Resources of the St. Joseph River

The St. Joseph River has been a habitat for various biotic resources that were important to Native Americans and French settlers in the region. Particularly rich information is available from documentary, ethnographic, and archaeo logical evidence, including the remains of plants and animals that once lived in or adjacent to the river.

Aquatic Plants

Though plants seldom preserve in the archaeological record, ethnographic evidence indicates that the Potawatomis used aquatic plants for various purposes.

**Wild rice** (*Zizania palustris*) was once plentiful in the river and an important plant resource for Native Americans. It was made into soup, eaten with sweets, incorporated into other dishes, and sometimes gathered and stored for winter use. Native Americans and ecologists are currently making an effort to restore it throughout the state.

**Cattail** (*Typha latifolia*) had economic benefit to Native peoples. The Potawatomis harvested the stalks in the fall, dried them out, peeled off the outer layers, and sewed them together into mats to cover wigwams. Cattails were also made into medicine to ease inflammation, and the Natives used fluff from them to make an early form of diaper for infants.

Aquatic Animals

**Lake Sturgeon** spawn upriver in the spring and were plentiful in the St. Joseph River. Often exceeding 10 feet in length, sturgeon were a subsistence resource for both Native Americans and European settlers. The presence of numerous sturgeon bones at archaeological sites along the river like Moccasin Bluff and Wymer West are evidence of their dietary importance.

Various species of **freshwater clams** have been recorded in the St. Joseph River. Many of the shells that have been recovered from archaeological deposits at Fort St. Joseph may have been used to scrape deerskins in processing hides for the fur trade in the eighteenth century.

**Beaver** was initially the preferred fur-bearing animal because their hides were in high demand in Europe for making felted hats. Hats made from beaver were so popular that the fur trade led to overexploitation in some areas.

Birds, particularly migratory species, were among those present in the faunal remains from Fort St. Joseph. The diversity of birds is consistent with animal exploitation patterns at other French colonial sites in the region such as Fort Michilimackinac and Fort Ouiatenon in Indiana.

Mammals

**Muskrat**

**Beaver**

**Raccoon**

**Otter**

Plants

**Wild Rice** (*Zizania palustris*)

**Cattail** (*Typha latifolia*)

**Purple Loosestrife** (*Lythrum salicaria*)

**Mussels**

* Indicates that remains of species have been found in archaeological deposits at Fort St. Joseph.