



# 25 YEARS: Resurgence of Mill Creek

**Mission:** *“We champion the resurgence of the Mill Creek Watershed as a natural and community asset.”*

Mill Creek, a stream flowing from Butler county headwaters, bisects the hills of Cincinnati, often most visible along the I-75 corridor. This river was once seen as a prized asset for not only providing hydraulic power but also transportation for a booming population as the town of Losantiville quickly grew into the City of Cincinnati.



The waste and refuse from the growing population and industry, were being deposited into Mill Creek devastating the vitality of the stream. Later on, sections of Mill Creek had millions of gallons of concrete poured into channels to fortify stream banks and manage flood waters. The stream’s ecosystem was heavily impacted by this channelization; one characteristic in particular was a rise in water temperature. Warmer waters can affect aquatic organisms’ bodily functions, create an imbalance in sex ratios of eggs, disrupt plant functions, and encourage algal growth.

In 1997, Mill Creek received a dubious honor. It was designated as “[O]ne of the most severely polluted and physically degraded urban streams in the United States and the most endangered urban river in the North America,” by American Rivers, the leading national stream conservation group. 25+ years of hard work and restoration efforts later, this once-overlooked river shall be remembered differently.

**Vision:**  
*“We envision the watershed as a healthy ecosystem where people and communities can thrive.”*

The stream’s resurgence is evidenced by biological and chemical data. Data collected by the Ohio EPA has allowed the distinction of Mill Creek as a “secondary contact river system” meaning one can wade, paddle, and fish the stream. Bird species are rebounding and using the watershed for migratory routes and habitat; fish such as white striped bass, walleye, and bluegill have been caught recently; and combined sewer system overflows are slowly but surely being eliminated.

Mill Creek Alliance has been working closely with many partners including the Metropolitan Sewer District of Greater Cincinnati on restoring the stream while simultaneously addressing combined sewer system dilemmas. Projects have included installations of wetland habitats (Twin Creek Preserve), re-stabilization of creek beds (Sharon Creek Confluence), and installation of an edible food forest (Freedom Tree Grove). Improvements such as these catalyze improvements of local neighborhoods, as well as water quality and wildlife habitats for all to enjoy.



# #MillCreekEducation



MCA's environmental education program engages students with hands-on field science. Adapting the programs to accommodate the needs of the resilient teachers and students post-COVID was a necessary and rewarding service to provide. Some teachers and classes hadn't been allowed to leave their classroom for 2+ years and getting these students learning outside again rekindled their joy for learning, especially in the STEM field. Thanks to dozens of volunteers, interns, and partnering organizations, the students were thoroughly engaged with ecological and aquatic science field trips to MCA restoration sites. Overcoming bus shortages, and unexpected cancellations, as well as implementing a novel program that engages teens with fishing, The Mahketewah Anglers Program, the spring and summer seasons have been fruitful.

Highlights of our spring season include:

1. More than 300 students representing 13 different schools were introduced to Mill Creek for the first time with our hands-on field studies program.
2. Volunteers collected data showing nearly a 50% decrease in phosphates since 2013. Real data was then able to be analyzed and compared with student-centered field studies.
3. More than 7 species of local Ohio fish have been caught, identified, and released back into Mill Creek by our Mahketewah Angler Program's participants.

Physically, improvements to Mill Creek are visible, but memories of what the river used to be cloud the brain. It is with hope that these sampling data of chemical and biological indicators with our students and volunteers provide transformative evidence that Mill Creek is restored: we shall continue this trend!



# #MillCreekRecreation



April showers bring May flowers and also Mill Creek Yacht Club outings! MCYC is an intrepid group of volunteers firmly aligned with their motto "Hands Dirty, Feet Wet" and a mission to provide "Fun with a Purpose!" The veterans of MCYC truly understand Mill Creek and its ruggedly charming waters; they are the experienced guides who best understand the river's strong, recirculating currents, its shifting sediments, and how to navigate low head dams and impediments safely.

Striving to engage the public and share this incredible natural wonder with all of Cincinnati, Mill Creek Alliance and MCYC planned several stream adventures this spring, a few of which were thwarted by heavy rains. However, together with many community partners, we were able to engage the surrounding communities in our 3rd Annual Canoes and Conversations event.

Highlights of Canoes and Conversation include:

1. The purpose was to gain community commitments for restoration and of Mill Creek's watershed, including the CROWN's urban Mill Creek Greenway Trail to improve ecosystems, transportation alternatives, and economic development.
2. State, county, and local officials and community leaders gathered streamside to learn about recent watershed improvement projects, economic benefits, and recreational opportunities along Mill Creek.
3. More than 130 people joined us for lunch and a business panel under the tent, 51 paddled down the creek, and 31 attended a [future] trail tour and completed a stream site habitat survey.

Trails are where communities connect. Whether it be a waterway (river) or a greenway (multi-use path), we are thrilled by the passion and support of the surrounding communities for these trails and Mill Creek improvements.

## Voices of Mill Creek: Connecting with our Watershed Communities

"I actually canoed on Mill Creek one time, after a cleanup had been done, and I was very impressed with it. It was a beautiful section that I canoed down. We went all the way from the headwaters of Twin Creeks Preserve down to Koenig Park, and we had a great time! I found it a lot better."

"It's a great place for recreation and one goal is to also make it a place for businesses. We hope we can open restaurants and things like that along Mill Creek, kind of like 50 West and those things on the Little Miami; it's a great opportunity for the community."

— Evendale Mayor Richard H. Finan

"The people involved, they're all just great, fun people. They're not just dedicated, they're interesting, and you feel like you're in good company when you're doing good work there. It's a nice green space, would be great to see trails along side. It's a largely untapped resource to the community, a place you can go and have fun!"

— Local Resident, Greg B.

"The Mill Creek watershed is seeing a revival and the potential for business development, habitat restoration, and recreational opportunities are in store for the future of Mill Creek. Mill Creek has a new future. Thanks to decades worth of restoration and cleanup efforts from hundreds of thoughtful stewards including government officials, local school children and Cincinnati residents representing 30+ municipalities."

— Local Resident, Eli F.

"I used to walk home from school and I would stop to look over the side of the (W. Seymour) bridge at it. You never knew what you were going to find. It would be a load of suds coming downstream or an oil slick coming down...you never see anything like that now."

— Local Resident,  
Vivian H.

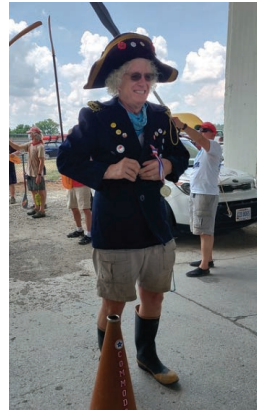
"The legacy perception is changing. The more people get out and the more people use it, the more people know about it and the better off we are. Mill Creek is a nice, little stream for an afternoon of paddling."

— Local Resident, Bernie M.

"My first introduction to the Mill Creek, at least firsthand, was that it's not that bad. It supports life, there's fish in it, people fish in it, I've kayaked in it and it is a fun place to kayak."

— Local Resident, Bridget T.

## Volunteer Spotlight: The Commodore, Bruce Koehler



No matter how far and wide you search, you won't be able to find a greater 'champion of Mill Creek's resurgence' than Bruce Koehler, AKA The Commodore. For over 27 years, Koehler has proudly served Mill Creek through his leadership and founding of Mill Creek Yacht Club (MCCYC). The Commodore has

contributed to the revival of Mill Creek because of his countless "Clean up by Canoes" events. Mill Creek was once an afterthought for the city and people of Cincinnati; some folks believed Mill Creek was 'a lost cause,' but this was never the case with The Commodore. He saw the polluted river as an opportunity to have "fun with a purpose" the purpose: to restore the watershed!

Bruce saw Mill Creek for what it could become once again; he understood the valuable aquatic waterway for being a corridor for life and a riverway spilling with potential for adventure. He focused his infectious love and energy for the environment by forming an intrepid group of trail-blazers and close-knit do-gooders who also embody his desire to clean up Mill Creek for all to enjoy. His love for the water, his joyful charisma, and his hospitable attitude make all members of MCCYC know they matter and belong. Whether The Commodore is making a new nickname for you, singing "Day-O" under the bridges, or creating catchy poems and tunes themed around litter, this man's heart is always engulfed in all things Mill Creek. This man lives, breathes, and wears Mill Creek on his sleeve. Bruce, you are a champion; we are so grateful for your work!



# #MillCreekRestoration

Optimism comes with restoration; Mill Creek Alliance champions the resurgence of the once-mismanaged river to a revitalized, re-naturalized community asset where all can thrive! In her early days, the Queen City decided that the meandering stream along the Miami-Erie Canal could be used as a public dumping ground rather than a drinking water source. Further water mismanagement led to deforestation, wetland loss, eroding stream banks, and combined sewer overflow points dumping directly into Mill Creek. Working tirelessly with a myriad of partners, we are actively shifting currents with some astounding restoration projects.



Restoration activities in 2022 have included:

1. MCA completed our \$390,000 Clean Ohio Fund grant to mitigate two low-head dams. The funds allowed for the reconfiguration of the stream channel and stabilization of deteriorated stream banks as well as incorporation of hardy, native flora.
2. The Ohio EPA awarded MCA \$299,000 to mitigate a treacherous section of Mill Creek at river mile 12.0. The location has been dubbed "Bonecrusher Falls" for its wild nature, steep drop-off, and rebar obtrusions that menace paddlers. Two additional grants totalling \$624,000, will fund ~2000 ft. of stream restoration along with improved public access for all to enjoy the wonders of Mill Creek.
3. The H2Ohio Grant Program awarded MCA \$499,000 for the Westchester Wetland Restoration Project, which will restore ~6 additional acres of wetland in upper Mill Creek/Port Union-Gilmore Ponds Conservation Corridor. This project adds additional habitat to some of the last remaining wetlands in the Mill Creek valley.



While more work is required to improve the watershed, we have witnessed a metamorphosis of Mill Creek over these last 25 years. The stream currently provides excellent opportunities for paddling, birding, and fishing. This green 'highway' is teeming with life; birds hide between swaying branches and the concealing canopy; insects dart from plant to plant amongst the riparian woods; fish use the water to migrate, hunt, mate, and play! Our efforts have made a large impact over the years; let's continue to champion the resurgence of Mill Creek!

## Upcoming Calendar of Events

July 30	MCYC Cleanup at Barrier Dam
August 6	Mill Creek Peek at Paddlefest / 180 Celebration at Finish Line
August 8	MCYC Monthly Meeting [2 <sup>ND</sup> Monday of each month]
August 27	MCYC Urban Stream Adventure
September 1	Trash-a-Thon BEGINS (through Oct 31)
September 24	Run the Riffles / Great Outdoor Weekend
October 15	MCYC Urban Stream Adventure
October 7-10	Visionaries + Voices Exhibit
October 29	Upper Mill Creek Cleanup

*For event details, visit our website:  
[themillcreekalliance.org/calendar-of-events](http://themillcreekalliance.org/calendar-of-events)*



## Invest in Your Local Watershed

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