

# Keepers

by Randall Schau

*“When people think of the area, they think of industrial pollution. That certainly exists, but there are a number of places so wild I have to remind myself that I’m really on the Detroit River.”*



*Bob Burns (right) serves as Riverkeeper for the Detroit River. He works closely with friend and fellow alumnus David Howell.*



*Former librarian and current small business owner David Howell in his floating office as chairman of Friends of the Detroit River (FDR).*

To the prospective developers the project they proposed in the late 1990s seemed like a great idea: convert 410 acres of 'unused' land along the Detroit River into a site for homes, a marina and a golf course. Not all agreed. The land in question was the river's last remaining natural shoreline, and some felt a strong case should be made for its preservation.

Among those who stepped forward to oppose the development were David Howell '72 and Bob Burns '81. Strangers at the time, the two have since become good friends and staunch defenders of the health of the river for all who use it.

"I first got involved when I attended a public hearing on the project," Howell recalls. "I didn't know Bob, but he was at the same meeting. We both joined an organization called Friends of the Detroit River (FDR)."

Working in concert with other citizen groups, FDR forced the developers to abandon their plan. Howell and Burns each agreed to join FDR's board of directors.

"That's when we first met," Howell says. "A couple of years later we realized we were both Kalamazoo College grads."

After the development was stopped, the federal government purchased the land and made it part of the



*As a result of protection, remediation and the efforts of FDR and Riverkeeper Burns, wild places coexist with developed and industrial areas along the 28-mile shoreline of the Detroit River—to the benefit of both humans and wildlife, including turtles and great horned owls.*

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

"It is really cool to think that we have a wildlife refuge (with a visitor center no less!) just south of Detroit," Howell says, "and that the area will be protected forever."

Howell eventually became FDR's chairman, a post he's held for the past 13 years. During that time he's spent countless hours kayaking the river.

"And Bob has spent even more time on the water. He's the technical guy, the one who understands the science for our remediation and restoration efforts. I have great admiration for him and what he's done for the river."

Burns's involvement with FDR expanded dramatically in 2003 when FDR became affiliated with the Waterkeeper Alliance, a national organization headed by Robert Kennedy, Jr. The affiliation created a position for an actual 'Riverkeeper,' a person who patrols the river as a citizen advocate.

Considered an obvious choice for the job, Burns has served in the role for 13 years. His primary task is to travel the river and observe keenly, keeping an eye out for problems, such as contaminants flowing into the water.

"The governmental agencies don't have the staff to be out on the water as much as is required," he says. "I'm their eyes and ears."



"If I see a problem, I'll determine the source and make appropriate contacts. I try to keep things non-confrontational, so I don't go to the authorities unless the problem isn't resolved. If we do make a report, the agency knows the situation really needs to be addressed."

"Bob knows all the folks at the various agencies," says Howell. "The DNR, the EPA, Fish and Wildlife, the Coast Guard, the Border Patrol, all of them. With his credibility, if he complains about something, they take it seriously."

Prior to their involvement with FDR the two men had lived very different lives.

Burns had grown up on Grosse Ile, an island in the Detroit River, south of Detroit, where he did a lot of hunting and fishing.

He ended up going to K by accident. During a visit to Western Michigan University, the high school senior found himself on the bricks of Academy Street. He fell in love with K and abandoned his plans to attend to Western.

After graduating with a degree in business Burns returned to southeast Michigan to work for a marine construction business. "That involved a lot of dredging, much of it in or near the Detroit River. That was one of the ways I came to understand the dynamics of the river."

Howell's path to becoming an advocate for the river was very different. He graduated with a history major, with a focus on Africa, especially Ghana, where he did his foreign study.

"There wasn't much of a market for African historians back then," he recalls, "so I went to the University of Michigan for my master's degree in library science."

He worked as a librarian in Farmington Hills for four years, but then something very different seized his interest—long-distance



*His Riverkeeper duties often take Burns into the air to spot potential problems.*

running (67,000 career miles and counting!). He left his library job to work at Total Runner, a store for runners located in nearby Southgate. After six years he bought the business, which he has owned and operated for the past 30 years.

Nowadays the river brings Howell and Burns together, literally, in Burns's improving riparian transportation.

In his early years as Riverkeeper, Burns used his own 18-foot fishing boat. That worked well enough for short trips but was decidedly underpowered for longer trips on the 28 miles of waterway between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie.

About a decade ago FDR raised \$15,000 and purchased a 22-foot, more powerful boat for Burns. It not only allowed him to go farther and faster, but also to places he couldn't have gone at all with his first boat.

"Because it's got a flat bottom it only needs about a foot of water, so I can get into some pretty shallow areas," Burns explains.

On the side of the boat are the words 'Detroit Riverkeeper.'

"That helps," Burns says with a smile. "It gives me some instant credibility when

people see me for the first time. I get fewer questions when I'm poking around."

The boat has proven to be a workhorse. With Burns at the helm, it frequently takes scientists to the sites they want to study. It also serves as a tour boat, carrying public officials, the media and school groups up and down the river, exposing them to both problem areas and places of great beauty.

Burns can provide a running commentary about the sights. He's spent almost his entire life in the area, and his stories about the river's history run deep. He also has a notebook full of photos that show what the area looked like years ago, before remediation.

His boat also makes a pretty good garbage truck, a function he hopes will one day become unnecessary.

"This past spring marked our 14th annual cleanup of the river,"

Burns says with pride. “We drop people off along the shoreline or on islands. Later in the day we pick them up along with the bags of trash they’ve collected. The first few years it was a big job because so much stuff had accumulated. Now it’s not so bad.”

Another way Burns can keep an eye on the river is from the air. “One of our former board members has a small airplane, and he’ll take me up. We can see things up there we can’t see from the boat. Some things, like water discoloration, are easier to see from high altitude.”

Not all the work occurs on the river. “I do a lot of speaking at schools and organizations about the river. And I go to a lot of meetings with government officials.”

Two of his favorite projects have involved signage. He created and placed one series that provides the public with an FDR phone number in case something amiss is seen.

“We created those signs,” Burns explains, “after an incident on the Rouge River, which flows into the Detroit River. Some fishermen saw an oil spill but didn’t know who to call to report it. If we can get people on the river to call us, we can check out the situation, then involve the right authorities.”

Another series of signs proscribes dumping into storm drains. “We’ve placed about 13,000 of those signs in more than 20 different communities,” Burns says. “A lot of people don’t realize that what they put in the drain ends up in the river.”

Burns shakes his head when he thinks about the condition of the river when he was young.

“For years industry polluted at will. They’d pour their stuff straight into

the water and dump their solid wastes on islands. In some areas the water had oxygen levels of essentially zero and pH readings of 12, which is extremely alkaline.

“After the passage of the Clean Water Act of 1972, things got dramatically better. People became much more interested in water quality.”

Threats to the river continue, though, and can come from almost anywhere, including the air. Some shoreline industries, like the power plant, burn coal.

“On a windy day, clouds of coal dust blow out over the river. When the dust hits the water, it floats on the surface like an oil slick.”

Now that the river water is cleaner, the area teems with wildlife.

“I’m continually amazed at the number of turtles I see,” says Howell. “And bald eagle numbers have increased. Twenty years ago there weren’t any, but now we have about a dozen nesting pairs.

Bank and tree swallows are real common and there is an effort being made to help terns by creating nesting sites.”

Cormorant numbers have also increased, which is a bit of a problem. The large black birds like to roost in large numbers in trees on some of the islands. Their waste eventually coats the trees and kills them.

“They’ve ruined a couple of our small islands that way,” Burns says.

Another species that has increased, to the detriment of the river, are non-native mussels. “For a long time our problem was zebra mussels. Their numbers have decreased, but an increase in the quagga mussel population now threatens.”

Although almost all unprotected shoreline has been developed, islands have had the potential to be what Howell calls “a wildlife oasis.” Too small or too wet for development, they can provide crucial habitat. By one

count, there are 23 such islands in the waterway, though the number depends on the definition of the word and the water level. Right now the river is running high.

“A lot of small areas we used to see are submerged right now,” Burns says.

Some islands, like Grassy Island, are former dumpsites that remain very much contaminated. They might be home to wildlife but they are strictly off limits for people.

Burns is familiar with the history of some of those islands. Thinking back to his early marine contracting years in the ‘80s, he says that in some cases, “It was my crew that dredged the stuff up that ended up on the islands.” He’s happy now to help change that history as part of island restoration work.

FDR, which has 350 members, has been active in a number of restoration projects. Sometimes that means opening up areas to the river so a flow can be re-established. That was the case with a wetland area on Belle Isle. Sealed off from the river, it had become stagnant. Sediment had started to fill it in. The solution was to dredge an opening so river water could recharge the area.

Other restoration efforts involve the opposite approach: rebuilding a barrier to reduce or eliminate river flow so that an area doesn’t get eroded or washed away.

On Stony Island, for example, a shoal of rocks and limestone



*Sugar Island is a great example of an FDR-brokered compromise that allows boaters to use one of the few great beaches on the river and preserve the remainder of the island as a wildlife refuge for animals like this coyote.*

boulders will be rebuilt to protect the area’s wetlands from the current. The \$7 million to fund the effort will come from the federal government and be disbursed by the FDR.

“Once our group got organized we were well positioned to administer grant money effectively,” says Howell.

FDR efforts often benefit plants, animals and humans together. Take Sugar Island, which was home to an amusement park until the 1940s. After the park was abandoned, nature reclaimed the island. The federal government purchased it and declared it a protected refuge, effectively ending a decades-old tradition of boaters using the island’s small sandy beach, one of the few that exist on the Detroit River.

That’s when FDR got involved. Working with boaters and regulatory officials, FDR brokered a compromise that allows boaters to continue to use the beach and avoid the island’s inland area.

Both men take pride in what has been accomplished. “FDR has had a hand in almost everything good that’s happened to this river in the last 20 years,” says Howell.

“I would never have guessed, when I was at K, that I’d be here now,” Burns says. “But so much of my life has been preparing me for this job.”

Having Burns remain as Riverkeeper is important to Howell.

“I can’t imagine trying to replace Bob. His background and skills are unique.”

Turning to Burns, Howell says, “Don’t even think about quitting on my watch!” 🐾



*The before-and-after of FDR’s Frank and Poet Creek restoration project.*