

**Two Visions of the Kickapoo River:  
Voices For and Against the Lake LaFarge Dam Project**

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### **Introduction—a counterfactual:**

It's summer at Lake LaFarge State Park and your T-shirt sticks to your back with the mingled heat and humidity. After the hot drive from Madison, west on US-14 and then north up the Kickapoo valley on US-131, you rejoice to finally set your rental canoe into the lake's cool, murky water. As you paddle out into the middle of the lake, you hear the playful yells of small children as they splash each other in the weedy shallows. From your vantage point on the water you can see some of the Lake's 36 miles of nature trails as they wind up and down the surrounding hills and bluffs. A young couple is walking on one of the trails now, following a path along part of the lake's 60-some miles of shoreline. Arm in arm, they are just two of the thousands of visitors that will come to the park this Labor Day. Now that you've well out on the water, floating out far from the winding shore, you tell your partner in the front of the canoe to open the cooler and grab you a cold drink. After popping the top, you slide down and make yourself comfortable. *There's nothing wrong with a day like today*, you think, and you would almost be right.

You would almost be right. While the paragraph above conveys the feeling of a Wisconsin summer day, it is completely fictitious. As anyone familiar with the Wisconsin State Park system knows, Lake LaFarge does not exist. An hour and a half west of Madison, State Highway 131 will indeed take you up the Kickapoo Valley, past the towns of Viola and LaFarge. But there is no sprawling artificial lake. Instead, the landscape is much subtler and the sluggish Kickapoo greets visitors as it snakes its way through the grassy floodplain between the valley's bluffs. Any paddlers to be found are not on a lake, but slowly wending down the river.

However, while Lake LaFarge does not exist, it might have. Today, the Kickapoo Valley is mostly quiet and, to naive eyes, appears nearly wild with obvious signs of past use obscured by decades of growth—mostly of old field grassland. Yet this is the same place where a dam was to constrict the river's flow, creating an artificial lake. Years of planning and millions of dollars were expended in an Army Corps of Engineers project that would have placed a massive

earthwork to block the Kickapoo just north of the town of LaFarge. The statistics in the brief description of a day on Lake LaFarge are taken from a plan for the new State Park that would have accompanied the reservoir (MAA, 1974). A section of the Kickapoo Valley bottom stretching from the LaFarge dam to the village of Ontario 10 miles north would have been inundated (Wilkening *et al*, 1973). If you know where to look, you can see the evidence—more than a third of the project was completed. While the dam itself could be mistaken for an unusually bald bluff, one of the concrete dam towers, bare of earth, provides a reliable landmark.

The land that was bought up for the aborted dam project now makes up the semi-wild Kickapoo Valley Reserve, a large nature area. Unlike the proposed Lake LaFarge Park or Wildcat Mountain State Park just to the north, access to the reserve is limited. While Wildcat Mountain provides ample parking and sites for car camping, all Reserve sites are primitive, with the majority accessible only by canoe (WI DNR, 2000). Trails for riding, hiking, and biking wind through the Reserve, but opportunities for recreation are relatively unstructured. There are no athletic fields, pools, or shelters and “iron rangers”—metal boxes at trailheads—serve to collect user fees. The atmosphere is less domesticated than that of larger state parks, and has a more selective appeal. While a nature-loving canoeist can find plenty to enjoy, a camper concerned primarily with convenience would be more at home elsewhere.

The cancellation of the Lake LaFarge project marks the crucial event in the recent history of the valley. Despite millions of dollars of construction and land expenditures, the forced evacuation of farmers from their lands, and the disappointment of many who had pinned their hopes for a local economic boom on its completion, resistance to the dam resulted in a halt in construction midway through the project. To understand the early termination of the project and present state of the Kickapoo River Valley, we certainly must understand the history framing the failure of the proposed dam. However, just as importantly, we must understand the effects of changing opinions about the role of humans in nature that accompanied the environmentalist movement and how these changes radically altered the fate of the Kickapoo.

### **The case for a dam:**

The idea of a reservoir/park complex in the Kickapoo Valley is the result of a compromise between regional demands and economic realities of construction. The combination represents a fusion of old attitudes toward use and the perception of a new need for organized outdoor recreation. Not surprisingly, the origin of the dam concept dates back to the New Deal. In the 1930s, residents of communities on the Kickapoo flood plain advocated for flood control through engineering (MAA, 1974). The depression was bad enough without natural disasters (surely a familiar sentiment that in the time of the Dust Bowl) and these already struggling communities had just experienced an especially severe flooding in 1935. Though pleas for flood control went unanswered during the New Deal's rush of public works construction, the idea of taming the Kickapoo was approved by Congress in 1962. The Army Corps of Engineers studies examined the feasibility of different flood control options, but the possible solutions were unsatisfactory.

Levees, dry dams, and other more ambitious designs were all projected to be extremely expensive. The problem of flooding on the Kickapoo was critical to residents, but with a low population and a history of economic depression in the valley, it was difficult to provide an objective economic justification for the project (MAA, 1974). Human costs of flooding were high, but the value of property at risk was not. The cost of even the most modest proposals was out of the question despite the Corps' generous criterion of balancing construction costs against costs of a 100-year flood: an inundation so severe as to come on average only once a century (US ACE, 1975). Under these conditions, demand for a dam could not justify projected expenditures.

Because the construction of a dam was not economically warranted for flood prevention alone, the Department of the Army enthusiastically sought an additional benefit to alter the economic calculus. Engineers hit upon the solution of a large reservoir dam. It would be expensive, but the resulting artificial lake could support a large new park. The added benefits

from this new recreational area would make up for the impracticality of constructing a dam to protect a historically poor area. Studies commissioned by the Corps of Engineers found the region of Wisconsin near the Kickapoo to be lacking in recreation resources (MAA, 1974). The same studies indicated that the large new artificial lake, christened Lake LaFarge, could remedy the problem.

These studies quietly and implicitly advance the idea of recreation as a fundamental planning necessity—an infrastructure of activity and amusement. In examining the region's deficit in recreational capital, the planners propose that, just as a certain number of, say, sewage treatment plants should be expected per person, so too should a certain number of facilities for canoeing, water-skiing, and hiking. In these documents, recreation has become a valid use for the land, in fact, a more valid use than the farming operations to which the land was then disposed. Flood protection, a large project for the Corps, and new, previously unsuspected economic benefits were mutually compatible positive outcomes of the Lake LaFarge plan. A natural, park experience could be created in one massive development, and its creation would provide a public good commensurate with the impressive construction task laid before the Corps. From the perspective of the Department of the Army, the project was a winner. When it came to damming the Kickapoo, more was more.

These same studies also envisioned an influx of tourism from a broader region, with residents or Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities making their way to the new park for a weekend of family camping (MAA, 1974). It must have been easy for planners to imagine an armada of suburbanites converging on the new park. A fleet would come from the cramped developments surrounding each nearby metropolis. Every year, the park would host hundreds of nuclear families, each to its own car, bringing camping gear and perhaps the family dog for a weekend in the open air.

Lake LaFarge would help meet the recreation demands of the new postwar culture, a large-scale development of open space to remedy the closeness of suburbia. Looking at maps of

the proposed park, or most extant Wisconsin State Parks, the idea gains force. Park design places campsites together in large groups, lined up alongside winding park roads and little cul-de-sacs. When its time to begin the day, the camper walks to a nearby field, trail, or beach. The geography of suburbia is replicated in the campground, mirrored in the vast field of tents, the importance of car access, and the commute from camp to nature proper. A familiar organization has been brought to bear on the outdoors.

### **The case against the dam**

The fusion of large-scale civil engineering and the vision of the outdoors as an escape from the consequences of large-scale development seems unlikely at first, but opposition to the project would also bring together an unusual confluence of old and new ideas of use. The Lake LaFarge project received strong criticism from upset farmers in the region who objected to the appropriation of their farmland and naysayers who saw the Corps project as an economic blunder in the making. Another body of opposition came from individuals and groups deeply concerned with the impact of the project on the wildlife: voices from the vanguard of environmentalism. While these two groups might not agree on the best use of the valley itself, each would agree that the Corps proposal callously ignored the rights of the valley's inhabitants, human or otherwise.

Arguments against the dam on the basis of negative economic impact were issued by the voices of the displaced and the skeptical. While the reservoir plan would hypothetically bring increased revenue to the region as park visitors purchased goods and services from nearby communities, its execution would come at a considerable cost to many valley residents. The location of the dam near LaFarge meant that the government would purchase the property of families who farmed in the section of the valley north of town. In theory, the benefits from the park would offset the lost economic contributions of evicted valley residents. However, while the Corps budgeted the cost of compensation for farmland, it glossed over both the changes that

would necessarily occur in valley communities and the risk to local economies should the project fail (KVR & US ACE, 2003).

To farmers whose lands were due to be purchased, the dam plan smacked of callous, uncaring government bureaucracy oppressing the individual. Compensation for lost land would not compensate for the destruction of the bond between a farm family and their acres or provide a ready solution for two obvious questions: where to go and what to do. Planning the future of the Kickapoo Valley was a top-down process without consultation with valley residents and obvious resentment did not deter the Corps of Engineers from proceeding. In fairness to the Corps, the loss of farmland to the proposed lake must have seemed trivial. Though the valley's soil is farmable, it is, at best, a reasonably fertile loam, and, at worst, poor, sandy stuff that crumbles in the hand. The rich organic soils of regions not far to the east—the area near Black Earth being an obvious example—are nowhere to be found in the Kickapoo Valley. The obvious risk of flooding and steep grade of valley hillsides also marked the region as less than ideal farmland.

To an organization used to operating on large scales, the loss of farms in the project area would have appeared to be a reasonable cost for subsequent regional benefits from Lake LaFarge. The poverty of the region necessitated a reservoir, but the loss of private property to the dam project could be justified by that very poverty. Unfortunately, the removal of farmers in the process of creating a dam designed to protect farm communities is more than an interesting historical irony. The loss of valley farmers was an economic blow to towns that were already suffering from poor employment prospects and flight to urban areas. Today, signs of economic hardship in the region are plainly visible. Near the reserve loom the ruined hulks of disused barns, now collapsed. In a town scrapyard, tractors, cars, and a schoolbus sit rusting. While the Corps' actions might have appeared wise in hindsight had the Lake LaFarge project been completed, the present state of Kickapoo Valley communities suggests that the project would have been at least a short-term loser even if it had proceeded.

There are other good reasons to expect that, even if the dam had been built, the Lake LaFarge project would have had less of a positive impact for local residents than was posited in Corps commissioned studies. For instance, a study by the University of Wisconsin Institute for Environmental Studies indicated that few individuals in the valley had both the knowledge and inclination to exploit new opportunities that might come with a park (Wilkening *et al.*, 1973). While a few local entrepreneurs might have taken advantage of the new opportunities, the lack of local capital and enthusiasm for business would have made entrepreneurial benefit by residents of valley communities the exception to the rule. Though new businesses and the park itself would have provided jobs for some residents, particularly unemployed younger adults, the assumption that the park would have greatly boosted the valley's economy should not have gone unquestioned by planners.

While many critics of the LaFarge dam were focused on the project's disruption of human communities, others were more concerned with effects on the valley's non-human denizens and adopting environmentalist arguments. From early on, the project came under fire from the John Muir chapter of the Sierra Club, which primarily voiced concerns over the dam's impact on rare species and the Kickapoo River at large (US ACE, 1977; Wilkening *et al.*, 1973). While early protests and several attempts at litigation in the early 1970s proved relatively ineffectual, the influence of environmentalism would play a major role in the downfall of the dam project.

While it is not surprising that the Sierra Club, a traditional defender of wilderness areas, opposed the dam, the grounds on which they opposed the project deserve closer examination. There is a certain irony in the Club's John Muir chapter launching an impassioned defense of the Kickapoo River Valley, for it is not the sort of landscape that immediately brings Muir to mind. The valley of the Kickapoo is far tamer, more beautiful and less sublime than the California Mountain valleys that Muir himself defended. The Kickapoo has beauty, but little of their

grandeur. It is a sluggish river and even appears so when it is flooded and at its most dangerous (WI DNR, 2000).

If one wants to find passion for the sort of landscape embodied by the Kickapoo, the writings of Aldo Leopold are a far better choice than the works of Muir. The difference between the two writers is telling. Muir sought transcendent nature wandering in the back of the beyond, whereas Leopold could find it in the environs of a blasted Wisconsin farm. Leopold brought poetry to low, wet places, and to semi-wild areas that had seen their share of human abuse. While Muir's work would become a holy text for many devotees of wilderness (Cronon, 1995), Leopold's essays about his sand farm would profoundly influence a more practical environmentalist esthetic. The battle to save the Kickapoo was more in keeping with Leopold, as a crusade to save beauty amidst a rural landscape than with Muir's battle to preserve the pristine and sublime.

As development squeezed into landscapes that had previously been unthreatened, its opponents followed. In a tactic that would later become commonplace, opponents of the dam condemned the project for its probable effects on threatened and endangered species, supported by the Endangered Species act of 1973. In the case of the Kickapoo, the species that drew the most attention was the officially threatened (and then proposed endangered) Northern Monkshood, *Aconitum noveboracense*. A beautiful wildflower, monkshood is dependent on cool soil to survive and the combined cooling effect of the Kickapoo River Valley's microclimates and sandstone bedrock makes it home to a significant portion of the *Aconitum* population. (US ACE, 1977) However, environmentalist arguments ostensibly based on threats to particular endangered species or other unique ecological features are problematic. By ignoring the whole of an area's environment for one threatened part, environmentalists obfuscate most of the area's virtues and weaken their argument for preservation (Cronon, 1995).

Opposition to the LaFarge dam provides a concrete example of the weakness of the endangered species argument. The threat to a flower species was not an effective deterrent to the

LaFarge Lake project. However, the negative consequences of the original reservoir design, as presented in a 1971 environmental impact study mandated by the 1970 Environmental Protection Act, led to significant changes in the dam project. The study found that the best quality of water in the proposed reservoir was likely to be “a relatively poor water quality” (MAA, 1974). Lake LaFarge would begin its life as a mature, eutrophic lake. The dam also presented a risk to the Kickapoo’s prospects as a fishery.

When the Corps adapted their project to meet new environmental demands, the more environmentally compatible reservoir design rapidly began to overrun projected costs. Following a 1974 study by the University of Wisconsin Institute for Environmental Studies that indicted the dam as environmentally and economically unsound, the project drew fire from former supporters in the Wisconsin Senate and was terminated in 1975 (Anderson & KVR, 2003). By forcing the dam project to include costs for reduction of environmental damages—internalizing externalities—the environmental impact statement had rendered the project obviously undesirable. A new appreciation for less than sublime landscapes was a critical part in rousing a defense of the valley, but some environmentalist tactics were more effective than others. It was a combination of new environmental legislation and broad arguments attacking the environmental quality of the Lake LaFarge project rather than appeals to protect endangered species that proved to be the dam’s undoing.

### **The Aftermath:**

Though the defeat of the dam project in 1975 may have pleased opponents in the environmental movement, it left Kickapoo Valley residents confused and bitter. The end of construction did not restore the land purchased by the Army Corps of Engineers to the families that had previously farmed it, nor did it restore the millions of dollars that had already been spent on construction. With the dam only part finished, the entire project, with its tremendous financial

and human costs, had produced what amounted to a man-made bluff. Citizens of the valley were left without the flood control for which they had pressed.

The failure of the reservoir project meant the end of attempts at large scale flood control on the Kickapoo. Alternative solutions that had already been rejected on economic grounds were even less appealing after the expenditure of the Lake LaFarge project and a more modest 1983 proposal for a small dry dam was rejected on the basis of insufficient returns for its still considerable additional cost. (US ACE & West, 2003) Citizen supporters of the project unsuccessful sought to use litigation to force the government to complete the dam project, but neither Lake LaFarge nor a smaller dam would ever be constructed. Efforts to minimize flood damage moved to a smaller scale. The village of Soldier's Grove, which suffered from frequent flooding, was largely relocated and provided with a minimal levee system. Otherwise, the demand for flood control in the valley was never answered.

The final disposition of the valley lands purchased by the Corps of Engineers was not decided until the Water Resources Development Act of 1996. Based on a remarkably democratic program that sought input from valley residents, the Corps properties were transformed into the Kickapoo Valley Reserve. As of 1998, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Board, a group consisting of residents of local communities and members of the Ho Chunk nation, has managed the lands (Anderson & West, 2003). While the Reserve is far more modest than the proposed Lake LaFarge Park, it also preserves more of the environmental character that gives the valley its appeal. The influence of local communities on the Reserve also stands in marked contrast to the top-down approach taken in development of the dam. In the end, those who advocated for a solution that left control of the valley in the hands of its residents received bittersweet satisfaction. While the Reserve may not undo the harm of failed development, it represents a compromise humans and nature, and economic hopes and hard realities that promises to determine the fate of the valley for a long time to come.

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