

The Queen of Rivers

A story is told in Connecticut of a native who saw a fisherman, whose license plates disclosed his New York origin, angling from the banks of a well-known river. When asked if he was catching any fish the New Yorker responded, "No, but there must be some big ones here; every time I remove my line the hook's gone." This story of a once beautiful New England river is, of course, not at all funny. The use of our rivers as open sewers is deplorable, and the seeming hopelessness of their condition adds to the anguish we experience on seeing these troubled waterways.

The story of the Raritan River in New Jersey is, therefore, all the more remarkable, because some considerable success has been met in reviving this stream, once called "the Queen of Rivers." An excellent account of this is given by Fred J. Cook in the *New York Times Magazine* of April 18, 1965.

Among the many interesting matters discussed in this article, perhaps most noteworthy is the rather rapid recovery of the river. One of the principal arguments against pollution prevention has always been that certain rivers had experienced pollution for so long that decades would be required to undo its effects even if the pollution were stopped immediately. The facts now appear to be directly contrary. The Raritan was heavily polluted with industrial and sanitary wastes for forty to fifty years. Only six months after the operation of a trunk sewer system was begun, the river was clearly cleansing and purifying itself. Natural aeration caused sludge accumulation to break away from the bottom. The sludge, unsightly at first, was carried away, and some sparkle at last returned to the river. Fish returned, too, in abundance, and it is now possible to contemplate even swimming in the Raritan.

It is also interesting that some of the prime movers of this project were the industrialists of the valley. The problem was not solved by a great infusion of government funds; indeed, the small treatment plants built at government expense in the days of the New Deal were never able to cope with it. No great body of government experts brought the project to fruition; instead the local businessmen and engineers, working closely with state officials, must be credited with a most successful, though not yet complete, enterprise.

Despite this and other encouraging reports, the problem of pollution abatement and control remains one of enormous importance to all of us. No one is better equipped than the chemical engineer to perform this great service to man. The research and development required, the design and operation of facilities, and the setting up of reasonable standards of performance are all items in which the chemical engineer can play a large part. In a world less distorted by space adventures this opportunity would be considered a great prize.

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