



The Nature of Bath

by Gregory A. Smith, UA Department of Biology professor and UA Field Station manager

The river had burned before, but the

From Burning River to Tranquility Base: Tragedy and Triumph in the Summer of '69

fire on the Cuyahoga in the summer of 1969 was different somehow. This time people, including the U.S. Government, took notice. With the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* six years later, among other high-profile environmental catastrophes, the country was primed for an environmental awakening. Carson sounded the alarm about overuse of chemicals in the environment, while Ehrlich warned that the population

was growing too rapidly and would soon overexploit resources.

The Western mentality of, "The greatest good, for the greatest number, for the longest time," had caught up with society. A growing concern over how society was damaging the environment was cemented on June 22, 1969, when the country watched the Cuyahoga River burn. Bringing national attention to the severity of the problem, *Time Magazine* referred to the Cuyahoga as the "river that oozes rather than flows." How could a river burn? What on earth was the population doing to itself? How could people sit by and let this happen, and what could be done about it?

The wheels were already in motion for significant changes that would forever alter the way business is done. The National Environmental Policy Act, requiring environmental impact statements for projects requesting funding from Congress, became active on Jan. 1, 1970. The Environmental Protection Agency was established later that year, while the Clean Water Act became law in 1972. The general public also took action based on their concern about the future of the environment, convening the first Earth Day in April 1970. It became "hip" to be "green," and such individual awareness of the world continues for many people today.

A growing population, booming economy and expanding industry provided the fuel for the river fire. While recognizing the importance of industrial products and the vital role they play in job creation, there is a better appreciation today of how to work with the environment and still be profitable. The Cuyahoga River itself was placed on the fast track for recovery and stands as a remarkable environmental success story. Since 1998, the river has been recognized

Help celebrate the river and science with an event jointly sponsored by Bath Parks and The University of Akron at the UA Field Station on Oct. 3, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. There will be food and fun for the whole family. For more information, visit the UA Field Station Web site at www3.uakron.edu/biology/fieldstation/.

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as an "American Heritage River," one of 14 such rivers in the United States, and the only one in Ohio. Although the river still has its issues, it is amazing how far it has come in 40 years.

While the pollution that spoiled the river was an indication of some of the worst of human ingenuity, events one month later would showcase some of the best. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the surface of the moon, becoming the first humans to visit another world. Such an endeavor was one of the greatest technological and scientific achievements of all time. Science provides the best way of knowing about the natural world and was a key component of management strategies in the recovery of the Cuyahoga. It is only fitting that these two events, highlighted in the summer of '69, are cause for celebration.

2009 marks the 40th anniversary of the burning river with "Year of the River" celebrations throughout the region (cuyahogariverrap.org/YOTR/yotr.html). Coincidentally, 2009 is also being hailed as the "Year of Science" (yearofscience2009.org/home/). All areas of the sciences from biology to chemistry to physics, geology and beyond will be highlighted in monthly themes. Earlier this year, for example, was the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin

(and Abraham Lincoln, born on the same day). Later this year will mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's classic work, *On the Origin of Species*.

The value of natural resources and the role of science in helping understand how to sustainably use and protect those resources cannot be underestimated. It is encouraging to see renewed vigor in the fight for the environment from stakeholders representing all sides of the

table: private landowners, municipalities, federal and state agencies, politicians, academics and concerned citizens. In the face of persistent increases in population size and increased demands for products and jobs, it is only through continued collaboration that the beauty and utility of natural resources will be preserved for generations to come. As always, get outdoors, take a walk and experience the beauty of nature! ∞

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