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Parcs et espaces publics le long du haut Mississippi

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Parks and Open Space along the Upper Mississippi River

Robert D. Espeseth*

The Mighty Mississippi River, the world's third longest river, begins as a pristine stream at the Lake Itasca State Park, Minnesota. Here visitors can cross the mighty river on stepping stones. This very humble beginning of the River that flows 2552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico is awe-inspiring as is the rest of the park. Established in 1891, as the first Minnesota State Park, this park is a showcase of a very comprehensive state park system which has many other park units on the Mississippi River and its major tributaries.

Itasca is also the start of *The Great River Road*, a network of federal, state and county roads, which criss-cross the river at various points and quietly traverse woodlands, river towns, bluff lands, peaceful farm lands and quaint villages of the north and south. The Great River Road acts as a parkway or greenway as it connects parks, forests, historic sites and scenic vistas from Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River Parkway Commission has representatives from each of the states along the River and sets the general policies for this extraordinary Parkway. The degree of cooperation and promotion of The Great River Road varies from state to state but has traditionally been very strong in the states along the Upper Mississippi reaches.

The Mississippi River Waterway is among the most important in the world. The annual tonnage is tremendous - much greater than that of the St. Lawrence Seaway. One big tow of coal, grain, chemicals or petroleum carries more weight than 900 semi-trailer trucks. The 27 locks along the entire river are operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and to see and understand the *locking through* of a towboat or pleasure craft is a rewarding experience. Some of the lock sites have interpretive centers and displays to enhance the visitors' experience.

The dams associated with the locks impound the precious water for the various uses of humankind. The resulting lakes or *pools* help provide a minimum 9-foot depth of water for the river traffic and enhance the fish and wildlife habitat generally. There have occasionally been disagreement and conflict

between the COE, the U.S. Department of the Interior (Fish and Wildlife Service) and the respective state natural resource agencies as to which has higher priority, the shipping interests, which demand the 9-foot depth of channel necessitating the dredging and deposition of huge quantities of sediment into habitat areas, or the fish, wildlife and scenic interests who feel that the environmental encroachment by the deposition of excessive dredge material is destroying valuable habitat and the natural beauty of the River. The multiplicity of uses along the River create and add to this dilemma.

For eons prior to the establishment of the lock and dam system the River and its tributaries were the *water highways* for the Indians and early trappers and traders by canoe, for early settlers by flatboat and raft, and for later travelers during the romantic era of the steamboat, in all its many forms. Major and minor Indian villages were initially located on the rivers as were the early settlements of the westward expansion of this country. Some of the parks or historic sites along the River reflect this cultural and historic significance. The most prominent site - a designated World Heritage Site - is Cahokia Mounds Historic Site (Illinois). Other examples are Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (St. Louis, MO); Effigy Mounds National Monument (McGregor, IA); Mines of Spain State Park (IA); Nelson Dewey State Park (WI); Fort DeChartes, Fort Kaskaskia, Fort Defiance and Fort Massac Historic Sites (IL); Fort Snelling and Frontenac State Parks (MN); and Trail of Tears State Park (MO). Each of these places depict and interpret a period relating to the Indian culture and period, or the early settlement period. Many of these sites combine the scenic and natural habitat of the river valley with the historic and cultural values.

The establishment of the state park systems in the Upper Mississippi River Valley during the first 2 decades of the twentieth century included key units along the River or on major tributaries close to the River. Some of these state parks were established as individual units even before there was a state park system because they were unique areas

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and people wanted to see them preserved. As previously mentioned Lake Itasca State Park (MN) was purchased in 1891 before the Minnesota State Park System was established. Minnesota and Wisconsin cooperated in the formation of an Interstate Park Commission in 1895 to oversee this unique park on the St. Croix River, a major tributary. When the plans were being prepared for the Wisconsin State Park System in 1907 by the noted landscape architect John Nolen he included Interstate State Park and Wyalusing State Park (at the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers) as 2 of the 5 top priority areas for acquisition and inclusion in the new system which started in 1911. Nolen was also involved with the early plans for the Minnesota and Illinois State Park Systems and probably had an affect on Iowa too.

Among the early state parks in Iowa was Pike's Peak State Park located high on the River bluffs right across the River from Wyalusing State Park in Wisconsin. Early state park sites in Illinois associated with the River included Mississippi Palisades and Pere Marquette, both containing high bluffs and riverfront areas totaling over 10,000 acres between them. Cahokia Mounds, Ft. Massac, Ft. DeChartes and Ft. Kaskaskia (all of which were mentioned earlier) were early units of the Illinois State Park System.

The Missouri State Park System started somewhat later than the aforementioned systems and really haven't placed a high priority on parks along the River; nor have they cooperated in The Great River Road program to the degree that other states have. It may be that the River and adjacent bluffs are not as accessible in Missouri as in other states.

At the state level five Minnesota state forests are traversed by the River, and on the St. Croix River, Minnesota and Wisconsin have state forests directly across from each other. Minnesota has 5 state parks along the St. Croix River, Wisconsin has 3 state parks. The St. Croix River also has the federal designation of the St. Croix National Scenic River for part of the course and the Lower St. Croix Scenic River for another reach of the river.


The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with sub-agreements with some of the adjacent state natural resource agencies. This agency manages over one-half million acres of bottom land and flood plain associated with the

River. There are also several state-owned and operated management areas for fish and wildlife along the River.

The Wisconsin Highway Commission (now Department of Transportation) was the leader in fostering the concept of using scenic easements along The Great River Road to preserve the scenic qualities of the drive and continue to make trips along the Road more enjoyable.

Wisconsin is also the leader in regards to parks and river access provided by the county level of government. There are at least five counties along the River which have parks on the River totaling over 3,000 acres. The largest of these parks is Goose Island County Park, LaCrosse County (WI). Minnesota also has several county operated parks in the Twin Cities area along the River. Illinois has the Rock Island County Forest Preserve District with several areas on or overlooking the River. There may be other scattered small areas under county jurisdiction which would include scores of boat launching sites, marinas and other river access points.

Most of the major cities and many of the smaller communities along the Mississippi River have excellent park systems with major park areas associated with the River. Some of these parks are right on the River while others are on the river bluffs and have outstanding scenic views out over the River. Examples of some of the most outstanding community parks along the River include: LaCrosse, WI (Myrick Island Park and Grand Dad's Bluff); Red Wing, MN (Bay Pointe and Coville Parks); Winona, MN (Prairie Island Park); Quincy, IL (Sunset, Riverview, and Indian Mounds Parks); and Dubuque, IA (Eagle Point and Louis Murphy Parks). Community park systems along the River would total over 20,000 acres, with probably 3-4,000 of these acres being parks directly associated with the River.

The National Park Service (NPS) has recently embarked on a new project, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, which includes 72 miles of the River from the confluence with the Crow River downstream to its confluence with St. Croix River. The NPS is cooperating with federal, state, regional and local communities to coordinate use, development and protection of the River Corridor. A Mississippi River Coordinating Commission was created by Congress to act as an advisory group for planning the new area. 

Parcs et espaces publics le long du haut Mississippi

Robert D. Espeseth

Troisième fleuve par sa longueur, le Mississippi possède une concentration de parcs et d'espaces publics qu'on ne trouve probablement pas le long d'aucun autre grand fleuve au monde.

Bien que l'État fédéral ait joué un rôle primordial dans la reconnaissance des valeurs culturelles et environnementales du fleuve, les autres niveaux de gouvernement se sont aussi grandement impliqués.

Les parcs et les espaces publics se présentent comme un système inter-États relié par la *Great River Road* qui agit comme voie touristique - ou voie verte - et reliant parcs, forêts et sites touristiques, de Itasca au Golfe du Mexique.

La *Great River Road* est un concept développé en 1930 par le Service national des parcs, avec les services internes à chaque État, le ministère du Transport, les différents services de transports et les agences étatiques de conservation des ressources naturelles.

Le degré de coopération et de promotion varie d'État en État mais a été traditionnellement très fort entre ceux qui sont situés le long du haut Mississippi. L'utilisation et l'impact de ce système de parcs à des fins touristiques se mesurent en millions de personnes ayant fréquenté les lieux et en millions de dollars réinvestis dans la vallée du fleuve.

Plusieurs des 27 écluses situées le long du fleuve sont dotées d'un centre d'interprétation et d'expositions pour enrichir l'expérience du visiteur. Certains sites interprètent une période de la culture indienne. Cahokia Mounds Historic Site (Illinois) est le plus important d'entre eux, et a été reconnu par la World Heritage Site Association.

Ce système de parcs utilisés à des fins touristiques agit comme le miroir d'une culture et d'un passé; toutefois, les barrages et les écluses sont à l'origine de conflits entre ceux qui défendent les intérêts de la navigation et ceux qui prônent la beauté naturelle du haut Mississippi.