not be further from the truth. The shifting bedload coupled with dozens of fallen mature hardwood trees that litter the river in every stretch confirm that this remarkable fishery is in a constant state of flux. While the general character of the stream remains intact, the best holes and runs typically morph into something entirely different every year or so.*

*The past six months, I have noticed the lower river show signs of excessive sedimentation once again. While muck and topsoil tends to come from ditch dredging and agricultural activity upstream, the bulk of sand appears to be coming from directly above the dam where it has remained latent for nearly a century. The large "sediment trap" that was excavated after the dam gates were opened has filled and, yet again, the lower river is guzzling down heavy doses of sediment that moves past the dam. This is a huge problem that will only get worse. Regardless of what is done to prevent this issue, there will always be additional sediment entering the system.*

*There are three primary options have been proposed for this dam: 1) Remove the dam and sediment upstream and allow the river to flow unimpeded in hopes that it will eventually find an appropriate balance more true to its original character, 2) Repair the dam (and ideally dredge a new sediment trap immediately upstream which would require periodic cleaning), or, 3) Take no action at all.*

*An incredible amount of sediment is said to be present within the old impoundment section of the river - an area roughly a mile long and much wider than the actual river channel. It is imperative that this sediment is removed if the dam is razed. While dam removal is expensive, dealing with the sediment immediately upstream will require a lot more money and, of course, wreak havoc on the lower river once the buckets start digging.*

*Why is sediment removal so important? Besides aesthetics and filthy drift boats, sediment choked streams are not terribly productive from a cold-water fisheries standpoint, as the building blocks of the food chain such as aquatic insects and baitfish (including juvenile trout and salmon) are relegated to low-density status when insect habitat is smothered and spawning "redds" full of eggs are filled-in and suffocated. Furthermore, river temperatures tend to increase on average as "turbidity", ie suspended sediment in the water, reduces clarity and absorbs solar heat, often elevating summertime water temperatures into the lethal range for cold-water species.*

*When the Dowagiac runs clean and clear during summer months, it is not unusual for the water temperature to be cooler than the more notable trout streams such as the Manistee and Au Sable in Northern Michigan, as well as other famous trout streams throughout the US. This is true even during stifling hot weather, which is remarkable considering the watershed's latitude and general terrain. This is indicative of a significant and constant influx of cool groundwater, which provides a livable environ for resident brown and brook trout, as well as migratory salmonids from Lake Michigan that find their way into the Dowagiac via the St Joseph River.*

*Removing the Pucker Street Dam will likely solve many of the river's problems, but there are a host of other questions associated with a project of this magnitude. Fish regularly concentrate immediately below dams, which often supports excellent angling opportunities (as well as illegal angling activity such as snagging), but dams also act as a barrier for migratory fish species. These "non-resident" fish tend to be larger and produce plentiful offspring. Theoretically, they compete with or even feed on resident trout and forage minnow species upstream.*

*While migratory trout and salmon will likely move into the far reaches of the upper watershed after the dam is removed, there is also potential for predatory species such as walleye and smallmouth bass to venture into areas that currently support a healthy resident trout population.*

*Many anglers that enjoy fishing for resident trout upstream are less than pleased with the prospect of steelhead, salmon and warm-water predatory species holding and spawning in the upper reaches of the watershed, which includes several tributaries. There is a belief that these fish will destroy the trout fishing that now exists directly through predation and competition, as well as indirectly through angling pressure.*

*I believe the impact these large fish have on the trout fishery is largely exaggerated. The fact is, with good spawning habitat prevalent in many sections of the Dowagiac and its tributaries, natural reproduction is bound to boost biomass and provide a nearly unending protein source for resident species to feed upon. This includes salmon and steelhead eggs, parr and even the flesh of dead adult salmon.*

*Keep in mind, while stream-bound spawning salmon may instinctively take a fly or lure, they are not capable of real feeding at the end of their life-cycle, so they will not actively prey on resident species. Furthermore, the vast majority of feeding done by stream-bound steelhead is on insects and fish eggs. While the overall population of resident fish may or may not drop, clearly the size of resident browns will increase as their largely insect based diet is boosted with the aforementioned buffet of high-protein forage.*

*It should be noted that while steelhead fingerlings and smolts do compete with resident trout to some degree, juvenile steelhead (rainbow trout) and salmon tend to be associated with fast riffles. To the contrary, resident brown trout typically concentrate in slower, deeper sections characterized by woody cover and undercut banks - further reducing the overall impact of migratory species on resident trout.*

*Sadly, only an infinitesimal amount of public access exists upstream of the dam within the roughly 160 miles of watershed. This will relegate fishing activity to landowners and a handful of privileged anglers who have access to these private stretches of water unless more access is opened up. This is, and always has been one of my big hang-ups with removing this dam. An undertaking of this magnitude and expense should offer more benefit to the public, plain and simple.*

*Directly downstream of Losensky Park and Pucker Street Dam, both banks of the lower Dowagiac are private and angler trespassing is a huge issue. This is why savvy anglers and guides use watercraft to access the river and target fish downstream. Unfortunately, the upper-river is not easily drifted with larger watercraft and frankly there is not feasible access for anything that requires trailering such as a drift boat or large raft. Floating the upper stretches requires portaging around massive log jams and is typically done with canoes and kayaks.*

*Future acquisition of upstream river access and clearing log-jams should be considered a mandatory aspect of dam removal. In addition, it is highly advisable to establish stricter fishing regulations that will encourage the rapid establishment of a naturally reproduced, wild fish-based fishery, as well as enhance the quality of the fishery with a net increase of desirable trophy-sized resident trout.*

*While in the past I believed that once the dam was removed very few fish would remain in the lower river to provide angling opportunities, admittedly, I have largely changed my thinking on this matter. While there will surely be a huge number of migratory fish that move directly upstream without pausing to take a look at the scenery, I feel that many fish will still hold in the lower river. It's clear that plenty of steelhead never see the dam now, so whether it exists or not is a non-issue for a reasonable percentage of returning adult steelhead and salmon. It is safe to assume that post-dam-removal-natural-reproduction will increase dramatically, and though "recruitment" always varies when dealing with dammed rivers such as the St Joe, the number of wild fish that return to the Dowagiac as adults is surely to increase within a few years of dam removal.*

*The local and state economic impact of the current lower river fishery is often touted and certainly should not be ignored. Migratory fish often draw anglers from out of town including adjacent states, and myself, as well as other guides, host anglers from around the world who enjoy the excellent fishery that exists below the dam. The lower Dowagiac River is typically bustling with activity during peak migratory fish runs, and the summer months see an ever-increasing number of recreational paddlers and tubers using the river as well.*

*The impact these activities have is not simply economic; recreational usage is clearly evident as the river banks are well worn from foot traffic and often covered with garbage. Over the years I have personally removed a ridiculous number of garbage bags full of refuse, only to see an entirely new batch appear virtually overnight.*

**The Bottom Line:** When I ask myself what the best option is for the Dowagiac River, I try to examine the issue with an open mind. I have always preferred to ignore my occupation and form opinions based on science, conservation and common sense, then hopefully arrive at a reasonable and ethical place. In this case, I have not been enamored with some of the rhetoric that has been coming from both sides of the issue, but I believe in the will of the people to do the right thing.

Comparisons to similar streams is inevitable, but hardly quantitative, as each river possesses its very own set of circumstances. I tend to err on the side of caution, but it's hard for me to deny the ultimate outcome of dam removal that, theoretically, will alleviate many of the issues that currently hang over the Dowagiac like a cloud of toxic smoke. As a guide, I know it is highly likely that any heavy project activity will result in unfishable conditions downstream. Essentially, myself and other guides will be out of business for an undetermined amount of time as far the Dowagiac is concerned. Furthermore, recreational anglers who enjoy fishing the stretch of water below Pucker Street dam are sure to find another place to fish for a while. In a nutshell, everybody will take their money elsewhere.

Lost in this discourse, to some degree, is the general lack of concern for the lower river. This is no time to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The lower Dowagiac is like an old friend that will soon be in need. Those of us who cherish so many great memories this stream has given us would be fools not to do everything in our power to assure that future generations may one day also swing a fly through its deep tail-outs and feel the exhilaration of a throbbing steelhead at the end of the line. We owe this stream everything, and frankly, it doesn't owe us a damn thing.

A couple weeks ago, I sat and stared at the decrepit dam like I had never done before. For whatever reason, in all the years of parking my truck right next to it, I'd never really given it a thorough look. It's in rough shape. It stands as an epitaph to man's seemingly inexhaustible desire to harness the earth's resources - regardless of how insignificant they are in the big scheme of things. What once was considered progress is now a deteriorating eyesore - a relic from a time when it made sense.

I have spent many sleepless nights wondering how my livelihood will be impacted if this dam disappears from the face of our planet. Considering that for nearly half of my life I have guided anglers on the Dowagiac River, it should be easy to understand why.

My thoughts are simple, I believe it is time to do the right thing and stop squabbling over whether or not to remove this dam. I feel that it is inevitable and, instead of looking back, I have chosen to look forward and dedicate my resources and my knowledge to the effort. I want to make sure this project is done right and, in particular, that the lower river is given a new lease on life as well. There are many projects that can be done concurrent with dam removal that will minimize the overall impact on the fishery. Ideally, the heavy lifting will all take place in the least amount of time so one day in the near future we can all look back and say it was well worth our time, money and effort.

The time has come to join forces and attack this as a team.

### **Key Points Looking Forward**

- Minimize impact on the lower river with appropriate measures taken during sediment and dam removal upstream
- Identify problem areas downstream of the dam and implement projects to assure this section is capable of efficiently clearing the sedimentation that will take place during and after the project
- Organize volunteer, conservation organizations, state, federal and tribal resource for project work - form alliances
- Clear log jams that block the river upstream of the dam to allow recreational paddler and angler passage
- Acquire additional access sites upstream and work with and assist private landowners, offer access incentives (see MDNR Hunter Access Program, "HAP")
- Select high quality sections of river and implement stricter fishing regulations to encourage establishment of wild fish and improve the size and number of resident trout (no-brainer revenue stream for state and local community)
- Encourage river users to clean-up after themselves (see Kickapoo River - Wisconsin cooperative effort)
- Encourage the public to contact/assist law-enforcement when illegal activity occurs at the various access sites

These are just a few of the thoughts that come to mind when I brainstorm the future of the Dowagiac River. There is much work to be done - LET'S DO THIS!

Sincerely,

Jay Anglin