

A satellite photograph of the Mississippi River delta region. The river is a prominent dark blue-green line winding through a vast, arid, tan-colored landscape. The river's path is highly irregular and meandering, especially in the lower half of the image. The top of the image shows the river's mouth where it meets a larger body of water, likely the Gulf of Mexico, with a dark blue hue. The surrounding land is mostly flat and devoid of significant vegetation, with some lighter-colored patches that could be salt flats or sand dunes.

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PARADOXES OF WATER

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The cover image is of The Nile River, July 19 2004. To the right of the Nile is the Red Sea, with the finger of the Gulf of Suez on the left, and the Gulf of Aqaba on the right. In the upper right corner of the image are Israel and Palestine, left, and Jordan, right. Below Jordan is the northwestern corner of Saudi Arabia. Jacques Descloitres, MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFC.

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IN REVIEW

A TOUR OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER VISITOR CENTER

By Joanne Richardson

The Minnesota National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) is a 72-mile National Park Service unit along the Mississippi River as it flows through the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and

St. Paul. MNRRA is an open secret in the Twin Cities, and it is not widely known as a national park, even by people who live and work within its borders.



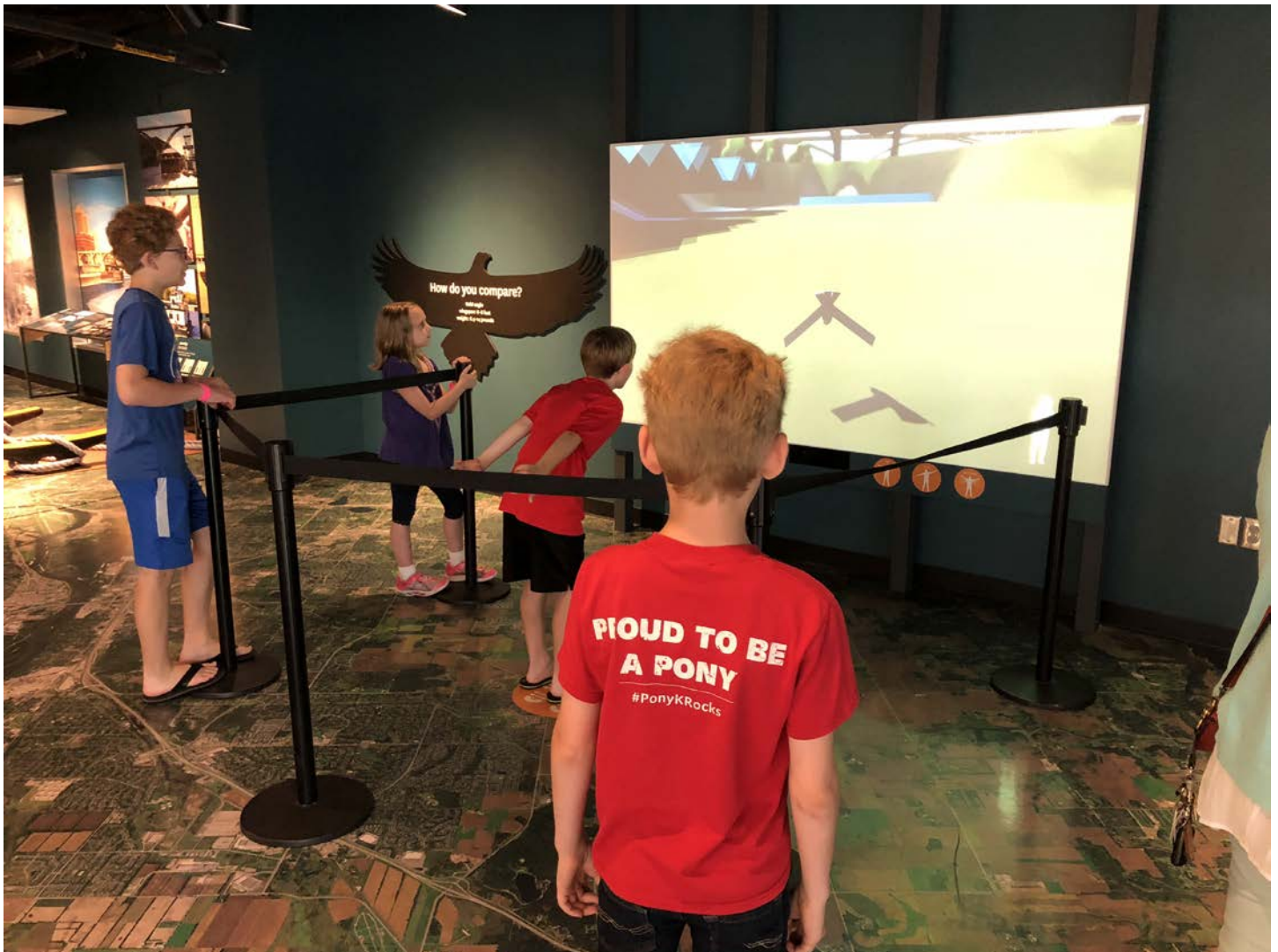
Approaching the visitor center through the SMM lobby.

Anchoring the park in downtown St. Paul is an excellent small visitor center located in the lobby of the Science Museum of Minnesota, situated on a high bluff along the river and tucked into the side of downtown. With easy access to transit, city, and river, this is a beautiful, accessible, and advantageous location.

I am of the entirely unscientific opinion that if you really want to know how good something is, ask your kid. Unless the child in question believes that The Correct Answer will win a treat of some kind, I find that you are likely to get startlingly unvarnished truth. Consequently my son John, age eight and one-quarter, and I, made the pilgrimage into the big city to see what we thought

of the visitor center. I'm reasonably sure John agreed to this plan because of the accessibility of treats forbidden at home, and his beloved Science Museum of Minnesota. Consequently, promises made and noted, we set off to Do Important Work.

As we approached the visitor center through the familiar territory of the SMM lobby, John's keen eyes and razor-sharp instincts led him straight to the prominently displayed video game. There was a short line, so he was able to study the technique of others before he had his own try. Standing in front of a video screen that stretches from floor to ceiling, with arms outstretched he flew along the river as an eagle, catching fish and delivering



The tempting allure of screen time.

them to a nest. The Very Honest Opinion was noted that the fish resembled cucumbers with fins, but since that was found to be delightful it was not at all a detriment. Tired arms and with motherly prodding to let others take turns, he played several times, diving, doing loop-de-loops, and testing for the game's boundary conditions; How high can I go? Can I go under water? Can I cross the city? Can I fly into a building? Can I fly all the way down the river? How fast can I go?

Stopping just short of physically dragging him, I did induce him to visit the rest of the visitor center. We talked with the park ranger on duty and saw the array of workbooks and activities available. John cast a world-weary eye across

these, having recently worked through many of the activities at Big Bend National Park in Texas. I think he'd be more interested in the activities if we were actually outside in a natural area. I enjoyed the array of pamphlets and maps, but each time I turned to show something to John, well, I think you can guess where he'd disappeared off to.

Child was retrieved and we moved further into the visitor center. I found the signage interesting, and John tried tying maritime knots with the ropes provided. A short clamber over a canoe later, and I eventually gave up, and let him fly like an eagle in the video game while I enjoyed the rest of the exhibit.



The prompts to return were a sign of success, he'd flown far enough to reach the edge.



One of my favorite signs offers a wonderful summary of the park and why it is significant.



He said it looked like fun for later.



Tying knots is tricky.



Still some growing left to do to catch up to an eagle's wingspan.



Shy about sharing the canoe, he enjoyed the presentation.



I enjoyed the array of interpretive materials that included compelling stories about people and the river.

Explore the park's history



The digital kiosk was excellent, nice detail but not overwhelming.

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Some time later, when our paths crossed again, I admonished him for standing in the river and risking wet shoes; he finally noticed the floor graphic which clearly indicated he was standing in the middle of the river. The withering look I received indicated that the joke had fallen flat, but he did indulge me for a few moments as I tried to Explain Important Things and point out some favorite places. Well, I had fun at least.

Ultimately, we both loved the visitor center for vastly different reasons. The eagle's flight video game had enduring appeal that enabled me to truly enjoy the rest of the exhibit while John remained happily occupied. He's excited at the prospect of going back, fishing for cucumbers,

and remembers the connection between eagles, fish, and trees. I think other lessons escaped him, but I know he'll have more opportunities to learn them. I went in with a good basis of knowledge myself, but I like to think that people who haven't made the river their profession will be able to take the knowledge of city and river as national park will enjoy the opportunity to learn a bit more about our beautiful city and river.

As I write this three weeks later, the eight year-old honest witness does not remember that the river is part of a park, or that this is unusual and special. He remembers the "best video game I ever played."



Impressive details, if you look down.

All images courtesy of the author.

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