

The Androscoggin – Once the Nation’s Most Polluted River

During the 1950s and 1960s, the highly polluted Androscoggin River became a poster child for the damage being done to our waters nationwide. The river was treated as an open sewer for industries and towns, large stretches of the river were devoid of any fish, and the stench and foul conditions of the river were noxious to people and communities from the New Hampshire border to the sea. Below are some testimonials about how bad the pollution had become, which helps explain why Senator Ed Muskie worked so hard to pass the Clean Water Act. He grew up on the Androscoggin and was determined to bring an end to its desecration.

[“By the spring of 1907, 20-foot drifts of yellow-brown foam coming from the canals in Lewiston served as a grim reminder of the mounting consequences of industrial pollution.”](#)

[“Inside Leo Good’s drugstore, the river odor was so strong that ‘people would order ice-cream and go away without eating it.’”¹](#)

[“In 1941 the odor coming from the Androscoggin in the Lewiston-Auburn area was so bad that children sold clothespins on either sides of the bridge and people threw up as they crossed the river. The odor was a constant reminder that if the Androscoggin River was treated like a sewer then it could act like one.”²](#)

[“\[T\]he appalling stench of rotten eggs became progressively worse all up and down the river, and reached its climax in the most heavily populated section of Lewiston and Auburn, where roughly sixty thousand indignantly aroused citizens became vocally and politically vehement.”](#)

[“It was a community disaster which was not only the topic of all conversation, but caused the slowdown of industry and business in general. Retail stores were deserted and some suffered physically from the effluvia. Jewelers, for example, nearly went berserk keeping their stocks of silverware saleable because the sulfite-laden air turned silver and other metals black overnight.”](#)

[“If you were driving from Augusta to Lewiston, you began to smell it at North Monmouth, twenty miles from the city, and it increased in intensity as the road approached the river.”](#)

[“Houses painted white turned black and blistered in great ugly patches, and by the time you had reached the city limits, you had to put up your car windows despite the heat and try not to breathe through your nose. It was revolting, and the exodus of families who could afford it became a locust-like invasion of the seashore and the mountain and lakeside camps—provided they were located far from the foul river.”³](#)

[“A 1957 study found dissolved oxygen levels under 2 parts per million, as low as they had ever been, and too low to sustain fish life.”⁴](#)

[“By the early 1960s, the Androscoggin had become one of the most severely polluted rivers in the United States. Dissolved oxygen levels from Berlin to Brunswick frequently reached zero during the summer, resulting in the death of virtually all fish and other aquatic life in the river.”⁵](#)

¹ McFarlane, Wallace S. “Defining a Nuisance: Pollution, Science, and Environmental Politics on Maine’s Androscoggin River,” *Environmental History*, Volume 17, Issue 2, 1 April 2012, Pages 307–335.

² McFarlane, Scot. “Smelly History of the Androscoggin River.” *Bowdoin College Department of History*.

³ Jones, Page H. “Evolution of a Valley: The Androscoggin Story.” 1975.

⁴ Inglis, Jeff, Van Heeke, Tom, Weissman, Gideon, and Hallock, Lindsay, Frontier Group. “Waterways Restored,” *Environment America Research & Policy Center*, 2014. Page 15.

⁵ “Cleaning Up the River: Challenges, Opportunities and Achievements.” *Museums of the Bethel Historical Society Online Collections & Catalog*, Omeka RSS.

[“For decades, the Androscoggin was used as a sewer for communities and industries along the river. It was known for cascading drifts of toxic foam and for noxious fumes detectable miles downriver.”⁶](#)

[“By 1970, the Androscoggin was considered one of the most polluted rivers in the United States and the largest body of water with toxic sediments in Maine.”⁷](#)

[“Rivers were so polluted 40 years ago that they were literally burning and waters were so degraded that they were virtually lifeless. It was clear to Americans and congress that our waters needed protection.”⁸](#)

[“Before the introduction of treatment plants along the Androscoggin, low water levels turned this once proud waterway into a slow-moving sewer.”⁹](#)

[“Today, the Androscoggin still has a long way to go. Yet this 164-mile river, once a veritable sewer running through Maine and New Hampshire, has now been largely freed of its reputation for toxic waste and rotten smells, and reclaimed as a source of recreation for New Englanders.”¹⁰](#)

[“\[T\]he Maine Attorney General’s 1942 report noted that 92% of the total pollution load in the river came from the paper mills.”¹¹](#)

[“The Great Falls in Lewiston and Auburn dispersed the hydrogen sulfide gases; as the water misted into the air, a rotten egg odor wafted across the two cities. Some store owners had to shutter their doors, and freshly painted homes were blackened as the hydrogen sulfide reacted with lead compounds in the paint. During some of the hottest days of the year, sweaty home owners were forced to keep their windows shut at night while they burned pine candles to combat the miasma. One local resident, Nere Duval, remembered how he became weak because he could not “sleep or eat”; Leo Good “came across the bridge one morning and threw up” in the middle of the street.”¹²](#)

[“By the time the Act was enacted in 1972, championed by Senator Muskie, the river’s decades of unrestricted discharge and damming had made it almost uninhabitable for fish and other aquatic life.”](#)

[“In 1888, Maine’s paper mills introduced sulfite into their pulping process, which had a devastating effect on the Androscoggin. Because of sulfite’s interaction with certain bacteria, the new process dramatically lowered the river’s levels of dissolved oxygen, rendering the water nearly incapable of supporting life and destroying the fish population.”¹³](#)

⁶ Inglis, Jeff, Van Heeke, Tom, Weissman, Gideon, and Hallock, Lindsay, Frontier Group. “Waterways Restored,” *Environment America Research & Policy Center*, 2014. Page 15.

⁷ Nasser, Brooke. “Introducing Life on the Androscoggin.” *Life on the Androscoggin*, Bangor Daily News, 10 May 2016.

⁸ Symons, Jeremy. “The Importance of the Clean Water Act.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 2 May 2011.

⁹ “Cleaning Up the River: Challenges, Opportunities and Achievements.” *Museums of the Bethel Historical Society Online Collections & Catalog*, Omeka RSS.

¹⁰ Inglis, Jeff, Van Heeke, Tom, Weissman, Gideon, and Hallock, Lindsay, Frontier Group. “Waterways Restored,” *Environment America Research & Policy Center*, 2014. Page 15.

¹¹ McFarlane, Scot. “Smelly History of the Androscoggin River.” *Bowdoin College Department of History*.

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¹³ Inglis, Jeff, Van Heeke, Tom, Weissman, Gideon, and Hallock, Lindsay, Frontier Group. “Waterways Restored,” *Environment America Research & Policy Center*, 2014. Page 15.