



Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission 2015-16 Annual Report August 2016



300 33rd Ave S, Suite 101, Waite Park, MN 56387 • 651-341-4196 • www.MnMississippiRiver.com

Mission

The mission of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Minnesota is to preserve, promote and enhance the resources of the Mississippi River Valley and to develop the highways and amenities of the Great River Road. The Commission is organized and guided by Minnesota Statute 161.1419. The Minnesota Great River Road is designated and managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation under Minnesota Statute 161.142.

Quarterly Meetings of the Full Commission

The MN-MRPC held full Commission meetings on August 20, 2015; November 12, 2015; February 4, 2016 and May 19, 2016. Each meeting included updates from regional citizen Commissioners and partner state agencies.

Projects & Activities

Great River Road Corridor Management Planning and Implementation

This multi-year project, completed in June of 2016, developed a Corridor Management Plan to guide the work of Minnesota's Mississippi River Parkway Commission, MnDOT and partners for the next 10 – 15 years. The project has also implemented a previous CMP key strategy - signing the Mississippi River Bicycle Trail (MRT) statewide.

Project Accomplishments

- The Corridor Management Plan and associated database/mapping were finalized in early 2016. The plan is organized around five themes, 15 objectives, 90+ strategies and identifies four initial implementation projects.
- Great River Road Wayshowing Signage, Plan Your Trip Interactive Mapping Tool (for travelers seeking information), Plan Your Project Interactive Mapping Tool (for road management entities) and Great River Road Ambassador Development are the four projects identified for initial implementation. Implementation of these projects will help address over 40 of the plan strategies.
- A project website houses the full Corridor Management Plan along with background information and project documents – www.mnmississippiriver.com/cmp. See attached sample documents.
- Printed copies of the Corridor Management Plan were distributed to MN-MRPC and CMP Project Advisory Team.
- A CMP/GRR/MN-MRPC overview brochure was developed and printed, for use with a variety of audiences to facilitate implementation.
- 753 byway resources were visited, documented and mapped; reflecting the full corridor of 565 miles, 6 destination area, 20 counties, 43 communities and 3 tribes. Each entry includes specific location, photograph, resource type, byway intrinsic quality, and a brief description that can be used for promotional purposes, traveler information and project planning.
- 620 wayshowing sign locations were visited, documented and mapped. 135 of those signs are missing and another 202 are in need of modification (54%).
- Two rounds of public open houses (six locations in each round) were held. Two online surveys were conducted. Four regional stakeholder meetings plus an online meeting were held to gather feedback on the draft plan. The public shared 215 river stories, 543 "can't miss" attractions and 99 favorite river views.
- 16 project management team meetings and seven project advisory team meetings were held.
- Three MN-MRPC CMP workshops were conducted prior to standing quarterly meetings.
- An Investment Inventory for the Minnesota Great River Road was completed by the Region Five Development Commission. Cities, counties, townships, and park districts were contacted regarding current

and future development plans along the Great River Road, including details on projected cost, funding sources and needs. 102 planned local projects along the byway were documented. The inventory will be updated annually and is included as appendix in the CMP.

- MnDOT included the CMP project as part of its internal conflict scoping process with Division Directors and five Districts to facilitate future implementation of strategies. Presentations and interactive sessions were provided at the MnDOT Planning Managers Group and All Planners Group meetings. Meetings were also held to plan for receiving, housing and maintaining the byway database and maps.
- Meetings were held with representatives of Explore Minnesota Tourism, Minnesota Historical Society, Department of Natural Resources and Department of Agriculture to develop strategies and facilitate implementation.
- A breakout session and mobile workshop were presented by MN-MRPC representatives and consulting team members at the MN American Planners Association Conference in fall of 2015.
- Mississippi River Trail signs were fabricated and installed for the full length of the Minnesota route. Total project included 800+ miles, 2,262 signs and 55 municipal agreements. Ribbon cutting/recognition events were held in three locations.
- MRT kiosk content was developed in partnership with local communities. Kiosks featuring MRT and GRR information were fabricated and installed in seven MRT host communities – Bemidji, Brainerd, Little Falls, Ramsey, Hastings, Lake City and Winona. Kiosk designs are available for viewing at www.mnmississippiriver.com/cmp under “project documents”.
- 15,000 copies of the “Mississippi River Companion” were printed. The document is available online at <https://www.nps.gov/miss/planyourvisit/missrivercomp.htm>.

National MRPC

MN-MRPC members participated in MRPC Standing Committees and carried out ten-state projects at the state level. Five MN-MRPC representatives participated in the 2015 Annual Meeting in New Orleans; and four participated in the 2016 Semi-Annual Meeting in La Crosse. Newly produced Great River Road maps were distributed to 11 MN GRR Interpretive Centers and 10 Explore Minnesota Welcome Centers, as well as to other sites upon request. A spring contest promoting Great River Road birding and summer contest promoting Great River Road biking were conducted. A ten-state Great River Road mobile application in Japanese and English versions was launched.

Mississippi River Geotourism Program

The MN-MRPC continued to promote the program as well as encourage and assist with nominations from within Minnesota, with primary focus on GRR interpretive centers and agency partner sites. 11 community information meetings were held in October 2015. Support was provided by the MN-MRPC in the form of local contacts, locations and communications.

Mississippi Corridor Critical Area Rulemaking

A DNR representative provided a presentation to the MN-MRPC in May 2016 on status of the rulemaking process. Comments submitted in 2014 by the MN-MRPC were then reviewed by a subcommittee of the MN-MRPC and compared to the 2016 rules proposed for adoption, and a letter and the comparison results were provided to the Administrative Law Judge for consideration.

Funding/Great River Road Investments

The Minnesota Great River Road and its amenities are supported by several funding sources, including those managed by the MN-MRPC as listed below (state operating budget, FHWA and National Park Service grants) and those managed by related organizations (other scenic byways, partner organizations such as the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, State of Minnesota, etc.). Funding for FY '16 and '17 was appropriated through the Minnesota Legislative Coordinating Commission, the MN-MRPC's fiscal agent, at levels consistent with the previous biennium.

State Operating Budget

The MN-MRPC operated with state funding at levels allowing the Commission to proceed with priorities. State operating funding for FY '16 was \$66,150. The FY '17 appropriation has been set at \$63,000.

Federal Highway Administration Grant

- Minnesota Great River Road Corridor Management Planning & Implementation (\$560,000) - Grant work was completed during FY '16 and the grant ended 6/30/16. A summary is provided beginning on page one of this report.

National Park Service Grant

- Great River Road Corridor Management Planning and Implementation (\$175,000) – Funds are local match for the National Scenic Byways Grant. Project tasks were completed in FY '16 and the grant ended 6/30/16.

Minnesota Transportation Alternatives Program

In the third year of a three year program to help transition Minnesota byways into the new MAP 21 funding structure, MnDOT awarded funds in 2016 for FY' 17 projects. Applications were due in August 2015. Four of the six applications were from along the Great River Road. Two Great River Road projects receiving funding: Lady Slipper Scenic Byway Bridge Design/Engineering and City of Red Wing Trail Development. The MN-MRPC authorized and sent letters to the Minnesota congressional delegation encouraging support for restoration of the National Scenic Byways program including appropriations (copy attached).

Examples of Local & Regional Activities

- **Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership** – This group continues to address riverfront issues and needs in the city, as well as promote the importance of the river, including initiatives such as the Mississippi Minute film festival (this year expanded in celebration of the NPS Centennial) and MRT improvements.
- **Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board** – MPRB agreement to purchase a key connection along the North Minneapolis riverfront – 3.88 acres of land containing 500 lineal feet of shoreline that will become part of a continuous network of parks and trails along the Upper Riverfront.
- **Saint Paul Riverfront Corporation** – Conducted the 5th Annual Placemaking Residency featuring sessions involving the role of art, government, creative economies, history, psychology of place, employment and vocation, investment and economic development. The organization also held the 22nd Annual Saint Paul Great River Gathering. Four members represented the MN-MRPC at this event. The group is also pursuing development of the River Balcony – a proposed 1.5 mile elevated pedestrian walkway along the Mississippi River that will extend from the Science Museum of Minnesota (a Great River Road Interpretive Center) to the Union Depot.
- **City of Saint Paul** – Seeking Transportation Alternatives funding for the Bruce Vento Bicycle and Pedestrian Bridge Project. Letter of support requested and received from the MN-MRPC.
- **Grand Rapids** – Proceeding with plans to develop a new footbridge over the Mississippi River.
- **USACOE** – Updated their Mississippi River Headwaters Master Plan.
- **MN DNR "Take Aim at Summer"** – The annual event was held in early June at DNR central region headquarters along the Mississippi River in St. Paul, focused on outdoor activities for families available within an urban area.
- **National Park Service 2016 Centennial** – The Science Museum of Minnesota premiered the film "America Wild" as a signature NPS Centennial event, the first stop for the film after Washington D.C.
- **Mississippi National River and Recreation Area:** MNRRA convenes quarterly meetings of the Trails and Open Space Partnership, a coalition of over 50 agencies and organizations. MnDOT and MN-MRPC participate. \$20,000 grant received from REI to pursue a kayak/canoe share program.
- **Brainerd-Baxter Mississippi River Revitalization Project** –The Brainerd Riverfront Steering Committee hired an engineering firm to begin implementation of their riverfront plan. MnDOT and MN-MRPC participate in this effort. On July 11 about 60 people gathered in Brainerd, Minnesota's Kiwanis Park for a ribbon cutting event celebrating the installation of two new Mississippi River-focused interpretive map panels, and their partnership with Aitkin and Crosby serving as co-host communities for the MRT.
- **St. Cloud Area** – Work began on a downtown extension to the Beaver Islands Trail; and St. Cloud, Sartell and Sauk Rapids were announced as hosts for the 2017 Minnesota Governor's Fishing Opener, which will feature various locations on the Mississippi River.
- **Take a Day OFF* (Outdoor Family Fun) on the Mississippi** - This 7th annual event at Stearns County Mississippi River Park was held on August 1 and is organized by Stearns County Soil and Water Conservation District, Minnesota DNR, Benton County, St. Cloud State University and several other local partners. Over 20 free activities were offered.

- **Cuyuna Lakes Mountain Bike Trail** – Plans are in place and state bonding funds were requested to implement the Cuyuna Master Vision for Trails, creating additional trails that would result in a world class three-day cycling destination.
- **Oliver H. Kelley Farm** – The Oliver H. Kelley Farm, on the banks of the Mississippi River, is an important agriculture history site near the Great River Road. Work on a new Visitor Center has been progressing, with completion expected in fall 2016.
- **Lady Slipper Scenic Byway** – Received a \$20,000 MnDOT Transportation Alternatives/Scenic Byway Grant for design and engineering of a new pedestrian bridge over the Mississippi River. The Great River Road runs concurrent with the Lady Slipper Byway in this area.
- **Upper St. Anthony Lock** – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers closed the Upper St. Anthony Lock in June 2015 and will maintain the facility for flood control only. An agreement was developed to facilitate the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (NPS) taking over the operations of the visitor center, in partnership with other agencies, beginning in spring of 2016.
- **Fort Snelling Upper Post** – DNR, MNHS and NPS are among the partners that have worked to redevelop this site into affordable housing.
- **Historic Fort Snelling** – MNHS requested state bonding funds for improvements at Historic Fort Snelling (a GRR Interpretive Center) with the Mississippi River as the main focus, including a visitor center with river view and improved wayfinding.
- **Dakota County** – Four Mississippi River Trail projects are in planning or construction; Pine Bend Bluffs Trailhead construction in partnership with City of Inver Grove Heights and DNR; Spring Lake Regional Park Reserve Natural Area Restoration; Hastings Riverfront Renaissance Project.
- **Itasca State Park** – GRR Interpretive Center training session for 40 – 50 staff members.
- **Forest History Center** – GRR meeting held with staff.
- **Mississippi River Trail** – Inaugural Headwaters to Hills Tour held, August 26 – September 2, 2015. Registration reached capacity quickly (capacity of 50) and the second was held July 10 – 17, 2016.
- **Lake Time Magazine Feature** – MN GRR Crossings Region (Grand Rapids to Brainerd) feature article in the spring edition of Lake Time Magazine (see attached).
- **Minnesota Business First Stop/Economy in Motion Event September 2015** – The fall 2015 multi-day meeting agenda included a presentation on the Great River Road and Corridor Management Plan. The group is made up of nine state agencies, three of which are MN-MRPC member agencies, focused on economic development through business expansions and relocations.

Membership

The MN-MRPC is organized by state statute to include: (2) Members of the House of Representatives; (2) Members of the Senate; (5) Members of State Agencies - (1) appointed by each: DNR, MnDOT, Historical Society, Agriculture & Tourism; (5) Regional Members – (1) from each of the Great River Road regions established by statute (1) Member-At-Large – appointed by the other 14. Two new technical members were welcomed over the past year: Regina Bonsignore, Department of Natural Resources and Kristie Zeller, Explore Minnesota Tourism. They replaced Cynthia Wheeler (DNR) and Bill Von Bank (Explore Minnesota) who are thanked for their service to the Commission.

**This report is respectfully submitted on August 24, 2016.
Rep. Sheldon Johnson, MN-MRPC Chair**

Top Themes:

Nature

Recreational Activities

Top Areas of Focus:

Health and Active Living

Facilities Management

Placemaking

215
RIVER
STORIES



20 KEY
STAKEHOLDER
MEETINGS

87 VISITOR
SURVEYS

16 PROJECT
MANAGEMENT
TEAM MEETINGS

MN-MRPC
MEETINGS **6**

ADVISORY
TEAM
MEETINGS **7**

SOCIAL
MEDIA
PLATFORMS **4**

132 PARTICIPANTS

12
PUBLIC OPEN
HOUSES

543 Specific #cantmiss locations

99 RIVER VIEWS IDENTIFIED

533 Online Survey Participants Aged 19-65+

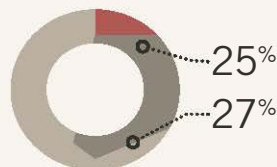


73% of respondents were aware they were traveling on the Great River Road

Most respondents were traveling by car and 20% were traveling by bicycle



25 percent of respondents were over the age of 50



27 percent were under 18



75% of respondents visited or plan to visit the Headwaters of the Mississippi River

The top three activities in terms of enjoyment included:

- 1 Touring by car
- 2 Headwaters/Itasca State Park
- 3 Hiking



75% of respondents were visiting friends and family or were vacationing

Many respondents would like to see more and better signs indicating they are on the Great River Road

Many listed getting lost as a least favorite activity or a need for improvement



95% of respondents definitely will or probably would plan to visit again

Most travelers learned about the Great River Road from:

- 1 The website
- 2 Existing local knowledge
- 3 Friends/family
- 4 Brochures
- 5 Wayshowing signs

| Theme | Goals |
|---|---|
|  <p data-bbox="307 185 591 280">Facilities Management</p> | <p data-bbox="631 124 1370 328">Assure safe travel through route signage, mapping, and traveler information. Maintain the byway as a seamless travel experience that honors the Mississippi River. Provide integrated multimodal travel options (air, rail, boat, vehicular, transit, bicycle, and pedestrian) so travelers can focus on enjoying the journey.</p> |
|  <p data-bbox="307 504 550 552">Technology</p> | <p data-bbox="631 416 1384 620">Use technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of byway management and measure the success. Enhance the visitor experience through web-based and mobile-based technology to promote travel experiences with easy-to-use travel information. Use social media to share river exploration insights from travelers and byway managers alike.</p> |
|  <p data-bbox="307 775 608 871">Education and Engagement</p> | <p data-bbox="631 716 1389 920">Educate byway facility managers, intrinsic resource managers, businesses and residents about the opportunities and benefits of leveraging the Great River Road as a tool to improve the State's and their community's livability and economy. Engage travelers locally and from all over the world to travel here for Mississippi River exploration.</p> |
|  <p data-bbox="307 1094 579 1142">Placemaking</p> | <p data-bbox="631 1005 1374 1209">Strengthen connections between the byway and the people and places that tell the story of the river. Protect, enhance, and promote the intrinsic resources available within and between communities. Develop itineraries that reflect the unique landscapes and activities offered by the Mississippi River as it flows through Minnesota.</p> |
|  <p data-bbox="307 1366 588 1461">Health and Active Living</p> | <p data-bbox="631 1318 1384 1485">Promote active Mississippi River exploration that includes bicycling, walking, hiking, and boating. Promote healthy, local food options. Manage and promote the byway applying geotourism principles that simultaneously sustain place and advance tourism.</p> |



Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission

300 33rd Avenue South, Suite 101 • Waite Park, Minnesota 56387

Phone: 651-341-4196 • E-Mail: info@MnMississippiRiver.com

Members of the House: Sheldon Johnson (DFL – 67B) – Chair *Members of the Senate:* David Senjem (R – 25); Patricia Torres Ray (DFL – 63) *State Agency Appointees:* Paul Hugunin – Agriculture, Scott Bradley – Transportation, Adam Johnson – Explore Minnesota Tourism, Keith Parker – Natural Resources, Andrea Kajer – Historical Society *Regional Appointees:* Nancy Salminen – Lake Itasca to Grand Rapids, Anne Lewis – Grand Rapids to Brainerd, Karl Samp – Brainerd to Elk River, Cordelia Pierson – Elk River to Hastings, Sheronne Mulry – Hastings to Iowa Border *Member at Large:* Mark Anderson

June 9, 2016

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
302 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Klobuchar:

As Congressional appropriators continue work on the 2017 Department of Transportation appropriation to the Federal Highway Administration, we request your support for sufficient funds to fully restore the National Scenic Byways Program including both existing byways' projects and new byway designations. A recent letter to House Committee on Appropriations Leadership from Congressmen Cicilline, Farr, Blumenauer, Grijalva, DeSaulnier and Cartwright urged support for funding new byway designations and highlighted the importance of National Scenic Byways.

The Minnesota Great River Road received National Scenic Byway designation in 2000. All ten Mississippi River states hold National Scenic Byway designation for the Great River Road. In Minnesota, Mississippi River counties accounted for \$9.8 billion in leisure and hospitality industry gross sales and an estimated 180,000 leisure and hospitality jobs in 2014, representing 70% of statewide travel and tourism impact (2016 Tourism and the Economy Fact Sheet, Explore Minnesota Tourism). National Scenic Byways designation and funding offer partnering opportunities for local communities and regional groups to identify and complete significant projects that improve local quality of life and the tourists' experience. Since 1992 National Scenic Byway funds have facilitated Great River Road projects including improvements to overlooks, rest areas, interpretation, maps, marketing, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, wayshowing, historic preservation and more, making a positive difference in Minnesota communities.

A new Corridor Management Plan was recently completed for the 565 mile Minnesota Great River Road including a detailed assessment of the current condition of the byway and resulting in five themes and 90+ strategies that will help move the byway and its partners forward and benefit all involved. The plan also includes an investment inventory of 102 local projects along the byway, which shows the local commitment to and investment in byway related projects as well as the need for categories of funds formerly available through the National Scenic Byways program. A brochure providing background information about the Minnesota Great River Road, recent accomplishments and future plans is enclosed for your reference.

Dedicated funding opportunities for scenic byways would enable the Great River Road and 20 other Minnesota byways, most with new Corridor Management Plans, to continue the innovative programming and projects that benefit Minnesota and the nation. If you would like to learn more about the Minnesota Great River Road, please visit www.mnmississippiriver.com or contact us at 651-341-4196 if you would be interested in a tour. Thank you for your time and consideration of this request for support.

Sincerely,

Rep. Sheldon Johnson
Chair

THE GREAT RIVER ROAD... MINNESOTA'S NATURE AND A WHOLE LOT MORE

By Anne Lewis, Commissioner, Crossings Section
Mississippi River Parkway Commission

The natural beauty of northern Minnesota is one of the region's greatest assets. But it takes more than scenery to meet the criteria to be a National Scenic Byway. That's why the Great River Road – the network of highways beside the Mississippi River at the heart of the north woods – unequivocally qualifies.

Apropos the beauty of the region, northern Minnesota hosts five of the state's eight National Scenic Byways. Beyond natural and scenic beauty, though, these picturesque travel ways must also possess characteristics of regional significance including archeological, cultural, historic, and recreational attributes to make the list. When you're on it, you'll see the Great River Road has them all.

The Great River Road, like the Mississippi River itself, starts in Itasca State Park and meanders our region in its own way. The importance of the river to early community life in both Minnesota and the nation dictated where towns grew. Today's travel routes – interstate, state and county roads – appear to logically link culture and commerce centers. But the heart of our nation and our region once revolved around the great rivers. This collection of roads following the Mississippi – the Great River Road – links us back, allowing a deeper look at places and people.

The Great River Road lets you explore so much more than

lakes and forests. National Scenic Byway signs and the iconic green river-pilot, paddle-wheel signs mark the way to not only scenic highlights, but to the history and human interaction that integrated nature with life in days past as well as today. Recently added Mississippi River Trail signs offer similar experiences for those who want to bike beside the river. All three signs mark the direction to uncovering the authentic, deeply rooted characteristics of our region.

Start with Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe students from the Bug O Nay Ge Shig School near where the Great River Road and Leech Lake Reservation intersect. The school's students are taught and mentored to perform traditional dances and songs throughout the region, in addition to their regular studies. On Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day weekend the Silver Eagle Drum and Dancers perform in Cass Lake, just off the Great River Road. They also participate in competitions throughout the region and across the nation both as a group and individually. A 2016 schedule can be found at <http://www.llojibwe.com>.

If you're on Hwy 2 heading west from Cass Lake, you'll come upon the unique and colorful Big Winnie Store in Bena, where the Great River Road meets the state highway. Listed on the National Register for Historic Places, the store almost startles passers by. The original owner wanted to build a store with an "Asian and Bavarian" look. As luck would have it, Frank Lloyd Wright used to visit Lake Winnibigoshish at that time, and it should surprise no one



Photo by Joe Rossi



Photo by Aaron Hautala

that he drew the sketches that formed the basis for the store's design. The building itself has had a colorful history housing and feeding loggers and trappers, and later Civilian Conservation Corps members and even German prisoners of war. Today, descendants of the original owner have painstakingly renovated and restored the store with an adjoining campground and picnic area. They're happy to share the building's story, if you stop by.

Also at that spot, you can take Minnesota Hwy. 84 south seven miles to see one of the early, significant engineering developments in the history of the Mississippi River in the town aptly named Federal Dam. While it's a little off the Great River Road, it's a wonderful Mississippi River place with yet another story to tell.

Dating back to 1866, the first mission of the newly formed St. Paul office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was to survey the Upper Mississippi River for flood and navigation purposes. The eventual plan - developed from the survey and the experience of a Nicollet Island tunnel collapsing - included building the first American reservoir ever on Lake Winnibigoshish. Eventually, a system of Mississippi River headwaters reservoirs - including Pokegama, Leech, Sandy, Crosslake and Gull - was built to maintain the four-foot, low-water channel between St. Paul and St. Louis and secure Mississippi River navigation for generations to come. An engineering innovation of large proportion in its day, we have come to take the reservoir system's form and

function for granted... that is until the spring thaw and occasional flooding occurs.

Returning to the Great River Road, and following it east and south along county roads 3 and 74, brings travelers to Schoolcraft State Park. Nestled among towering White Pines, this rustic campsite beside the Mississippi River commemorates an individual who embodies America's exploration era and a chronicler of topography and culture. Henry Schoolcraft, for whom the park is named, accompanied Michigan's Governor Cass (Yes, there was an era when state governors didn't just govern, they went out and claimed new territory, too.) as he sought to find the source of the Mississippi River. 10 years after that initial exploration, it was Schoolcraft who found the source and gave it the name, Itasca, combining two Latin words meaning "true" and "head". But Henry Schoolcraft was more than an explorer. His first marriage was to a member of an illustrious multi-cultural family with strong Ojibwe roots. His writings, including a congressionally commissioned study of Native Americans, are thought to have been the basis, in part, for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha, linking Minnesota and all things "Hiawatha" for many years to come. Think Minnehaha Falls, Lake Hiawatha and the Longfellow neighborhood in Minneapolis.

Continuing on to County Rd. 76, we come to the Forest History Center, one of the Minnesota Historical Society's 26 sites throughout the state. With its authentic reenactment of a 19th century logging camp and its displays of current forestry prac-





tices and regional impact, the Forest History Center is a unique environmental history and learning center beside the Mississippi River. It offers living history experiences, naturalist programs, wildlife encounters, artisan craft workshops, outdoor recreation, concerts and cultural festivals, children's activities and more. A National Great River Road Interpretive Center, too, the Forest History Center offers insights and engagement to people of all ages. Located in Grand Rapids, it's in the heart of Minnesota's nature and an interpreter of the region's and river's resources and their impact on the area and state.

As one leaves the Forest History Center and travels along Hwy 76 to the east, there's a canoe, kayak and stand-up paddleboard retailer, Paddlehoppers, just over the river. Offering all forms of Mississippi River transport for rent as well as sale, this year you can call ahead to reserve the water conveyance of your choice and be given a ride to an up-river destination. Pick from a four-hour or eight-hour return trip for up-close-and-personal encounters with the Mississippi River.

The Great River Road continues its river bank concourse through pastures, some dirt roads and several twists and turns on its way to Aitkin, Minnesota, with its signature tag line: "Mississippi Riverboat Town". Explore the region's history as well as the chronicles of how this Minnesota county experienced the major national shift from river to train transportation as a

microcosm of the country's experience. It's all located in the Aitkin County Historical Society in the restored Great Northern Depot.

Taking State Highway 210 out of Aitkin through more agricultural countryside and woodlands, travelers will find themselves in the towns of Crosby and Ironton, home to one of the state's most ambitious land reclamation endeavors resulting in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area here. Local residents worked with state officials for over 30 years to reclaim an overgrown mining area - renowned for its pristine waters, including the Mississippi River. Its hilly terrain has made for excellent biking and hiking trails for outdoor enthusiasts of all abilities. Arriving just in time for the rise of "adventure tourism", this Great River Road destination boasts rustic camping (winter as well as summer), biking, scuba diving, paddling and endless promontories from which to view Minnesota's nature at its best. The recreation area not only boasts scenic beauty, it holds onto its rich history of "boom and bust" and gives visitors a story of resilience and innovation that is standing the test of time.

These are just a few of the stories and authentic adventures to be found on the National Scenic Byway, the Great River Road in northern Minnesota. It's not a route for rushing, but rather - for those willing to take the time - a network of pathways to intrinsic and intriguing experiences to be savored.





NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Mississippi River National Geographic Geotourism Program

COMING SOON...

The Mississippi River Geotourism Council, made up of the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mississippi River Trail, Inc. and the Mississippi River Connections Collaborative will launch their Mississippi River Geotourism web site this spring through the auspices of National Geographic's Map Division. The 10-state Mississippi River Parkway Commission is a project partner.

Branded through National Geographic, the program seeks to promote the culture, heritage, and ecological diversity of the people and places the Mississippi River connects through the voices and the stories of the river's communities.

Nominations of attractions, activities, landmarks and legends – and more – that capture the river's unique character, heritage and beauty will be ongoing at www.mississippiriver.natgeotourism.com.