

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Excellence

The Challenge

During the last century, southwestern Pennsylvania was a bustling area fueled by the coal and steel industry. Small, prosperous towns dotted the rural landscape. Changing economic times, however, caused industrial activities in the area to decline. Mills and mines closed, unemployment increased, and towns lost population. All that remained were the environmental impacts of heavy industry: coal refuse piles, abandoned mine drainage, and vacant mine sites.

The Solution

In 1997, the Kiski-Conemaugh River Basin Alliance was formed by individuals and communities interested in reversing the adverse effects of mining. Specifically focused on ecological restoration of streams, rivers, and abandoned mines and increasing opportunities for eco-tourism, the group set out to develop a comprehensive river restoration and conservation plan.

By 1999, a watershed plan was developed with the consensus of local communities and groups. With goals established, the alliance partnered with the USDA Forest Service, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and Pennsylvania State University Extension for financial and technical assistance to implement the plan for a cleaner environment and increased eco-tourism opportunity.

Through USDA Forest Service cost-share grants from the Cooperative Fire, Rural Development through Forestry (Economic Action), and Urban and Community Forestry Programs, the Kiski Basin Initiative (KBI) spurred more than \$1.6 million of local, grassroots projects in the Kiski River Basin. Projects included community tree plantings, maintenance, and management plans; environmental education; development and construction of river access points, pavilions, trail interpretation signage, dry hydrants, and wetland preservation; and the purchase of forest fire equipment and protective nomex fire clothing.

Resulting Benefits

Through public meetings and engagement at the start, community support for the conservation plans was greater than 75 percent.

- In 2000, the Kiski River was named the Pennsylvania River of the Year. The Alliance also received the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence in Education and Outreach (Stream Team).



Bob Strietmatter, biology teacher, and students from Windber Sr. High School plant a tree in honor of the Legacy Groves of Somerset County in Pennsylvania.

- In 2001, the Alliance received the Three Rivers Environmental Award (Public Awareness category; Stream Team).
- In 2002, the Kiski Basin Initiative partnered with the USDA Forest Service and received a grant to design and construct living memorials to the victims and rescuers of the Flight 93 crash on September 11, 2001.
- In 2003, the executive director was invited to share successes at the National Park Service Symposium *Partners in Stewardship*.
- In 2004, the group began a relationship with the Canaan Valley Institute. CVI is using the Kiski Basin Initiative as a model throughout Appalachia.
- In 2005, the Kiski Basin Initiative will release a report that provides insight and assessment of the wood products industry in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Sharing Success

Through the development of partnerships, the Kiski Basin Initiative broadened its audience from southwestern Pennsylvania into Appalachia and Nationally. Groups and projects KBI has worked with include the Riparian Land Partnership, Water Resources Education Network, Greater Latrobe (PA) High School, "Investing in Clean Water: Report of the SW Pennsylvania Water and Sewer Infrastructure Project," and Citizen Environmental Monitoring in Appalachia.



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