

Mussel muscles dredgers

Okay, how about a show of hands of all who had heard of the INFLATED HEEL-SPLITTER MUSSEL before July 1995? Hmm, I thought so. Probably most people still haven't heard about it. But this rare bivalve has appeared as the most effective device so far to put a halt to the project by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to dredge the West Pearl River, one of Louisiana's designated natural and scenic streams. But first, some background information needs to be discussed.

Despite much vocal opposition to the project from an odd coalition of tree-huggers, main-stream conservationists and right-wing voters who live in St. Tammany Parish, the Corps, with at least passive support from Congressman Livingston, was going ahead with its plan to dredge the West Pearl. The purported justification was to open a channel to Bogulusa so that the paper industry there could be serviced by barge transportation. (The fact that highway and rail services were adequate was overlooked.) Then during the summer, someone found the shells of the Inflated Heelsplitter Mussel (I'm not making this up) in the West Pearl. That halted the boondoggle, at least for now, and with so much opposition from so many sources, the project may be gone. Let's hope so, anyway.

But back to the Inflated Heelsplitter. Until this past summer, it had not been seen in the Pearl River since 1911. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had listed it as a threatened species, and the threat to the sand-dwelling creature is described as particularly great from dredging because the silt created by dredging covers the shellfish's habitat. In case anyone is wondering where all this information comes from, it shows up in that most wondrous and enormous of bureaucratic documents, the Federal Register. In that vast crypt of information, one learns of the Inflated Heelsplitter Mussel that the "valves may gape anteriorly, the umbos are low, and there is a prominent posterior wing that may extend anterior to the beaks in young individuals. The umbonal cavity is very shallow and the nacre is pink to purple." This is important stuff to know so take notes. There may be a pop quiz later. What is missing from the Federal Register is an explanation for the popular name for the mollusk. Maybe when people walked in the streams and stepped on one it did

nasty and disgusting things to a foot.

We also can learn that the mussel was first described scientifically as *Symphynota Inflata*, perhaps to give it a more elegant name than the terms used when it was first dug up or stepped on. Besides being known as the Inflated Heelsplitter, it is also called the Alabama Heelsplitter.

This discovery reminded me that St. Tammany Parish is also the location of another stream-dwelling species on the threatened-and-endangered list. In January 1993, this column reported on the Louisiana Quillwort of Thigpen Creek, another great name to go with Inflated Heelsplitter Mussel. (Does a goofy name help to get a species onto the list? There's a fish on the list called a Smoky Madtom and a plant known as Furbish Lousewort. Go figure.)

The Inflated Heelsplitter of the West Pearl has become a pearl in the conservationists' jewelry box. The Corps of Engineers' dredging project is one of many designed to use public money to pay contractors to perform unneeded and unwanted public works. The colloquial term for this is "pork barrel." The lowly but threatened mussel is the Pearl's pearl that we cast before the swine of the pork barrel, not to be ignored, but to stop the project. Let's hope that the Inflated Heelsplitter Mussel has deflated the West Pearl dredging project onto its own private endangered list - for good. Δ

- Earl Higgins

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