

PAGE B1

Patuxent Section Paying Heavy Sewage Disposal And Sedimentation Cost

Maryland's Sewer—II

For 110 miles, the banks of Maryland's Patuxent River are feathered with beauty, mud, dumps, trailer parks, sewage treatment plants, gouged-out gravel pits and the sights, signs and symbols of what the river has lost, is losing and still hangs onto against the odds of civilization. Michael Wentzel and Michael Shultz found many of these things on a canoe trip along a portion of the river. This is the second report in a five-part series on the Patuxent River.

By Michael Wentzel

The mud on the river bank off Queen Anne's Bridge road in Prince Georges county is thick, greased for a quick slide for the careless walker.

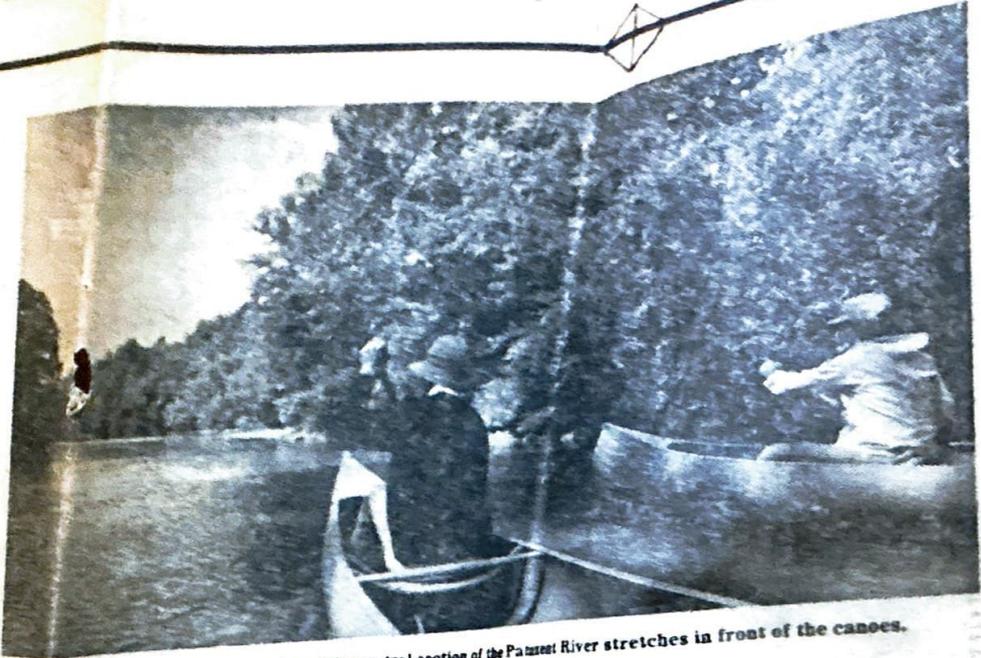
"You city boys sure come prepared," says Elaine Griffith, the feisty manager of Prince Georges county's Jug Bay Park. His shin-high rubber boots slurp into the muck as he tugs the bright-orange canoe into the Patuxent River.

I venture down the river bank first and my somewhat worn, retired running shoes take the day's first dip into the mud—a good 4 inches in—picking up a sad, gray-brown stain and a bitter odor that won't leave.

Michael Shultz does little better, sliding in his sneakers instead of sinking.

It is early and a vagrant cold front has turned spring backward into a blustery March day. The river ripples in parts with the wind, and the trees are alive with the sudden rushing, falling sound of gusts.

We are starting late (8:30 A.M.) but the morning is still cold and we all wear thermal underwear, turtle-necks, sweat-



WATER TRIP—A scenic portion of the central section of the Patuxent River stretches in front of the canoes.

treatment plant frequently fails and dumps untreated waste into the river. "Just a fine spot," Blaine says. "Get a good picture of the plastic ducks on the hill and that fine treatment plant."

On an earlier excursion, Blaine had taken Michael Shultz and me by powerboat up the river and into Western Branch, where a massive plant is set to discharge almost 15 million gallons a day into the river. The trip had its good and bad sides. We saw a young bald eagle circling over the river marshes. Geese, talking loudly, were eating snails on the river bank that was dark and wet since the tide was out. An osprey with a fish dangling from its beak flew over the river.

As we neared Western Branch, Blaine explained how the area failed to freeze this winter, one of the coldest in memory. The water was warm with bacteria and decay. He stopped the boat in the a shallow portion of the branch. We watched the river percolate, a bubbling near the banks from the decay on the river bottom.

Sediment flows have turned the river a dull brown in this region and have filled in huge, expansive marshes. The sediment holds the nutrients from farm fertilizers and from the nutrients in the

tion, and clams, crabs and oysters are faring little better. The watermen and water-lovers have lost the river's bottom, choked off by sediment and heavy algae growth that is fed by the wastewater.

"Oh, my God, there's been a hell of a change in the river," said Adolph Welch, a Benedict waterman for 30 years, who speaks with the same troubled bewilderment as other watermen. "I didn't know what pollution was and I never was told that pollution was coming."

Donald Heinle, a research scientist with the Chesapeake Biological Laboratories, has worked on the river since 1963. He has seen a decrease in clarity, even at Solomons, where the river is wide and fed by the bay.

"From October to May, you used to be able to see the bottom clearly," he said. "No longer. I could walk out a pier here in the summer and see the sponges and oysters on the bottom in 15 foot of water. No longer."

Bernard Fowler, the 53-year-old chairman of the Calvert county commissioners, remembered his youth on Brooms Island, and his portrait was similar.

"I worked while I was going to school, nipping for big oysters in the