

(This article was first published in *Heritage*, the Newsletter of the Missouri Parks Association, August 2001)

TAUM SAUK AREA THREATENED BY HYDRO PLANT

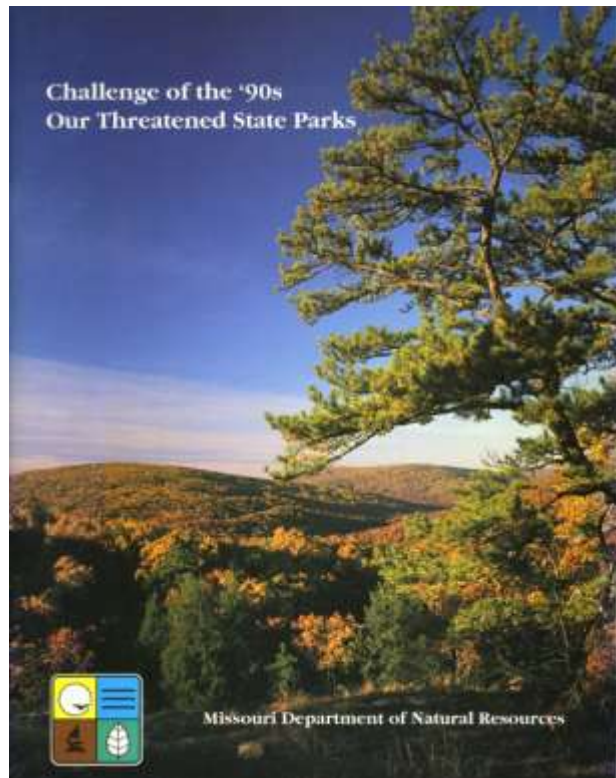
by Susan Flader

When state park officials selected a cover photo to illustrate their first-ever assessment of "threats to the parks" nearly a decade ago, they chose not a scene of despoliation but a symbolic representation of the best of what they were seeking to protect. It was a vista at the core of the Ozarks, looking from the state's grandest waterfall near its tallest peak across its deepest valley into the heart of Taum Sauk Mountain State Park, Missouri's then-newest public park but also its geologically oldest, wildest, most intact, and most ecologically diverse landscape.

Scarcely could one imagine that the very symbol of what they were seeking to protect through their threats study, titled "Challenge of the '90s," would itself become the most seriously threatened landscape in Missouri at the dawn of the new millennium. The photo showed two forest-blanketed, time-gentled igneous knobs in the heart of the St. Francois Mountains, on the left Smoke Hill, recently acquired by the state, and on the right Church Mountain, leased to the Department of Natural Resources for park trail development by Union Electric Company of St. Louis (now AmerenUE). But on June 8, the Ameren Development Company, a subsidiary of Ameren Corporation, filed an application for a preliminary permit with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for the Church Mountain Pumped Storage Project. It would consist of a 130-acre reservoir ringed by a 12,350-foot-long, 90-foot-high dam on the top of Church Mountain, a lower reservoir of 400 acres formed by a 1,900-foot-long, 100-foot high dam flooding several miles of Taum Sauk Creek, which has been designated a State Outstanding Resource Water, and associated tunnels, powerhouse, transmission lines, roads, and related facilities.

Leaders of the Missouri Parks Association, who have examined the proposal in the context of the resource values within the potentially impacted lands, consider this project the greatest threat to any unit of the park system in the nearly two decades of MPA's existence. The proposed project strikes at the heart of what MPA and the Missouri state park system stand for: preservation and interpretation of the state's most outstanding natural and cultural features and provision of outstanding recreational opportunities in keeping with the system's mission.

To be sure, the Ameren application seeks a *preliminary* permit-not one to authorize construction but a 36-month permit to proceed with economic and environmental studies and prepare engineering plans, including the drilling of boreholes and construction of access for drilling equipment. FERC has issued



a notice dated July 5 allowing 60 days from that date for comments, protests, and motions to intervene. The Ameren application and instructions for commenting are available on line at ferc.gov, using the "RIMS" link and selecting docket # P-12049.

The Missouri Parks Association, in addition to filing comments and perhaps a motion to intervene in the FERC proceeding, aims to persuade Ameren executives, most of whom are longtime Missourians with extensive civic involvement, that the environment of decisionmaking and public consciousness of the values at stake in this area have changed dramatically since the late 1950s, when Union Electric first began to acquire land to build their their initial-and, at the time, highly innovative and widely hailed-Taum Sauk pumped-storage plant on Proffit Mountain just to the west of Church Mountain. In short, we aim to persuade them that this project at this time in this place is decidedly not in the public interest.

* * *

The Taum Sauk area in the heart of the St. Francois Mountains at the geologic core of the Ozarks is wildness incarnate. Indeed, at a time when Americans have come to value wild lands and are determined to protect what remnants remain, the wild character of these lands, with their remarkable biodiversity, unspoiled vistas, and outstanding recreational opportunities, has taken on surpassing cultural as well as natural value.

The region near the forks of Black River, including Taum Sauk and Church Mountains, was once part of the largest land grant ever made by French or Spanish authorities in Colonial Missouri. The Catholic priest at Ste. Genevieve, Father James Maxwell, was awarded four leagues square-150 square miles-in 1799 for the purpose of settling destitute Irish Catholics that he would rescue from "British tyranny" in order to help populate the interior of the territory. This was Missouri's original "Irish Wilderness," six decades before Father Hogan's Irish settlement in Oregon County. But the area was too inaccessible. Though Maxwell's heirs continued to litigate the unconfirmed grant as late as 1875, it remained remote and largely unproductive, sparsely settled by hardscrabble hunters and farmers who ran their stock on open range until the state finally outlawed the practice in 1967. The bottomlands along Black River were tillable and hence more heavily degraded by settlers and their stock, but the interior from Proffit and Church Mountains to Taum Sauk, including its principal drainage, Taum Sauk Creek, retained much of its biotic integrity.

When conservation sentiment began to sweep the country in the first decades of the twentieth century, this area at the heart of the St. Francois Mountains was recommended for acquisition as national forest in a 1914 federal reconnaissance. In the same year, a state senatorial committee investigating potential sites for state parks recommended two tracts totaling more than 15,000 acres in this area, in addition to Onondaga Cave and Ha Ha Tonka. Missouri lagged behind many other states in acquiring public conservation lands, however; it was not until 1924 that it began to purchase its first state parks-mostly big Ozarks springs-and it was the depression '30s before the state authorized purchase of national forest land, which nearly surrounded but did not include the Taum Sauk area.

In the 1940s, Leonard Hall proposed a 60,000-acre roadless wilderness preserve in the St. Francois Mountains, in a grand arc from Bell and Lindsey mountains in the north through Goggins on the west to Proffit, Church, Taum Sauk and on, but the plan faltered owing to multiple ownerships. Meanwhile, Joseph Desloge of St. Louis had persistently over the course of seventeen years assembled more than 2,300 acres and two miles of river frontage on the east fork of Black River that the Desloge Foundation donated to the State Park Board in 1955 as Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park, the first substantial tract in the Taum Sauk region in public ownership. That same year, the Conservation Department acquired Ketcherside Mountain State Forest east of Taum Sauk, and the park board continued its efforts to secure at least a portion of the 1.5 billion-year-old pink granite Elephant Rocks to the north, which had

been suggested as a state park as early as 1924. A 135-acre remnant of the site would finally enter public ownership in 1966 as a gift from St. Joe Lead Company geologist John Stafford Brown.

Some time in the mid-1950s, Boy Scouts from Pilot Knob and Festus and their leaders began laying out a 28-mile trail through this rugged terrain from Elephant Rocks to Fort Davidson in Pilot Knob (which would become a state historic site in 1967), over Shepherd and Russell Mountains to Taum Sauk, then down to the base of Mina Sauk Falls, through the Devil's Toll Gate and west along Taum Sauk Creek for three miles, fording the creek some twenty times before ascending the south flank of Proffit Mountain, then down Sugar Camp Hollow to the East Fork Black River and Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park. The "Taum Sauk Trail" was dedicated in April 1958, and since then the "wildest walk in Missouri" has been a seminal experience in the lives of well over 25,000 Boy Scouts and countless others who have here taken the measure of the Ozarks and of themselves.



In the midst of this rediscovery of the wilderness and recreational values of the Taum Sauk region and the beginnings of public commitment to the area's preservation, the Union Electric Company became interested in the possibilities of storing excess power for periods of peak demand through a pumped storage hydroelectric plant. The technology, which had been used in Europe and Japan but seldom in the United States, resulted in a net energy drain, requiring about 3 kilowatts to pump the water uphill for every 2 kilowatts of hydroelectricity produced, but it could be profitable owing to the difference between peak and non-peak rates. UE did not initially focus on the St. Francois Mountains, however; rather it began its search for sites at Lake of the Ozarks, where it already had a ready-made lower reservoir. But for various reasons, including the distance from the St. Louis load center, they turned their attention to sites nearer St. Louis, settling by 1956 on Establishment Creek near the Mississippi River in Ste. Genevieve County. When that proved infeasible owing to geological deficiencies and the routing of the new Interstate 55, it occurred to them that they could get by with smaller reservoirs if they had the greatest possible head of water. That led them inevitably to the St. Francois Mountains.

Taum Sauk Mountain at 1772 feet is the highest point in Missouri, and Taum Sauk Creek flows through the deepest valley (in terms of elevation differential). We don't know why UE avoided Taum Sauk, but we can imagine that they appreciated the extent of public interest in this spectacular area. Instead they settled on nearby Proffit Mountain, which would accommodate a 55-acre upper reservoir, and, for a 395-acre lower reservoir, the East Fork Black River just below the new Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park. In December 1959 they awarded a construction contract and began quietly but quickly to purchase land—some 3,600 acres in 38 different tracts. Even before completing land acquisition they began construction of road access and leveling the mountain top, blasting and quarrying rock to the floor level of the reservoir and using the quarried granite for the reservoir walls.

In the late '50s and early '60s, UE operated in a relatively benign political environment. There was apparently no significant opposition to the project from conservation organizations or anyone else, but that is hardly surprising. This was the greatest era of water development project construction in U.S. history and most people regarded such projects as virtually unstoppable. Moreover, what

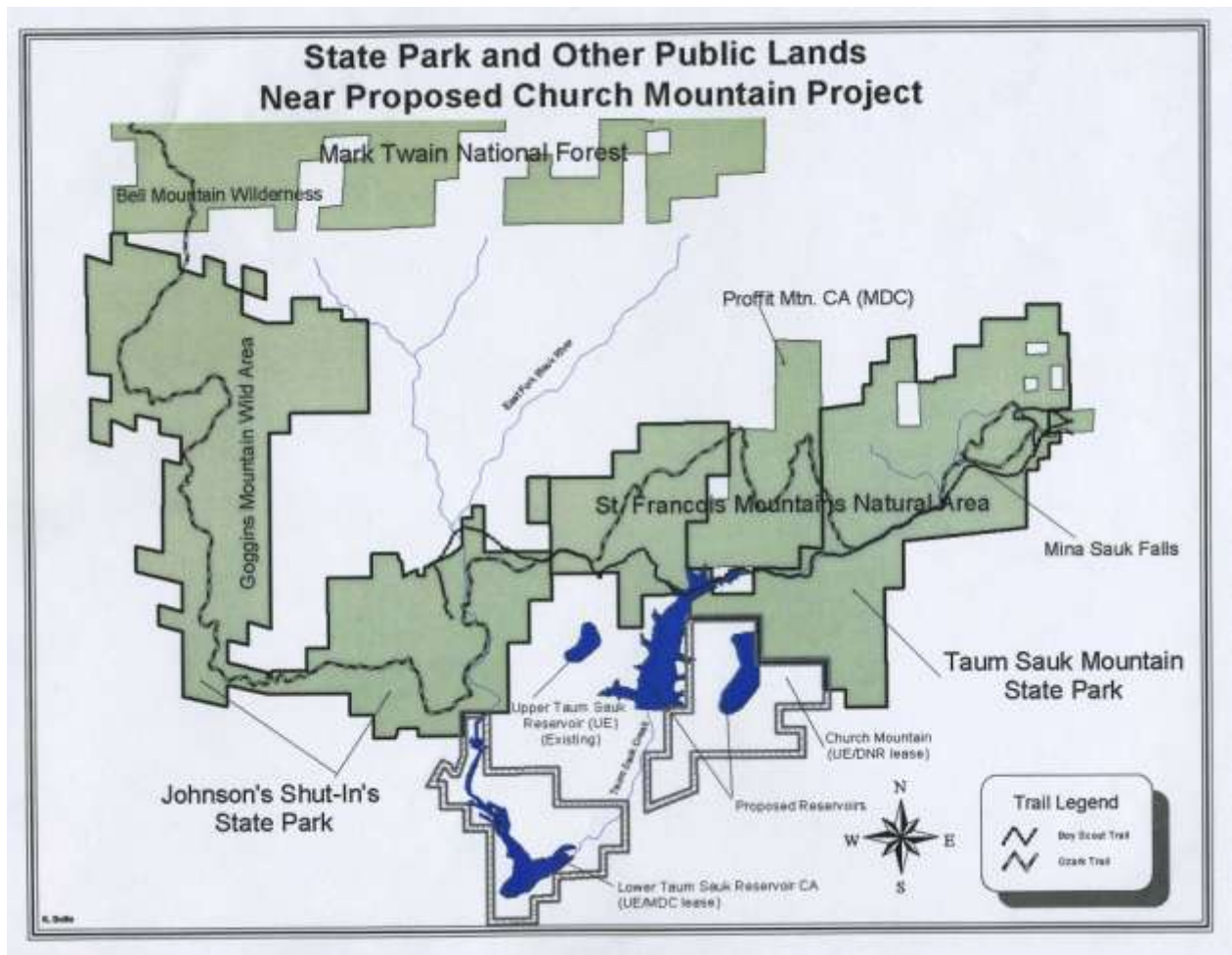
organizational capacity there was in Missouri at the time was engaged in trying to find an alternative to proposed dams on the Current River, an effort that led by 1964 to establishment of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. As further indication of the decisionmaking environment at the time, we may note that Union Electric completed construction of the project and dedicated it in October 1963 before hundreds of dignitaries who arrived on a special train from St. Louis—all while still arguing in the courts with the Federal Power Commission (FPC) over whether a federal license was required for the project. It was, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1965, but by then the plant was a fait accompli.

Even as the Taum Sauk plant was being brought on line, however, a controversy began over licensing of another, even larger pumped storage project at Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River that would permanently alter the decisionmaking environment for such proposals nationwide. Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference, a coalition of conservation groups, intervened in FPC licensing proceedings against the Consolidated Edison application and, when FPC granted the license, took the case to court, winning a landmark decision in 1965 that required the FPC to consider scenic and historic values equally with economic values. Though hearings and litigation would drone on for fifteen more years before Con Ed finally abandoned the project and donated the land for a park in an out-of-court settlement, the 1965 precedent clarified the public interest in natural and cultural resources, guaranteed citizen groups the right to argue for protection of environmental interests in court, and led in 1969 to passage of the National Environmental Policy Act.

In Missouri it would require several decades for conservationists, biologists and government officials to begin to appreciate the magnitude of wildland and ecological values at stake in the Taum Sauk area. Realization began to dawn as a result of roadless area surveys and natural area inventories initiated throughout the state in the 1970s. The former, which led to the designation of the 9,000-acre Bell Mountain Wilderness in 1980, impressed on conservationists the extent to which wild land had become a finite resource in Missouri. And the latter, which involved especially intensive study of state parks, revealed that Johnson's Shut-Ins had a more diverse array of plant species than any other park in the state, with over nine hundred recorded species of trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, wildflowers and ferns. A new emphasis on ecosystem management, supported by increased interest in conservation biology and restoration ecology, began to penetrate most federal and state land-managing agencies by the late 1980s, and with it came a heightened interest in and concern about biodiversity and the negative consequences of landscape fragmentation on neotropical migrant songbirds and other species of plants and animals. By this time it was becoming understood that the Ozarks, especially at its core in the St. Francois Mountains, was a major center of endemism and biodiversity of national and even global significance.

With the new appreciation of the need to preserve and restore biodiversity on a landscape scale, in contrast to the earlier focus on protecting individual species in tiny natural areas, state park officials with the support and encouragement of DNR Director G. Tracy Mehan and the approval of Governor John Ashcroft initiated efforts in the late '80s to acquire substantial additional parkland in the Taum Sauk region. With legislative appropriations from the parks and soils tax at a time of highly constrained state budgets, DNR in 1990 alone acquired more than 3,000 acres in 35 separate parcels, and by the time the new park was dedicated in 1993 it was nearly 6,900 acres stretching from Taum Sauk Mountain all the way to Johnson's Shut-Ins. The new park was a tribute to more than twenty local landowners who willingly agreed to part with their property so that the land could be preserved intact for future generations, as well as to the citizens of Missouri who funded it to the tune of nearly \$1.2 million. Union Electric cooperated by granting the state a 25-year lease on 1300 acres of Church Mountain for the development of hiking and backpacking trails.

Later in 1993, the park division acquired nearly 5,000 acres of wild land immediately west of Johnson's Shut-Ins, including all of Goggins Mountain and part of Bell Mountain, funded by a \$1 million gift from the Richard King Mellon Foundation's American Land Conservation Program. The new tract was contiguous with the Bell Mountain Wilderness on the Mark Twain National Forest and it already contained twelve miles of the Ozark Trail, which had been developed in the mid-1980s from Bell Mountain all the way to Taum Sauk. Virtually the entire Goggins addition to Johnson's Shut-Ins was designated a State Wild Area (Missouri's largest) in 1995. By this time, Missouri had gone a long way toward realizing the vision of early park enthusiasts dating back to 1914 and even key parts of Leonard Hall's audacious wilderness proposal in the '40s, with more than 15,000 acres in the region now in state parks, more than 5,000 acres in the Conservation Department's Ketcherside and Proffit Mountain areas (the latter acquired in 1969), another 1340 acres surrounding the Lower Taum Sauk Reservoir leased by UE to the Conservation Department for management in 1967, 9,000 acres in Bell Mountain Wilderness, and other Mark Twain National Forest lands.



In 1996 the interagency Missouri Natural Areas Committee designated 7,028 acres at the core of this area with the greatest concentration of significant and exceptional features, including nearly all of Taum Sauk Mountain State Park and the Proffit Mountain Conservation Area, as the St. Francois Mountains Natural Area. It included more than four miles of Taum Sauk Creek, the upper 5.5 miles of which had previously been designated by the Missouri Clean Water Commission as a State Outstanding Resource Water. The new natural area was by far the largest of more than 160 such areas officially designated in Missouri since 1971, in recognition of the exceptional quality of the Taum

Sauk region and the new scientific emphasis on maintaining biodiversity through landscape-scale preservation. Ecologists had hoped to include also the 1300 acres of Church Mountain leased by UE to DNR, which was fully equal in quality to the rest, but Union Electric declined.

In recent years DNR has sought to acquire additional private lands in the vicinity, including two tracts along Taum Sauk Creek for which they were negotiating when it was rumored, in spring 2001, that AmerenUE had acquired them under threat of condemnation and was studying the feasibility of constructing a second pumped storage reservoir on Church Mountain. Not until the application for preliminary permit became available in mid-July could the dimensions of the proposed project be confirmed by DNR, MPA, or other concerned parties, even though it is now clear that some park land on Church Mountain would be directly impacted by the dam for the upper reservoir and other park land along Taum Sauk Creek would be flooded.

* * *

Since the Governor and DNR have not yet taken an official position on the Church Mountain Project, it remains for concerned citizens to express their views on the project's potential impact on public interest values in the area to state and federal officials as well as to Ameren.

Some who are aware that there is already one UE hydro plant in the area wonder whether a second one nearby would make much difference. The existing upper reservoir-named Taum Sauk even though it is on Proffit Mountain-is 55 acres, compared with 130 acres and more than double the generating capacity for the Church Mountain project. Moreover, the existing reservoir is on a secondary summit of Proffit Mountain and it is hidden from many vantage points by Church Mountain and by the higher dome of Proffit to the north. By contrast, Church Mountain has only one dome and it is directly in the line of sight from virtually everywhere, especially from Taum Sauk Mountain and Mina Sauk Falls, visited by thousands of people every year who seek "the wildest vista in the Ozarks." It is also visible from nearly everywhere along the Ozark and Boy Scout trails, from both the valley and the high country.

The existing lower reservoir on East Fork Black River south of Proffit is not visible from anywhere in the interior of the Taum Sauk area, while the new reservoir on Taum Sauk Creek would be visible from virtually everywhere. Moreover, it would flood out more than a mile of the historic Boy Scout trail in the valley, making it impossible to use a route that most scouts and many other hikers prefer to the higher Ozark Trail, because of the beauty of the creek and access to water, shade, less rugged terrain, and a three-mile shorter route from Taum Sauk to Johnson's Shut-Ins. If the new reservoir fluctuates as much as the existing one, up to fifteen feet twice daily in hot weather, it could also be a hazard to recreationists.

Even more destructive to the public interest than the massive impact on esthetic, cultural and recreational values would be the ecological impact of major fragmentation in the highest quality area that could be identified in Missouri in which to preserve a landscape-scale mosaic of the natural communities that make this part of the Ozarks one of the greatest centers of biodiversity on the continent. The impact on the aquatic and riparian communities in Taum Sauk Creek valley would be devastating-and this is a stream that retains a more natural riparian zone than practically any stream in the Ozarks, including the East Fork Black River, which was always more accessible to settlement and livestock. The St. Francois Mountains Natural Area and Church Mountain itself, which ecologists believe is of equal quality, is thought to be more important for the preservation of biodiversity even than Johnson's Shut-Ins, with its more than 900 plant species, because it has suffered less disturbance and has been much less fragmented. Although the area has yet to be studied as intensively as Johnson's Shut-Ins, it is known to harbor at least seven state-listed species of conservation concern, including the federally listed Mead's Milkweed.

There can be no question of the vast importance of the central "high peaks" region of the St. Francois Mountains, of which Church Mountain and Taum Sauk Creek are so integral a part. These ancient rounded mountains are so critical for their inherent natural history value, but they also have played an historical role of great importance; they are a time honored scenic treasure, and an enduring resource of wholesome recreation and spiritual inspiration. They are for many Missourians and visitors to Missouri the core of what remains of the oldest, wildest Ozark landscape. All of this has been reinforced through the latter twentieth century by a massive investment from the state of Missouri in the acquisition and protection of these lands.

The current proposal by Ameren to decapitate Church Mountain and drown the valley of Taum Sauk Creek would violate not just a pleasant Ozark ridge and hollow-it would gut a key visual and natural heritage resource of all Missourians. This situation might seem to doom Missourians to an inevitable and disastrous confrontation between one of the most powerful and respected utility companies in the state, on the one hand, and the united voices of civic and conservation responsibility on the other.

We dare to hope that it need not be so. Whatever planning considerations led Ameren to broach this preliminary proposal, it is only reasonable to assume that it was done without a full and acute awareness of the enormity of the heritage values that would be destroyed. The responsibility now lies with all of us to bring these factors to their attention, forcefully but respectfully. Only preliminary plans have been drawn up. There is plenty of time for Ameren to withdraw this plan and find alternatives. Ameren can in fact emerge from this issue with a heroic act of public citizenship to its credit. That is our hope. That is our goal.