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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



**NETWORKS &
COLLABORATION**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of a Healing Place Collaborative network diagram. Members are listed around the outside of the circle and each line between them indicates a collaboration or work done between those two members. Image courtesy of Mona Smith.

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FEATURE

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A “PARTNERSHIP PARK” - THE MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL RIVER AND RECREATION AREA

By John O. Anfinson

The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area touts itself a “partnership park,” but what does that mean, especially in the context of the National Park Service (NPS) overall? When

most people think of national parks, they imagine Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, the Everglades, the Statue of Liberty, or some other iconic park or place. I realize this is a gross generalization. Most



*Canoeists on the Mississippi River in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.
By National Park Service [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.*

people probably know the national park unit they grew up visiting. Having just celebrated its centennial, the NPS has 417 units, and there is no typical park.

So let me contrast the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (NRRA) to those parks that own all their land and have a formal entry gate, where visitors stop to take their picture or a selfie. Those parks have partners but do not inherently

need them. Other than complying with a myriad of laws and regulations, they do not need permission to manage the land or to carry out a program or project.

When Congress established the Mississippi NRRA in 1988, it gave us less than 50 acres, all on islands. While it established the possibility of a grant program, that has never been funded. Of the 54,000 acres within our boundary, we now



Map of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area showing the entire 72-mile reach from Dayton and Ramsey down to the southern border of Dakota County, below Hastings. Map by National Park Service.

[Download a PDF of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area \(4.1 MB\)](#)

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own 64. In our 72-mile reach from Dayton and Ramsey down to the southern border of Dakota County, below Hastings, there are 21 cities, four townships, and five counties. Much of the land is privately owned. Other federal agencies and the State of Minnesota also own and manage land within our boundary. If we want to do anything just about anywhere, we need to partner with some entity or organization and most often with many. We are a partnership park out of necessity. So how do we accomplish anything when we do not have a carrot or a stick? The best way to answer this question is to highlight some of our successful partnerships.

We do not have our own classroom space, so we rely on partners to host our programs and events.

The Padelford Packet Boat Company, which hosts our Big River Journey program, provides one of our more unique partner classrooms. Through this partnership, we have brought over 70,000 students to learn about the Mississippi on a riverboat. At stations hosted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Science Museum of Minnesota, the Audubon Society, and the park, students learn about the Great River's history, nature, and water quality. We do not have much equipment, as we have no place to store it. So, we work with Wilderness Inquiry to put nearly 10,000 middle and high schoolers on the river each year in their 10-person voyageur canoes. In addition, we use partner parks, like those run by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and Fort Snelling State Park.



Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman paddling with Wilderness Inquiry in 2016. Via Twitter, @SecretaryJewell.

Since we pay rent for our Mississippi River Visitor Center space in the Science Museum of Minnesota, you could argue that our arrangement is not a partnership, but it is or has developed into one. With a one-week notice, we learned that Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell decided to make the Mississippi NRRA one of her few stops for a Centennial tour the week of the official NPS 100th Birthday. Her staff told us she had time to paddle a short reach of the Mississippi in voyageur canoes with a diverse group, but she had to be off the water in time to have a live conversation with the American astronauts on the international space station. Only our deeply rooted partnerships saved us. Wilderness Inquiry quickly agreed to provide the canoes and the staff to stern them. Outdoor Afro brought their national and local leaders and members to paddle with us. The Science Museum spent a week talking to communications staff at NASA to work out how the Secretary could Skype with the astronauts from the museum. The day was beautiful and every aspect came off as if we had been planning it for months. Only close and well-seasoned partnerships made that possible.

In 2014, we began exploring the idea of revamping our Mississippi River Visitor Center in the Science Museum and then decided to make the grand re-opening one of our signature Centennial events. After over a year of planning, we closed our visitor center on June 6, 2016. We reopened on August 25, the anniversary of our founding, to a large audience that included Representative Betty McCollum and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, our funders, and many other supporters. The Mississippi Park Connection (MPC), our philanthropic partner, raised over one-half of the \$630,000 needed to redo the center. Without the MPC, we would not have considered the project. We contracted with the Science Museum, one of the premier exhibit design companies in the country, to complete the design and construction, but we worked together more as partners than business relations.

In 2016, we developed a closer partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to manage visitation at their Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam. Since the facility closed to navigation in 2015 and no longer served commercial navigation, the Corps decided not to open the visitor center and offered us the chance to manage it. This was possible, in part, because we have been working with the Corps for years on our Journey to the Falls program. After several months of negotiations, we signed a five-year agreement to operate the visitor center and give tours of the lock. Because we do not have a maintenance staff and the Corps did not want to continue managing their restroom, we negotiated and signed another agreement with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board to clean the bathrooms, as long as we provided the supplies. Staffing was also a concern, but the MPC sought and received a \$50,000 grant to help pay for one of our interpretive rangers and supplied one of their volunteers to augment our regular staff and volunteers. Whereas the Corps had seen about 2,000 visitors per year between Memorial Day and Labor Day from 2005 to 2015, we hosted over 15,000 in our pilot season.

Congress specifically established the NRRA to help guide development along the river throughout our 72-mile corridor. This has been one of our hardest challenges. Despite the National Park designation, Congress relied on State Critical Area Executive Order 79-19 to protect the corridor's resources rather than instituting a separate layer of federal regulations. Over time, we learned that the Executive Order did not work well. Communities throughout the corridor implemented it in different ways or failed to do so at all. We had little hope of addressing this problem on our own, but our primary advocacy partner, Friends of the Mississippi River, stepped up.

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) was born as our champion and the river's, in 1993. They

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helped guide the writing of our Comprehensive Management Plan, which the Secretary of the Interior and the Governor of Minnesota signed. Today, FMR's budget and staff are nearly the same as ours. FMR led the effort to revamp the Minnesota Critical Area regulations for our corridor. While it took many years and nearly did not happen, FMR persisted. The result is a new set of rules that will apply equally throughout our corridor.

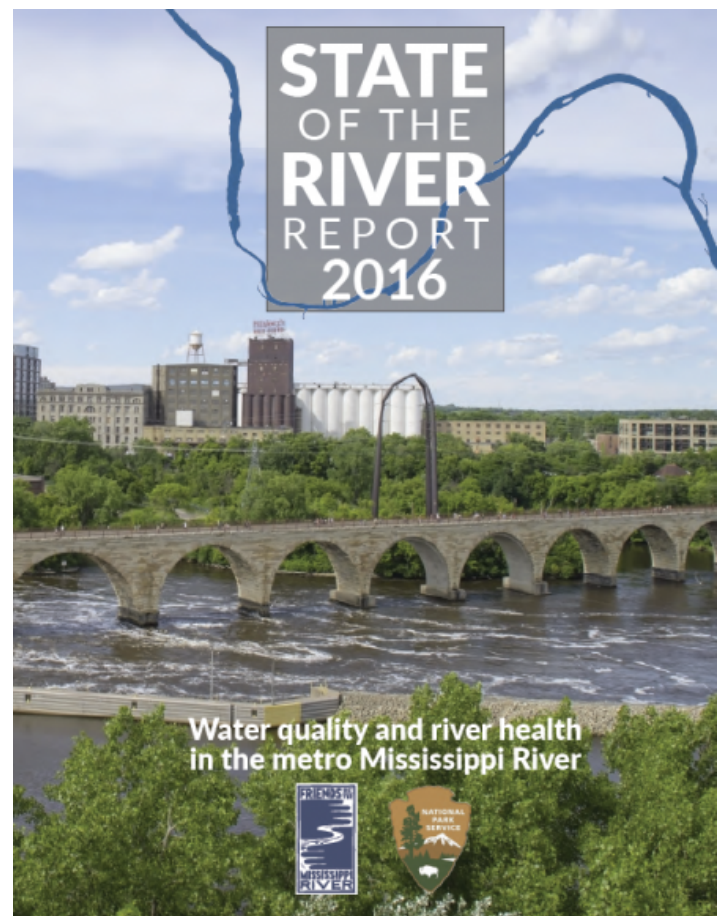
As the Mississippi River is our principal resource, we care deeply about its water quality. To better understand and protect the river, the NPS initiated a partnership to promote public engagement in everyday actions for clean water. Called Metro Watershed Partners, this partnership includes over 70 organizations, representing local, state, and federal agencies; non-profits; educational institutions; and watershed management groups. Together, the partners have touched millions of people through exhibits, broadcast media, and now social media.

We also collaborated with FMR on a second State of the River Report. Led by Lark Weller of my staff and Trevor Russell of Friends of the Mississippi River, we announced the new report on September 22, 2016 to a large audience at the Science Museum of Minnesota. The report focuses on old issues, such as sediment, flow, nitrogen, and phosphorous, and new ones, like microplastics. The report provides the public and policy-makers with rigorous scientific information presented in a very readable and understandable format.

One of our newest and most exciting partnerships debuted late last summer. PaddleShare is a program that allows people to check out a kayak, paddle downriver, check it back in, check out a Nice Ride bike, and pedal back to their car. One of the stations is located at Bohemian Flats near the University of Minnesota. Through federal transportation funding, we brought the seed money to acquire the kayaks and check out

stations, but we needed the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, City of Minneapolis, the Three Rivers Park District, the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, REI, and the Mississippi Park Connection to make it happen.

The University of Minnesota's main campus straddles the Mississippi River and, therefore, the national park. So it is not surprising that many NRRA staff have worked with faculty from the University on programs and projects and in the classroom. Most recently, Lark Weller, our water quality planner, and researchers from the University, Metropolitan Council, and Minnesota Department of Health received a University of Minnesota Serendipity Grant to explore the roadblocks to providing equitable access to water resources and services. Once roadblocks are identified, the goal is to make this research available through an "institutional equity toolkit" that will help address the disparities. Minnesota



is one of the richest water resources states in the country and how it manages those resources is truly a “grand challenge.”

These few examples demonstrate the range of our partnerships. While we do not have much of a stick and no large carrots, we do have something to offer our partners: the NPS arrowhead and the national and international reputation it brings. Like the founders of the Mississippi NRRA, cities around the country are mounting campaigns to get their treasured resources designated as units of the National Park system. With the NPS stamp on their resources, they know long-term preservation is more feasible, and that we will incorporate their story more effectively into the national narrative.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the Mississippi NRRA in 2018, we can reflect on what being a partnership park has meant. Partnerships create opportunities. While many saw and still see our lack of landownership as a liability, we have captured opportunities we could not have done alone, even if we owned the land. Partnership means buy in. Our partners have to see the value we add before they work with us. We succeed because we can leverage what they care about and what helps us fulfill our mission. We share every accomplishment with someone else; it is never just about us.

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About the Author

John Anfinson is superintendent of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (NRRA) for the National Park Service. He is the author of *The River We Have Wrought: A History of the Upper Mississippi* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), *River of History* (2003) and many articles about the Mississippi River. He has been researching, writing and speaking about the upper Mississippi River for over 25 years.