



**ISSUE NINE : WINTER 2018**  
**OPEN RIVERS :**  
**RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY**

**INNOVATIONS**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy Shanai Matteson, Works Progress, and Water Bar & Public Studio.

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Assistant Editor:  
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Media and Production Manager:  
Joanne Richardson, Institute for Advanced Study,  
University of Minnesota

## Contact Us

Open Rivers  
Institute for Advanced Study  
University of Minnesota  
Northrop  
84 Church Street SE  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054  
Fax: (612) 625-8583  
E-mail: [openrvrs@umn.edu](mailto:openrvrs@umn.edu)  
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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FEATURE

# FREE-FLOWING WATERS: A VISION FOR A LOWER MISSISSIPPI RIVER WILDERNESS

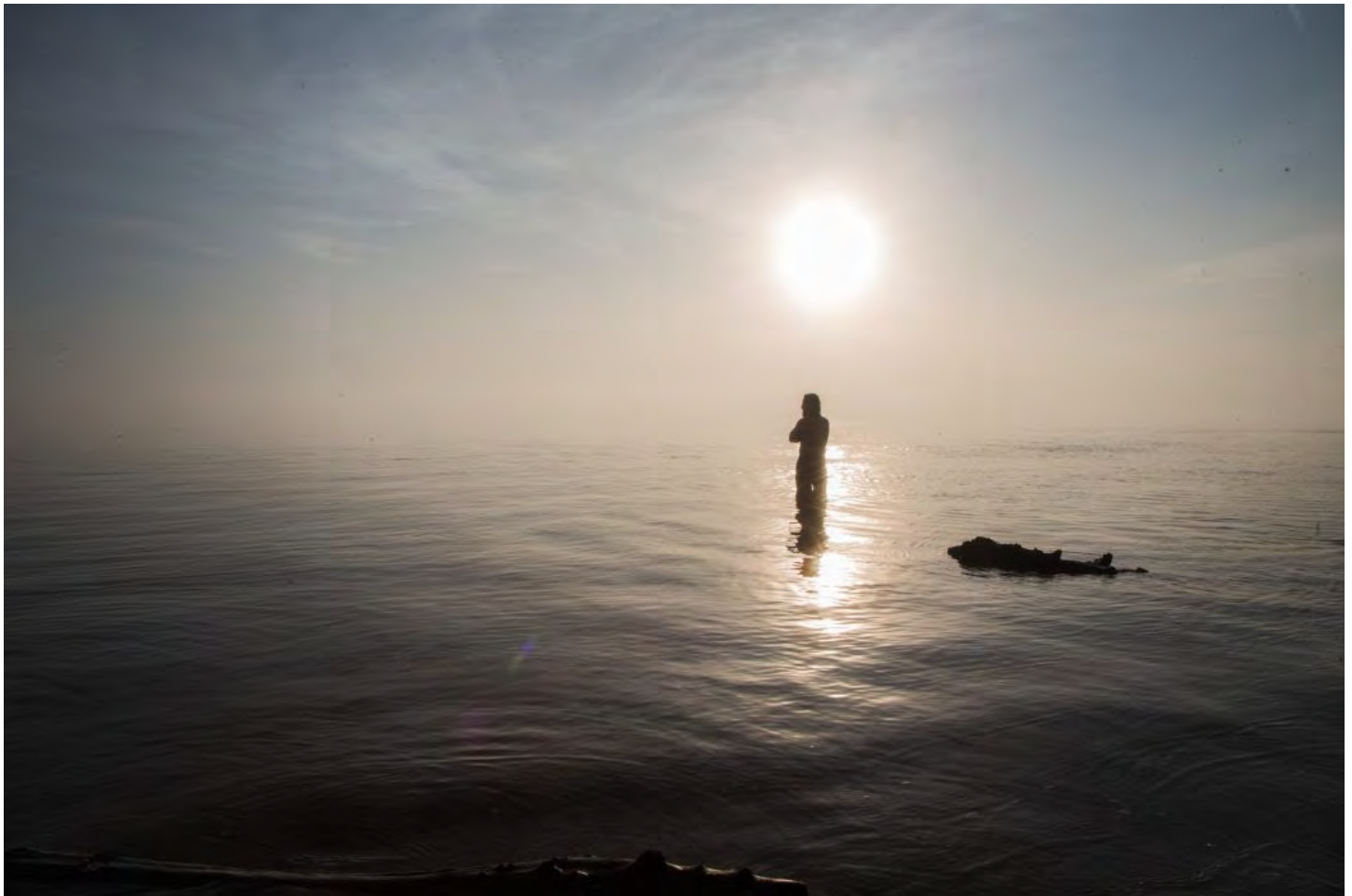
By John Ruskey and Boyce Upholt

**W**ilderness is a feeling.

It is more than that, of course—wilderness is the wind and the water, the turtles and coyotes, all that exists beyond and around and within our human selves. But when we speak of wilderness,

we're so often speaking about a feeling: that feeling of smallness, strangely comforting, or of connection, or of wonder at how much there is in the world.

Sometimes that feeling comes in surprising places. I noticed this one winter night in 2002, while



*Morning swim at Shreve's Bar. From the Atchafalaya Rivergator Expedition of 2015.  
Image courtesy of David Hanson.*

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paddling down the Lower Missouri River towards St. Louis. I looked up at the trees, sweeping their cold branches through the sky, and realized I was inside a grand illusion. The trees, the sandbars, the ducks and geese, the wild turkeys, the unbroken sky, the line of free-flowing water: here was a long, serpentine web of wilderness, with me inside it. But that web is only as wide as the floodplain. Just out of my vision, humankind and its machines were eking out their wretched existence.

*See David Hanson's video "ATCHAFALAYA."*

I could hear engines and gunfire, smell exhaust and even sewage. But the human presence was as far away from me as the other side of the moon. I felt alone, and yet not alone. I felt that the river was mine, and that I was a part of the river, which is far bigger than me or my comprehension. The water flowed on, down towards my home in Mississippi, creating a meandering piece of paradise within the destruction of humankind.



*Contemplating the wetlands. From the Atchafalaya Rivergator Expedition of 2015.  
Image courtesy of David Hanson.*



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“If the river is an illusion,” I wrote in my journal, “then I gladly choose this dream, and will keep dreaming as long as I can.”

I’ve been choosing that dream most of my life. I first came to the Mississippi River as an 18 year old. When we graduated from high school in 1982, my best friend and I decided we’d had enough of traditional schooling. To the dismay of our guidance counselors, we scuttled all college plans and decided instead to build a raft and float

down a big river. We lasted five months before we shipwrecked. We were rescued by the Coast Guard on a wilderness island a few dozen miles below Memphis.

*Listen to Traveling down the modern Mississippi by WHYY featuring John Ruskey and others, including Christopher Morris from ‘Open Rivers’ issue two.*



*Documenting sedimentation at the Atchafalaya River Delta.  
From the Atchafalaya Rivergator Expedition of 2015. Image courtesy of David Hanson.*



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I realize now that as I washed ashore on that island, I was having that wilderness feeling: I looked up and saw red-winged blackbirds settling into darkening woods, and despite the direness of my situation, I saw beauty. I made a promise then: if I survived, I'd come back to this place. It's

a promise I've kept, again and again. It's a promise I'd like to see others make, too, which is why I started the Lower Mississippi River Foundation.



*Fully loaded on the Atchafalaya River from the Atchafalaya Rivergator Expedition of 2015.  
Image courtesy of David Hanson.*



# The Gut of America

My home now is Clarksdale, Mississippi, which sits along what used to be a bend in the Lower Mississippi River, 50 miles from that island. It's in the great floodplain of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the birthplace of the Delta blues, which is one of the wildest stretches of Lower Mississippi River.

In 1998, I started Quapaw Canoe Company (QCC), a professional river-guiding operation that specializes in Mississippi River tours. Fifteen years later, QCC had initiated so many public service projects—to engage local youths

with the river, to help preserve and promote the river—that it became obvious that we needed a non-profit partner. So, in 2011, the Lower Mississippi River Foundation was born.

Our mission is to recognize, protect, and promote the Lower Mississippi River as a viable wilderness. This serves the river itself, as it will preserve its ecological health, and it serves future generations, who will be able to enjoy an iconic American wilderness experience—that is, if we don't let it be washed away.



*On the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



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See the video *River Made “Deep into the Gut of America”* by *David Ross*.

We seek to promote stewardship of the Lower and Middle Mississippi River through deep engagement, primarily through youth programming and conservation. Our biggest goal is to nurture a healthy, viable wilderness for the enjoyment of current and future generations. We have also set a number of numerical goals that help indicate progress towards this larger objective—including specific targets for the number of students and parents who have a positive relationship with the river, and the number of local leaders who have experiences that lead them to fight for the river.

These goals, and the strategies for pursuing them, will be detailed below.

I sometimes refer to the lower river as the “gut of America.” Some people may turn their noses up at this nickname, but I think it makes sense. We often call the Midwest the nation’s heart, and it is certainly the heart of the Mississippi’s great basin, for it is where its three mighty rivers—the Missouri, the Ohio, and the Upper Mississippi—all come together. The North Woods are the system’s “head,” and the Great Plains and Eastern Woodlands, its “arms.” The South, then, is the gut.



*Dinner time.*

*Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*

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*Listen to John Ruskey talk about the Mississippi River on Resistance Radio.*

The gut is as important to the whole as any other part, and more important than some. You can live without your arms, but not without your gut. (This nickname also fits the general atmosphere down here, where people tend to “go with their gut,” and let their gut hang out, and enjoy eating a feast of chitlins as a hangover cure after a night’s revelry to live Delta blues, zydeco, second line, or swamp rock.)

The Lower Mississippi winds through serpentine meanderings like the lower intestine. It digests the water, revitalizing the whole—at least when

it is working properly. Before it was overtaken by industry, Southern Louisiana boasted one of the world’s richest fisheries. But when you are located at the very bottom, you receive all the best of what that system has to offer along with all the worst.

Perhaps the most famous consequence of that fact is the hypoxic dead zone that spreads at the river’s mouth. Farmers across the country are spraying nitrogen and phosphorous on their fields to fuel the growth of their crop—and the fertilizer from over 40 percent of the nation, from Montana to New York, is washing down the Mississippi River. In the Gulf of Mexico, those fertilizers come together to form a great feast for



*Sunrise over the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



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algae. That's not so great for other aquatic life, though—all that algae reduces the oxygen content of the water until almost nothing else can survive. The Gulf of Mexico hosts the second-largest human-created dead zone in the world, and this year it achieved its largest recorded size.

There are other problems, too. The system of levees built to control the river has kept it from flooding its floodplain, including those coastal wetlands. Floods were what built this land, which is sinking under its own weight. The problem is exacerbated by industrial canals, which allow saltwater to creep in and kill off ecosystems, and by rising sea levels. As a result, Louisiana is losing 16.6 square miles of land each year. Meanwhile,

the mud that should spread out across the landscape is being held inside the levees. The few backwaters that are left there are smothered under all that mud, and are rapidly disappearing. Once they're gone, it will likely spell doom for the river's ecosystem.

As habitat disappears, industry seems to multiply. The "Chemical Corridor," from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, is home to a quarter of the nation's bulk commodity chemical production. Meanwhile, upstream development in the floodplain is so rampant that flood damage is spiraling out of control. As of October 2017, there were a record 16 "natural disasters" during the year that caused a billion dollars in damage; included in



*Sharing the waters.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*

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that list were major floods in the St. Louis area. For some towns on the river, this was the fifth flood event in four years—and four of those floods made local all-time top-ten lists. However, it is wrong to call these disasters “natural,” really—they’re occurring because we’ve built too much where we should not, reducing the size of the floodplain and increasing the damage of floods.

My point here is not to scare you, or to suggest that the river has now become some toxic sewer that you should avoid at all costs. My point is that the river needs care.

And the best way to care for the river is to know it. Yes, there are places, especially in Southern Louisiana, where a paddler should use caution—where the barge traffic is thick, and the pollution is real enough to make you sick. But on the whole, the Lower Mississippi River is still surprisingly intact—which means we still have a chance to give it the care it needs.



*Sharing the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*





*The long landscape of the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



# Wild Miles

Biologist E.O. Wilson proposes that we set aside half the earth to save the earth. This is what the earth's creatures need: space to maintain their diversity and health. As the climate changes, what Wilson calls "long landscapes" are particularly important, corridors of wilderness that species can use to migrate to more suitable habitats. Naturalists nostalgically remember the great American forest where a squirrel could cross from Arkansas to Georgia without touching the ground. Incredibly, given that 90 percent of the river's old floodplain is now disconnected, this kind of connection is still intact along the Mississippi. A white-tailed deer, for instance,

could conceivably walk or swim through deep woods and wetlands from Baton Rouge to the city limits of St. Louis without having to cross a paved road (with one bottleneck at Natchez). All highways in this stretch travel over tall viaducts, and only a few dirt roads are found over the levee. The river creates a superhighway for wildlife of all sorts. Hundreds of species of songbirds migrate through the continent's heart each year. The lower river is home to 109 of the 140 bird species resident on the Mississippi; tens of thousands of snow geese stop here on their way to Alaska and Canada, far above the Arctic Circle. There have been no known extinctions of fish species. The



*Wilderness at the doorstep.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



interior least tern, listed as an endangered species in 1985, has recovered so successfully that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended the species be delisted. If we can sustain these successes, and even build on them, the long landscape of the Mississippi could someday connect the Southern longleaf pine with the Great North Woods.

The Mississippi remains wild not just in its potential as an ecosystem corridor—but also in terms of the wilderness *feeling* it can provide to us, as humans. One of the first projects of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation was to identify the remaining “wild miles” on the Lower Mississippi River. These are the places where you can still feel that wilderness dream: places where nature predominates and nothing is seen of humankind save passing tows and maybe a tiny hunting camp or a single fisherman buzzing by in a johnboat. (This is similar to the definition of wilderness included in the 1964 Wilderness Act, which emphasizes places not where the work of man is absent—there are no such places—but where it is “unnoticeable.” Wild miles, however, are our own designation, and exist outside of other legal or scientific conceptions of wilderness.) By our reckoning, there are 515 wild miles between Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Cairo, Illinois—71 percent of the riverside. Upstream, on the Middle Mississippi (between Cairo and St. Louis), there are another 105 wild miles, or 56 percent of that stretch of river.

These are the kinds of places that the 24 million paddlers in North America travel great distances to find. In sheer “wild value,” the Lower Mississippi ranks alongside the Boundary Waters, the Allagash, or the Okefenokee. The Lower Mississippi Water Trail is at least as important to our national heritage as the Erie Canal, the Santa Fe Trail, or the Appalachian Trail. It has been travelled by millions of Americans including the Sioux, the Natchez, and more recently Abraham Lincoln, John James Audubon, Langston Hughes,

Louis Armstrong, and Muddy Waters, and has always been our nation’s single most important route of migration and transportation. It is the lifeblood of our nation flowing directly from the productive heartland through the cultural flowering of the South and into the vitality of the Gulf of Mexico.

I believe that the Mississippi River is the longest and narrowest wilderness in America. It is the only wilderness that is found on the doorstep of major cities (Memphis, New Orleans, St. Louis). Within minutes of putting in your canoe in these cities, you can be surrounded by woods and water as provocative as any in the world. To enter it is as easy as sitting on the bank and watching the river flow. Roll up your pants and swish your feet in her waters. If you want to get deeper, get in a canoe and paddle for a day. Envelope yourself in a landscape that feels as far away as a desert wilderness or the highest mountains.

But in order to keep that wild feeling, we have to get more people on this river. This can seem like a paradox: what makes a place wild is its emptiness, right? But the history of river preservation shows that the best way to save a river is to bring in paddlers and recreationalists. The Buffalo River in Arkansas was named America’s first “National River” in 1972, thanks in large part to the advocacy of paddlers who opposed the construction of a dam; the Buffalo is now one of the few undammed rivers left in the nation. (The Lower Mississippi River is also included on that short list.) The Appalachian Trail, one of the country’s most iconic wilderness experiences, is through-hiked by well more than 1,000 people each year. The Mississippi River, by comparison, is traveled by around 100 long-distance paddlers each year. The river is only served by increasing that number. This is why the Lower Mississippi River Foundation has developed a 30-year vision around fostering a much more public relationship with the river.





*Getting people on the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



# A Vision for the River

As noted above, the Lower Mississippi River Foundation (LMRF) was formed in 2011 to oversee existing public programming that had previously been conducted under the auspices of the for-profit Quapaw Canoe Company. For the past six years, the LMRF has functioned only because of the devotion of committed volunteers; it has never had a full-time staff member. In 2016, recognizing that the Mississippi River is at a crossroads—its wilderness character can be preserved with real action, but if not it will soon be lost—the LMRF undertook a “visioning process” to determine what we wanted to see for “our” river over the next 30 years. We are now in the process of hiring a full-time executive director who can take the lead in making this vision a reality.

The vision centers on making the Lower Mississippi floodplain the national model of a

healthy and resilient river ecosystem. We envision a thriving river where recreation, education, agriculture, and industry all function in healthy partnership with each other.

We believe this healthy river will boost local economies, and therefore, the quality of life along the river. Land value will increase, and there will be a booming industry of hunting, fishing, and nature tourism. A balanced mixture of public and private land ownership will allow substantial public use of the river and its floodplain, both for recreation and for education. Our vision does not rule out the presence of other, traditional land-based economic activities: sustainable logging and agriculture can be practiced alongside reserves set aside for wildlife, where forests can mature to their fullness.

## A healthy, balanced, and resilient river ecosystem

At the heart of our vision is sustaining the Mississippi River’s wild ecosystem—and improving the ecosystem’s vitality so that it can be the nation’s best model of what health, balance, and resilience mean for a river. The intricate inner workings of its biological systems must be studied and managed for optimal functioning. All species will be counted and cataloged, and closely monitored for sustainable life cycles. Humans, of course, will be a species that is present, too; parents must be able to bring their family to the water and let their children swim without fear of contamination.

We also want to see the wild places become wilder. The levees must be moved further away from the river whenever and wherever possible. This will solve so many of the river’s problems: it will allow us to accommodate larger flood events and decrease destructive flooding potential, and it will allow the growth of more wetlands and bottomland forests that process nutrients and maintain a resilient ecosystem. The Mississippi River floodplain can become a bottomland forest and wetland corridor for wildlife connecting the Piney Woods of the Gulf Coast with the Midwestern woodlands with the North Woods.



*In the river, not just on it.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



## Reconnecting Southerners

One of the issues hurting the river now is simply our separation from it. We live inside our homes, drive in our cars—walk around in stiff clothing that has been designed for office etiquette rather than function in a still-wild world—and forget that the wildness is all around us. And the Mississippi River, the most intact wilderness in the mid-South, is hidden from this workaday life. The levees are so tall that we never see the river and its woods unless we are driving over and away from it.

In 30 years we envision a Lower Mississippi Valley where residents commonly recreate on their big river in canoes and kayaks and paddleboards. All children living in the Mississippi Valley will have some first-hand experience with the river and its wild beauty. Parents will respect the river, not fear it. They will know what the challenges are, and what skills, knowledge, and equipment are necessary to safely enjoy it from human-powered vessels. Canoes, we envision, will be as common as towboats, kayaks as



*Reconnecting to the river.  
Image courtesy of Mike Brown.*



common as fishing vessels. Birding and animal watching will be as popular as hunting. The environment will be revered as divine creation where humans serve as students and stewards.

## Diversify and democratize

There are already a few that know the river's secret—but these few tend to be wealthy. Much of the riverside land is owned by hunting clubs, some of which require thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in annual fees from their member. Fear of the river, and ignorance about its beauty, have allowed these landowners to continue to claim more and more land with little opposition.

Within the next three decades, we need to create public water trails, open to all people. We need to

Science and art methods will be employed to study, document, and share its wildlife. Boat ramps will be as plentiful as grain elevators.

share the knowledge and skills that will allow the public to enjoy these trails—ensuring Southerners feel comfortable swimming, paddling, and interacting with wild nature in sustainable ways. Thirty years from now, we envision a Lower Mississippi Valley where residents of all races and economic means view themselves and their children as integral inhabitants in a complex ecosystem. Children must be raised to understand, respect, and take responsibility for the wild floodplain through continual engagement and lifelong stewardship.



*Bringing children to the river, Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



# How do we do this?

That's a wonderful vision, but how will we get there? The LMRF has a four-pronged approach, building on our past successes.

## Bring leaders and decision-makers onto the river

The heart of my work has always been bringing people onto the river. I launched the Quapaw Canoe Company in 1998, after a tourist visiting Clarksdale asked to be guided onto the river, and I realized there was a market for the explorations I was already doing.

I also found that by bringing the right people to the river, I could help keep this land public. Buck Island, a large island easily accessible from the paddler-friendly harbor in Helena, Arkansas, was purchased by the American Land Conservancy (ALC) in 2005, with hopes of turning it over to



*Bringing people together. Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*

another buyer. For years, though, they found no one suitable.

In 2010, I was approached by the editorial team of *Canoe & Kayak* magazine, who joined the Quapaw Canoe Company for a five-day trip through the wildest of the wild, the 101 miles downstream from Helena, Arkansas. We invited ALC leader Tim Richardson, who was spearheading the campaign to save Buck Island, and Kevin Smith, a five-term state representative from Helena (and now the president of the LMRF) to join the trip.

We made our first camp on Buck Island, so that everyone could see it firsthand. I didn't need to make any speeches. The river told its own tale. There were animal tracks everywhere on the sandbars: deer, coyote, raccoon, opossum. The spring songbird migration was just beginning, and great flocks of snow geese passed overhead,

and white pelicans camped on the beach: thousands of birds on thousands of acres of sand.

About a year after *Canoe & Kayak* published their account as a cover story, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission stepped up and purchased the island. It is now protected by a permanent wetlands easement through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which means that it will never be deforested again, and our children will one day enjoy the big woods that used to predominate in the Mississippi Valley.

While it's important that everyone in the South, and everyone in America, has a relationship with our continent's greatest river, we recognize how targeting particular individuals can have rippling consequences. We now plan to target the legislators, business leaders, and other key decision-makers who have a direct say in the river's future, and have a goal that 100 such individuals have a Mississippi River experience by 2022.

## Increase the amount of protected areas

To nurture a healthy, viable wilderness, it is critical to increase the amount of protected areas along the Mississippi River. This will serve the river's ecosystem: ten percent of the river's 400 species are considered endangered, and will benefit from habitat conservation. But this will also help the public interact with the river, and build the will to protect it. Paddlers and other recreationalists need public spaces where they can fish, camp, and explore, knowing they are not trespassing.

There are already organizations doing this work; the LMRF is not a land-conservation organization, nor do we have the resources to acquire land ourselves. But given our first-hand

relationship with the river, the LMRF has a unique understanding of the properties available along the river. We've learned which islands are particularly valuable to paddlers; we often know when properties are for sale before the general public.

There are currently four islands of at least 1,000 acres on the Lower Mississippi River that are open to public use (including Buck Island). Through the dissemination of knowledge to potential investors and collaborators, we aim to add at least one more island to this list by 2022, as well as create five new boat ramps or other public-access sites along the Lower Mississippi River.





*Public spaces on the river are critical.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*

## Engage more colleges and college students

The LMRF believes that colleges and universities can play a key role in building engaged river citizens. The river can serve as an immersive learning laboratory, where students can engage in interdisciplinary learning programs that last for weeks or even months.

A good model is a three-month, 18-credit “river semester” organized by professors at Augsburg College in Minnesota’s Twin Cities, in partnership with a geology professor at Louisiana State University. The Quapaw Canoe Company guided the group on a 10-day portion of their trip in 2015. Other colleges, like the University of Puget Sound and the University of Mississippi, are creating interdisciplinary academic programs that use the Mississippi River as a learning laboratory, and have also relied on the QCC’s river expertise in planning. By 2022, we aim to have 10 colleges and universities use the river in such a capacity.

Another possible direction is to appeal to universities’ continuing education programs. This could take many forms, from a one-day class to a semester-long course. For example, in 2009 we offered Big River Safety & Navigation as a semester-long continuing ed program through Phillips County Community College and the University of Arkansas. In 2015, we offered “Guiding and Outfitting 101,” a two-day class for prospective professional outfitters and guides, this time in

partnership with Louisiana Delta Adventures and LSU-Monroe. One participant, Corey Werk, went on to create his own outfitting business, Bayou Teche Experience, now thriving in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. Community colleges, technical colleges, and larger universities’ continuing education programs may be the most effective partners for these types of offerings. The LMRF also helped support two one-day classes about the river and its history at the lifelong learning program of the University of Southern Mississippi, one held at the main campus and one on the Gulf Coast campus.

The LMRF is also interested in advising colleges and universities on alternative spring break opportunities in the Lower and Middle Mississippi River region. Alternative spring break programs offer opportunities for college students to travel to impoverished regions to perform community work while also enjoying outdoor experiences. The LMRF has already been offering a day on the Mississippi and a clean-up for existing alternative spring break programs. LMRF can be a consultant to design these types of programs for other educational institutions. We aim to see 25 such programs by 2022. Through all of these forms of collegiate programming, we aim to see 2,500 students have deeply engaging experiences on the river by that year.

## Expose students early

When I first began carving canoes, the sharp swinging blades of adzes and axes, and their resounding booms on the raw logs attracted youthful attention. Local kids would approach, entranced by the scene, asking what I was doing, and why. Bewildered and awestruck at the same time, they would eventually overcome their shyness to request a swing of the tool. From these humble beginnings developed the Mighty

Quapaw Canoe Apprenticeship Program, which was launched in 1998—the first-ever public programming affiliated with the QCC. The Mighty Quapaws are young men and women from local, mostly low-income neighborhoods, who trained in leadership and outdoors skills, and served as apprentice guides on trips. Out of approximately 50 youth who have gone through the multi-year Mighty Quapaw Apprenticeship Program, 8 are





*Learning on the river takes many forms.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



*Carving a voyageur canoe.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*



still active as “on-call guides,” and 3 have gone on to full-time careers in the nature tourism industry.

The river often scares people. It is mysterious and wild. Yet the Quapaws learned that in a canoe you can reach out your hand and touch the water. It won't bite! Building youths' relationships with the river remains at the core of the LMRF's programming, as the “fear culture” that so often surrounds the Mississippi River is best dissolved early. The giant voyageur-style canoes we carve and paddle on the big river become nurseries for diversity and democracy. Mighty Quapaw Mississippi Delta youth find themselves talking, eating, and sharing campsites with people they have only previously seen on television. Outdoor settings break down barriers. The canoe fosters benevolent situations where old fears and stereotypes magically dissolve and new bridges are built in their place. These are the connections between individuals that lead to constructive civilization.

*Listen to River Guide Wants People to Paddle the Mighty Mississippi, Not Fear It featuring John Ruskey, by NPR.*

The LMRF has gone on to partner with after-school youth programs in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, serving mostly 5th through 12th graders. While participants represent the full range of the Delta's socio-economic diversity, we have experienced the greatest participation from kids who are traditionally considered “underserved.” Eighty-five percent of Mighty Quapaws are African-American, many from severely low-income neighborhoods. Students typically meet twice a week for two hours during

the school year, with additional once-per-month full-day field trips and overnight expeditions in the summer

In 2014, LMRF provided river experiences (day-trips or overnights in canoes on the big river) for 870 youth. There is great potential for expansion in this direction, but lack of funding often proves to be a stumbling block. We are developing Leave No Kid on Shore, or LiNKS, as an umbrella program that coordinates all this youth work, and provides a continual source of funding. The LMRF will present a one-week leadership summer camp on the Mississippi River in 2018 for Arkansas and Mississippi high schoolers. In 2019 we hope to double the number of youths participating, and double again in 2020. By 2022 we aim to have 25 secondary schools, and 500 students total, engage deeply with the river in some form.

Through this work, we aim to create a local force of young river citizens: 250 youth in the Mississippi Delta who have learned wilderness survival skills, from orientation to cooking, and 250 youth who have learned to carve and design canoes; 25 youth who become leaders that can take others through such training; 10 youth who have summer jobs in outdoor recreation; 5 who have chosen nature tourism or outdoor recreation as their intended career. We want 25 percent of parents in Coahoma County, Mississippi, and Phillips County, Arkansas, our two “home-base” counties, to have sent their students on field trips on the Mississippi or its tributaries—representing a sea change in the current “fear culture” that surrounds the river.



*Getting outside on the river.  
Image courtesy of John Ruskey.*





*“Canis Major, Orion, Moon over South Pass” by John Ruskey, watercolor, 18×24.  
Image courtesy of the artist.*



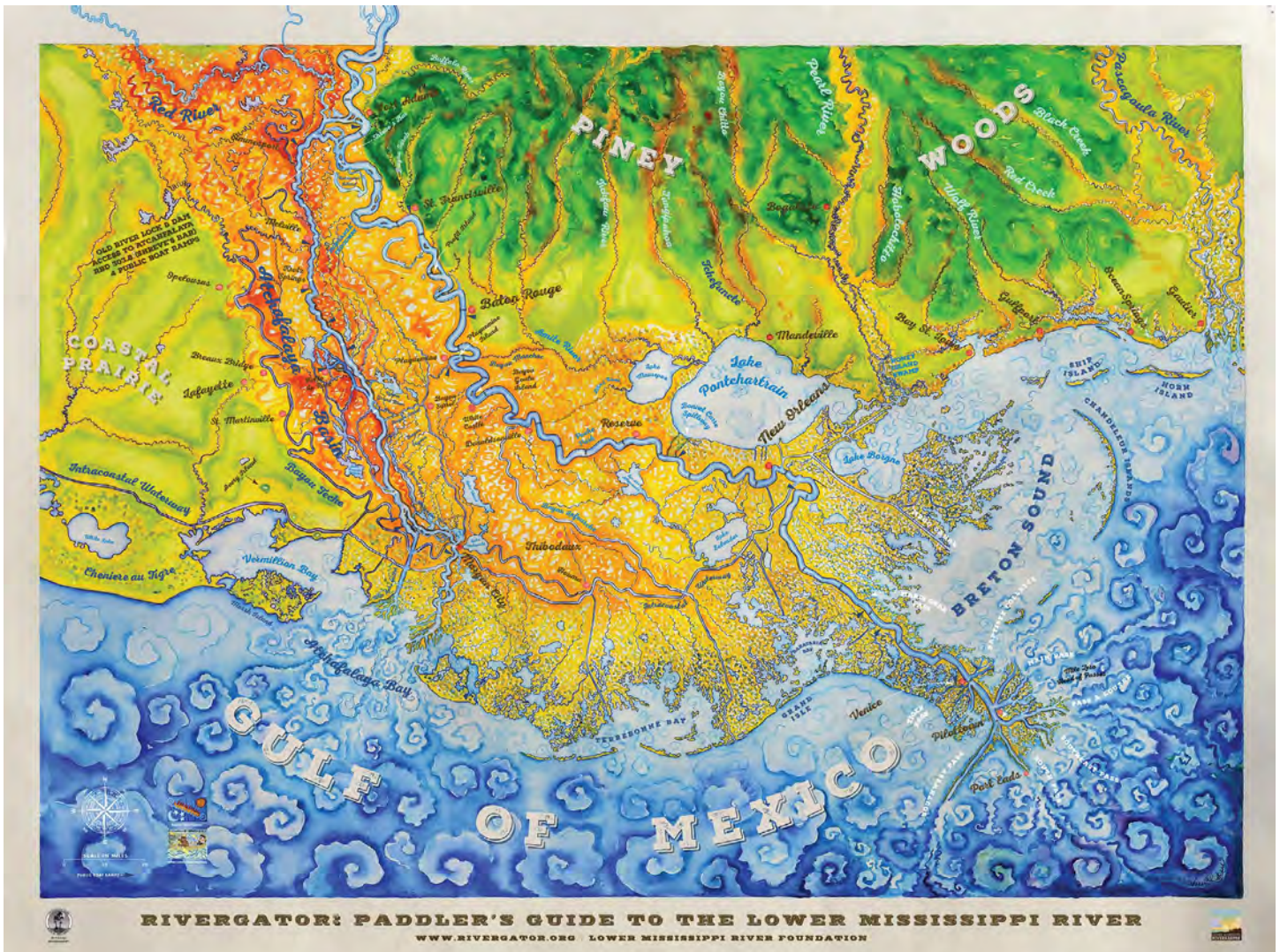
# Towards the future

Why is this river important? To me, the answer lies in how it makes me feel.

It gives me wholeness. It makes me feel connected. It brings together the world's isolated parts and shows how they exist in harmony. Things that normally conflict with each other—things like water and land, earth and sky, economy and recreation, ambition and humility, city lights and star light—the river makes them flow together in

one contiguous whole, and they make more sense than they do on dry land.

This year, I was reminded of these feelings as I canoed once more from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico. One of the first projects conducted under the auspices of the LMRF was the Rivergator, a complete mile-by-mile guide to that water trail, available free of charge online. This began simply as an attempt to describe the river from Buck



*“Southern Louisiana — Mississippi and Atchafalaya River — Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Venice, Birdsfoot Delta, Atchafalaya River” by John Ruskey, watercolor, 26×36. Prints of this poster are available at the [Rivergator Map Shop](http://RivergatorMapShop.com). Image courtesy of the artist.*



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Island to Choctaw Island, a 101-mile run down the wildest stretch on the Lower Mississippi, as a part of the effort to add Buck Island to the list of public lands along the river.

When we completed that stretch in 2012, we realized that something was missing. We needed to describe the river upstream to Memphis, and downstream to Vicksburg. Then we saw that Caruthersville to Memphis was needed, and also Vicksburg to Natchez. It became encyclopedic in scope—eventually spanning all of the Lower Mississippi. And it was a long project; research trips—required to see the river at its various

stages—spanned more than half a decade. It also informs all of our objectives, as it helps everyone better access the river. In 2017, to celebrate the completion of the Rivergator Project, the QCC led an expedition, in two stages, down the full water trail.

Ultimately, our goal at the LMRF is to make sure more and more people have had the “wilderness feeling” on the Mississippi River. That is the only way to ensure that our nation’s citizens will protect this national treasure. To be saved, it has to be recognized.

## For More Information:

- [Quapaw Canoe Company](#)
- [Rivergator](#)
- [Villageurs](#)
- [Between the Levees](#)
- [Separate Boats](#)

## Further Reading:

- [\*We Are the Wild Ones\*](#)  
Canoe & Kayak Magazine, April 29, 2017 by Boyce Upholt, photos by Chris Battaglia.
- [\*Paddling on the Lower Mississippi\*](#)  
Star Tribune, October 3, 2015 by Dean Klinkenberg.
- [\*Details: Canoeing the Lower Mississippi\*](#)  
Star Tribune, October 3, 2015 by Dean Klinkenberg.
- [\*Wild Miles on the Lower Mississippi River\*](#)  
Bitter Southerner, July/August 2015 by Boyce Upholt, photos by Rory Doyle.
- [\*Southerners of the Year 2017\*](#)  
Southern Living, December 2017.

- *Brand-New 'Rivergator Paddler's Guide' Provides a Map to the Lower Mississippi*  
Riverfront Times, Monday, March 20, 2017 by Bill Loelke.
- *Meet John Ruskey, who just canoed the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans*  
St. Louis Magazine, June 7, 2017 by Chris Naffziger.

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## About the Authors

John Ruskey is a worker bee in the colony of his queen, the Lower Mississippi River. He carves canoes, paints, and guides others into the wildest place remaining in the center of North America, the verdant floodplain of the big river, which reaches fullness in her last thousand miles of free-flowing joy to the Gulf of Mexico. He is owner of Quapaw Canoe Company, Director of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation, and author of Rivergator.org, one million words, photos, paintings, maps and videos describing the Mississippi River for paddlers.

Boyce Upholt is a freelance journalist based in Cleveland, Mississippi. His writing on science, culture, and technology has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Sierra Magazine*, and *The Believer*, among other publications. Boyce provided editorial and organizational support in the writing of this article. He is currently at work on a book about the history and future of the Mississippi River.