

# The Elegy of Hater #2

By Brad Walker, Rivers Director - Missouri Coalition for the Environment      February 28, 2018

## **Introduction - Caitlin Zera**

*For anyone who finds themselves drawn serendipitously or intentionally to environmental work, it is no secret that it can be discouraging.*

*In our political climate, which has grown increasingly hostile and corporatized, environmental activism often is reactive. We are immobilized to make change and proactively protect our planet because special interests have captured the very mechanisms of our democracy.*

*As the saying goes, we occasionally win the environmental battles but we are losing the war.*

*We cannot address environmental problems unless we have the foresight to address larger (and arguably more insidious) root causes - the relentless pursuit of profit over community health, the myth of unlimited growth, the corporatization of our public resources like clean water and air, and the buying and selling of our democracy.*

*The past few years have been difficult - we have seen unprecedented rollbacks in environmental protections, the widening of the wealth gap, and the spending of untold sums on political campaigns. But when I look to the future of our movement, I see hope if all environmentalists would also become fervent defenders of democracy.*

## **The end of my second career path**

I have had a very interesting and satisfying second career working on the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) and more recently the Missouri River, which has spanned over 11 years and three organizations. In retrospect it may have been pre-destined to happen.



**Figure 1: Source - US Army Corps of Engineers**

After I finished my first late-life return to college at Western Illinois University in 2002 I was signed up to do a year-long internship at a respected land trust near the Mississippi River in Alton, IL. I backed out on it because I found another opportunity near DeKalb, IL where both of my sons were going to college – how could I not take advantage of that. Then the second Gulf War happened and set off a recession; eventually I lost my funding so off I went to my second college tour at the University of Florida - coincidentally during the two years of the most hurricanes in decades there.

While in Florida I eventually decided that I wanted to do advocacy-work related to either democracy (corporate power more specifically) or sustainability. The seeds of that garden had been [planted throughout my life](#) but finally bloomed during the George W. Bush era of blatantly subverting government through corporate capturing of agencies (which I believe has already become almost a nostalgic period when compared to the abuses of the current administration). After completing my course work and learning that I was not a very good large classroom teacher I abandoned my dissertation work and looked for a non-profit job.

I was lucky enough to get an offer from Prairie Rivers Network (PRN) in Illinois ironically to work on the Upper Mississippi River near Alton. Despite my near total lack of experience with major rivers PRN hired me. That experience encompassed driving over the Mississippi River when I left for Idaho after graduating for college for my new job in 1975 and then driving over the river again in 1996 when I returned to Illinois; aside from a short trip to interview for the land trust job in Alton I mentioned earlier.

When I started with PRN in 2006 I was clueless about the problems on our major rivers. As I once spontaneously admitted to a MCE coworker — “I really am not a river person, although I once played one on TV”. But in some respects this lack of knowledge may have been a benefit because it motivated me to learn about rivers, at least in part so as not to look too ignorant. I also think that I came into this new arena with few preconceptions regarding the issues.

Fortuitously, I had an excellent mentor in the late Mark Beorkrum. He took the time to teach me the basics and provide me with enough background and direction to recognize that there were two primary things I needed to do. In order to advocate on river restoration and the activities that have caused the need for it, one has to figuratively emerge themselves into the river. In order to accomplish this I had to:

- extensively read and research river history and the numerous studies that have been written and
- travel and explore the river.

I truly lament that my mentoring was cut short by Mark’s untimely death but he has had a lasting impression on me.

My next transition was a move to the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) in 2008 that relocated me to Davenport, IA. I was lucky to have a great supervisor, Brad Redlin, who was well versed in the issues of the river. This new position allowed me to cover the entire UMR, reinstitute the Nicollet Island Coalition (NIC) and write a report titled *Big Price – Little Benefit*. Through this period I learned the value and benefits of working on important issues with a focused group of dedicated people within NIC. The members of NIC were instrumental in completing and publishing the [Big Price – Little Benefit report](#) in 2010, which was an analysis and critique of the Corps proposed 2007 expansion of navigation structure on the UMR and Illinois River north of St. Louis – essentially building new locks.

But my time with the IWLA was to come to an abrupt end in May 2011 and I found myself jobless in Edwardsville, IL across from St. Louis.

However, by June I found the organization that would be my final stop in my second career with the Missouri Coalition for the Environment in St. Louis. My departure from the IWLA was difficult for various reasons but despite a rather thorny situation, Kat Logan-Smith, MCE’s Executive Director at the time, graciously hired me.



Figure 2: Bellevue, Iowa Source - Brad Walker



**Figure 3: Source - St. Louis Public Radio**

One of the pieces of baggage I brought with me was another report I had been drafting, although unfortunately portions of the report were held hostage for a short time. The report used the UMR as a case study for discussing the lack of a legitimate sustainability framework within the management and use of our major rivers. Once the prisoner negotiations were completed the report titled [\*Our Future? - A Vision for a Land, Water, and Economic Ethic in the Upper Mississippi River Basin\*](#) was eventually finished and although I failed to get it published in 2012 as a NIC report, most of the members of NIC did assist

in its completion and signed onto it as individual organizations.

Further, while with MCE we were able to expand the organization's involvement on federal policy for our major rivers beyond the Mississippi River Water Quality Collaborative. This includes committee-level participation on other coalitions including the Water Protection Network and the Mississippi River Network. MCE eventually added Missouri River work to its mission through a two year effort with Caroline Pufalt at the Missouri Chapter of Sierra Club to organize the Lower Missouri River Collaborative (LMRC) in 2016. The importance of establishing the LMRC cannot be overstated. There has always been an abundance of very loud, pro-river-resource exploitation voices, which have benefited directly from that exploitation at the taxpayer's expense. The Missouri River had no organized, river-wide pro-environmental voice and the LMRC will hopefully fill that void.

Personally, I was given the latitude by both of the MCE Executive Directors that I have worked with to write numerous [blog articles](#) on river-related topics taking a strong advocacy position for protecting the rivers and focusing upon root causes and the primary river exploiters. I think the blogs provided the unexpected opportunity that let me [play that river person](#) when I became known as "Hater #2."

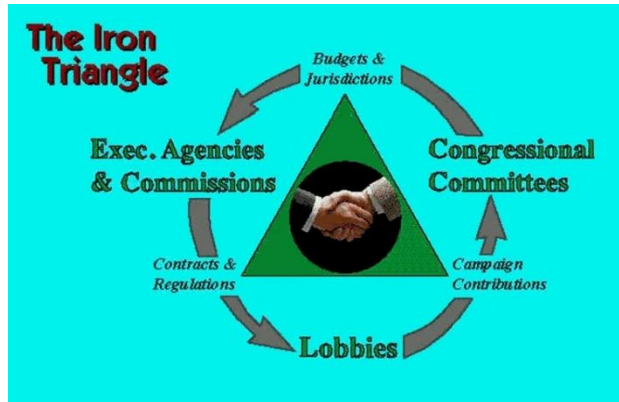
For the vast part, my time with MCE has been enriching and enjoyable. I have learned a lot, visited numerous places that I never would have otherwise, and met many new and wonderful people – there are too many to list here. Opportunities to assist in the very difficult task of improving these two rivers were afforded to me and I hope that I was up to the task.

One of the things I have struggled with was our limited ability to persuade legislators to act in the best interests of the general public regarding our rivers. I initially thought it was simply their desire to provide economic prosperity to their constituents through creating more jobs and benefits from new projects. But after digging deeper and recognizing that the authorization of the majority of those projects within the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), was largely symbolic because most of the new river-related projects authorized in WRDAs are never built and the legislators know this.

To the detriment of the general public, most federal legislators located in the UMR region — especially those with ties to the river — primarily do the bidding of special interests by supporting the Inland Waterways System (IWS) and floodplain industrial agriculture that exploit the river system. The IWS, which was built and has been operated by the US Army Corps of Engineers for over 80 years to float oversized barges, has major problems.

- It is more than 90% subsidized by the taxpayers and its construction and continuing operation have been the primary cause of the environmental damage to our large rivers.

- Also, although the barge industry claims their system is the most fuel efficient, the system is less fuel efficient than rail (and thus more polluting) in the most of the UMR region.
- Finally, only a small group that includes the barge and industrial-agriculture interests significantly benefit from this inefficient transport system.



**Figure 4: The Iron Triangle**

It is this cozy relationship between industries – Congress – the Corps of Engineers, often called the “Iron Triangle”, which is at the heart of the problems with these rivers (See Figure 4). The UMR - IWS is a “money pit” both from a navigation and environmental degradation perspective that endures only through propaganda and political donations. It is the public’s lack of knowledge regarding this ongoing boondoggle that allows it to persist. If an objective and fiscally conservative evaluation was performed and the results became public knowledge, I believe that public opinion would support the

removal of the segments of the IWS north of St. Louis.

Removing deep draft barges and the infrastructure that allows them to operate would actually be an economic and environmental boon to many areas near the UMR and Illinois River north of St. Louis.

### **The merging of interests and concerns - Corporations and Sustainability**

This is where other special activities I have had the opportunity to work on within MCE have come into play because they cover the issues and problems I plan to work on after I leave.

One of these special activities is the Democracy in Action (DIA) work that was formally begun in the summer of 2015 with two wonderful interns who researched and setup the DIA program and organized information for future interns. The DIA program is a self-directed internship focused upon informing people that our ability as a society to protect the environment has been significantly diminished due to the power and influence of political money and corporations on all levels of government. Unfortunately, this problem is much broader and more pernicious than just our concerns for environmental destruction because it covers all aspects of public policy.

Over the last two and half years we have had 12 DIA interns performing various tasks expanding and refining the message. During the spring of 2017 our intern setup the [DIA web pages](#), created a very informative online [Corporate Personhood Timeline](#), and we began using the more understandable phrase “Reclaiming Democracy” to describe our efforts. Our two summer 2017 interns wrote insightful reports, one on [corporate personhood](#) and the other on the how a [transformation](#) to a society no longer dominated by corporations might occur.

In August 2017 Caitlin Zera of MCE and I were able to present at the [2017 Democracy Convention](#) in Minneapolis, MN. MCE was the only environmental organization presenting specifically on the need to solve the corruption caused by extreme corporate and money influence on our political system in order to be able to solve environmental issues.

To put this political influence problem into perspective, corporations were estimated to be 70 of the 100 top economies in the world in 2016, up from about 50 a decade ago (See Figure 5). That is an astounding and disturbing fact.



Top 100 Countries/Corporations					
Country/Corporation	Revenue (US\$, bns)	Country/Corporation	Revenue (US\$, bns)	Country/Corporation	Revenue (US\$, bns)
1 United States	3,251	35 Austria	189	69 Ping An Insurance	110
2 China	2,426	36 Samsung Electronics	177	70 United Arab Emirates	110
3 Germany	1,515	37 Turkey	175	71 Kroger	110
4 Japan	1,439	38 Glencore	170	72 Société Générale	108
5 France	1,253	39 Industrial & Commercial Bank of China	167	73 Amazon.com	107
6 United Kingdom	1,101	40 Daimler	166	74 China Mobile Communications	107
7 Italy	876	41 Denmark	162	75 SAIC Motor	107
8 Brazil	631	42 UnitedHealth Group	157	76 Walgreens Boots Alliance	103
9 Canada	585	43 CVS Health	153	77 HP	103
10 Walmart	482	44 EXOR Group	153	78 Assicurazioni Generali	103
11 Spain	474	45 General Motors	152	79 Cardinal Health	103
12 Australia	426	46 Ford Motor	150	80 BMW	102
13 Netherlands	337	47 China Construction Bank	148	81 Express Scripts Holding	102
14 State Grid	330	48 AT&T	147	82 Nissan Motor	102
15 China National Petroleum	299	49 Total	143	83 China Life Insurance	101
16 Sinopec Group	294	50 Argentina	143	84 J.P. Morgan Chase	101
17 Korea, South	291	51 Hon Hai Precision Industry	141	85 Gazprom	99
18 Royal Dutch Shell	272	52 General Electric	140	86 China Railway Engineering	99
19 Mexico	260	53 China State Construction Engineering	140	87 Petrobras	97
20 Sweden	251	54 AmerisourceBergen	136	88 Trafiquora Group	97
21 Exxon Mobil	246	55 Agricultural Bank of China	133	89 Nippon Telegraph & Telephone	96
22 Volkswagen	237	56 Verizon	132	90 Boeing	96
23 Toyota Motor	237	57 Finland	131	91 China Railway Construction	96
24 India	236	58 Chevron	131	92 Microsoft	94
25 Apple	234	59 E.ON	129	93 Bank of America Corp.	93
26 Belgium	227	60 AXA	129	94 ENI	93
27 BP	226	61 Indonesia	123	95 Nestlé	92
28 Switzerland	222	62 Allianz	123	96 Wells Fargo	90
29 Norway	220	63 Bank of China	122	97 Portugal	90
30 Russia	216	64 Honda Motor	122	98 HSBC Holdings	89
31 Berkshire Hathaway	211	65 Japan Post Holdings	119	99 Home Depot	89
32 Venezuela	203	66 Costco	116	100 Citigroup	88
33 Saudi Arabia	193	67 BNP Paribas	112		
34 McKesson	192	68 Fannie Mae	110		

**Figure 5: Corporations control 70 of the top 100 economies on the planet: [Source](#)**

Yet our federal government has completely abandoned any attempt to utilize our still existing anti-trust laws to reduce this dangerous accumulation of power.

The other extremely related issue I plan to work on is sustainability and consistent with the framework of sustainability outlined in the *Our Future?* report mentioned above. The report's definition of sustainability — actually termed “[strong sustainability](#)” — is much more specific than the watered down term often referred to as “[triple bottom-line](#)” sustainability or weak sustainability. Unfortunately, triple bottom-line sustainability has little to do with attaining actual sustainability other than pushing off our current unsustainable systems to later generations to tackle at increasingly more difficult conditions.

The fundamental flaw of triple bottom-line sustainability is that it ignores the incontrovertible fact that neither economic nor societal development can exist without both natural resources and a functioning environment. The concept exists solely on the misconception that somehow we can find a balance between resource and environmental exploitation and our flawed pursuit of unlimited economic expansion. But as has been pointed out by many very smart people, we cannot persist in this futile pursuit of unlimited growth on a finite planet.

*E.F. Schumacher said it as clearly and succinctly as can be: “it does not require more than a simple act of insight to realize infinite growth of material consumption in a finite world is an impossibility.”*

The best indicator of our failure to address this issue honestly and systemically is the concept of [Ecological Overshoot Day](#), also known as Ecological Deficit Day. Earth Overshoot Day is the date each year “when humanity’s demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year.” The graphic below shows that we have pushed overshoot day back from nearly December 31 or 365 days (zero overshoot) in the

1970s to August 2 or 214 days (151 days of overshoot) in 2017. This is equivalent to overdrawing your retirement account by more than 40% before you even retire. This impact to our future security should be front page news and understood by everyone. Ecological Overshoot is also directly related to climate change because both are driven by our excessive historical, and continuing, use of fossil fuels.

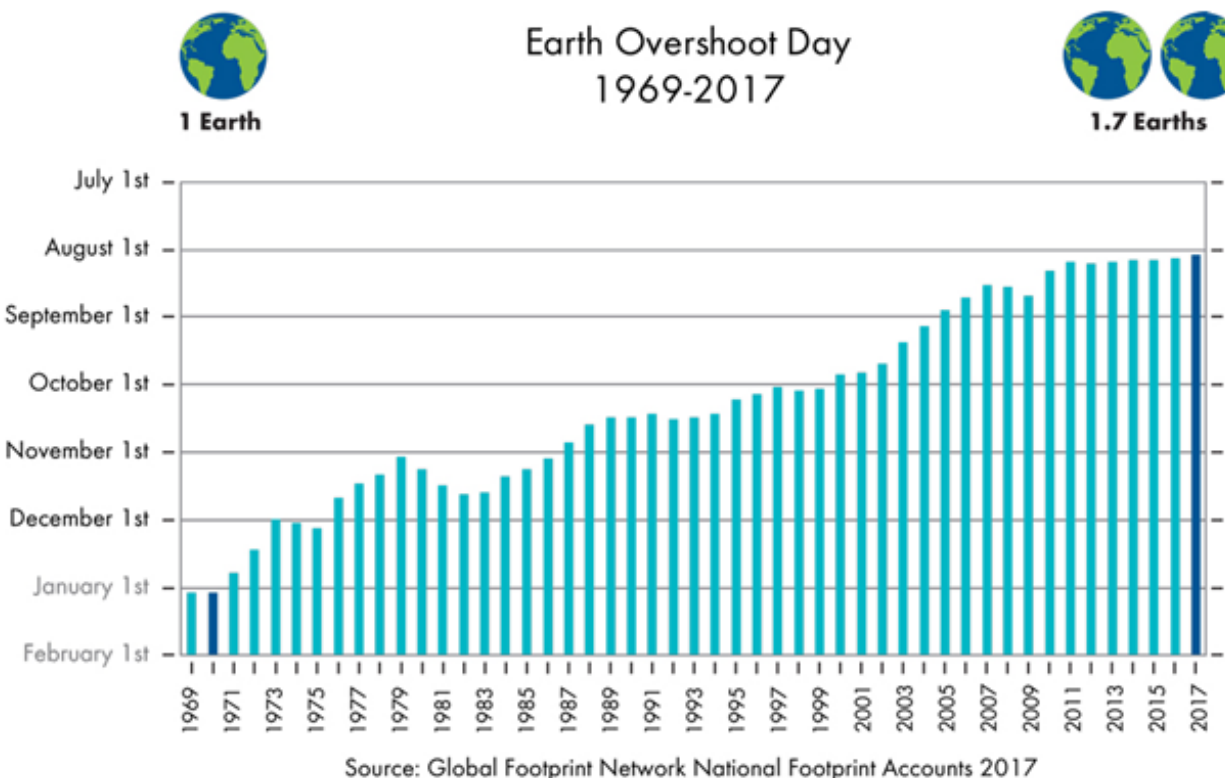


Figure 6: Earth Overshoot Days Over Time: [Source](#)

### Where I want to go from here

The principal reason we do not know about these problems, certainly in the USA, circles us right back to the excessive corporate power and political influence of money problems that are running rampant here and controlling not only government but the media. Media control has likely reached corporate-monopolistic levels never seen before in this country. Most sectors of our economy are also suffering from similar levels of monopolistic control including agriculture, banking, defense, retail, and transportation. As can be seen in the Figure 5 listing the ongoing transformation of corporations is moving them to a transnational status when they will no longer have any accountability to any country. This is already occurring through corporate created "institutions" such as the [World Trade Organization tribunal](#).

There is a direct connection between the over-exploitation of our natural systems and the unrelenting drive for power and control by wealthy people through corporations. My personal conclusion (I believe supported by many much smarter people than me) is that we cannot solve our environmental problems without regaining control of corporations. The same can be said for social issue battles such as discrimination and inequality. Frankly, there is an ongoing class war that a small percentage of the population is directing, winning, and most people seem to ignore or be completely unaware of.

The opponents of democracy managed to gain unwarranted rights for corporations (which are really nothing more than pieces of paper) in the late 1800s but were slightly beaten back in the

early 1900s by Teddy Roosevelt. Then the Great Depression was brought on by the corporate proponent's greed and led to some public relief during the mid-1900s from the New Deal social programs.

The corporation is the perfect tool to create, or rather steal, wealth from others. [They revved up their attacks](#) on democracy in the 1980s relentlessly attacking the New Deal public-beneficial social policies, as well as newer environmental protection policies, that were designed to protect basic rights. This has led now to a complicit Congress that is almost completely controlled by plutocrats using their corporate-generated money to manipulate policies to benefit themselves. The result is unprecedented inequality in a nation built on the belief that equal opportunity is essential to attaining freedom and prosperity. The Trump presidential election is simply an [expansion of this assault](#), not the beginning as some might want us to believe.

The 2017 election has shown us that everything is up for grabs. Any law, rule, or regulation, no matter how important they may be to the public, is open for reversal if corporate interests believe they are being impacted financially. National parks and monuments are on the block for exploitation. This level of abuse of power is only possible when government, be it federal or state, is "legally" corrupted by corporate wealth and influence and legislators fear their donor masters more than the public.

A complete [reversal](#) of the unwarranted rights awarded to corporations by our out of touch Supreme Court is the only secure and permanent solution. If all of us who are being abused by this small minority banded together this would be relatively easy to accomplish; but we will have to recognize that the opponents of democracy have worked for a century constructing false divides between us that we must rise above. Creating a true democratic system that places iron-clad protected checks and balances upon wealth should be the immediate goal of all of us. Other issues, even fully addressing climate change, are secondary and will be much easier to resolve once the influence of wealth on our system is controlled and minimized.

## US federal spending

Already proposed discretionary spending, 2018 (in \$billions)

Defense <b>574</b> (up 9%)	Dept. of Veteran Affairs <b>78.9</b>	Health <b>65.1</b>	Justice <b>27.7</b>
		Homeland Security <b>44.1</b>	State Dept. <b>27.1</b>
			NASA <b>19.1</b>
	Education <b>68.2</b>	Housing <b>40.7</b>	Agriculture <b>17.9</b>
			Transport <b>16.2</b>
		Energy <b>28</b>	Interior <b>11.7</b>

Note: Figures for Dept of Commerce, Labor, Environmental Protection, Small Business omitted for clarity

Source: Whitehouse.gov

BBC

Figure 7: [Proposed 2018 U.S. Federal Budget](#) reveals our country's values and priorities

This issue of corporate power and influence is what I plan to work on during my retirement. I will do this for my children and for your children. Please consider helping as well and take the time to research the contents of this article — don't take my word for it.

Finally, I want to thank you all for the opportunity I have had to write, and even pontificate, on lots of related topics over the last 6+ years. I have enjoyed it, but most of all it has been a great learning experience for me.

<http://moenvironment.org/environment-blog/2018/03/01/the-elegy-of-hater-2/>