

Rivers as Bridges

Sister Rivers: Yangtze. Mississippi. People

Dubuque, IA: June 10, 2010

“Some of River Lands’ assets may not yet be fully exploited in the global economy. Assets help (us) assess what could be, not just what is.” -- Mark Drabenstott, Center for Regional Competitiveness

Land, rivers, colleges and friendly people are River Lands’ assets. If connected they have the potential to support a sister-river, sustainable development concept that serves the world and economically benefits each county in the region. Beginning with the Yangtze and Mississippi, the Environment and Public Health Network for Chinese Students and Scholars (ENCSS), based at UW-Madison believes rivers can become bridges that produce levels of friendship, scholarship and leadership to benefit everyone. River Lands could be the headwaters for that movement.

The overall strategy is called Rivers as Bridges and it will connect the Yangtze and Mississippi by sharing stories and information about people’s lives, work and dependence on water. It is a sister-river strategy about rivers as sources of cultural richness, ecological diversity and economic vitality that produces lessons that have merit across continents and over generations.

Rivers as Bridges recognizes that knowledge, beliefs, culture and political economy have shaped and have been shaped by the environment. Rivers are integral to this shaping because they are civilization’s cultural estuaries and mainstays of human survival. Talented young adults in China and the United States constitute some of the most hopeful bridge-builders.

River Spirit Exchanges are pilot projects for Rivers as Bridges. Exchanges help young adults share knowledge about rivers and explore new experiences that connect them for the future to shape a better world. Exchanges are opportunities for regions like River Lands to display their assets to the world and build relationships beyond their borders. A RSE pilot project took place May 16-18, 2010 in River Lands and was sponsored by ENCSS.

Rivers as Bridges: 2006 to 2012

2006: ENCSS was formed. Its focus is on scholarship, friendship and leadership and connecting students, scholars, businesses and governments in China, United States and elsewhere. The goal is to improve the environment and public health. ENCSS has built a record and has grown to 400 members, who attend 39 universities in 27 provinces in China and 40 universities in 24 states in the United States.

2008: The China-US Water Symposium was held, the idea of ENCSS. New North, a regional economic organization in northeast Wisconsin, organized the symposium and hosted about 40 Chinese who participated in classes, field trips and discussions about rivers and water. Rivers as Bridges emerged as a strategy to continue the constructive efforts begun during the symposium.

2009: The first River Spirit Exchange took place in China in December. It was organized by Lawrence University for 15 college students and faculty with a focus on the role water and water management play in China. This exchange included a two-day journey on the Yangtze River and visits to Wuhan and Guizhou Province.

2010: The second River Spirit Exchange originated with two UW-Madison students from Iowa and China. ENCSS organized the event which involved 45 students and staff to “gather at the

river and let our cultures bridge together.” Students studied geology, observed cranes, canoed, put up tents, built campfires, took nature walks, partook of Native American rituals, studied rivers restoration and performed service on the Kickapoo, Wisconsin, Platte and Mississippi Rivers.

2011: Two more exchanges are planned for China. One, to be led by Lawrence University, proposes to enable young adults and their sponsors to visit the Yangtze and generate ideas for the Rivers as Bridges launch in 2012 and to explore opportunities for exchange, including joint research. The other will have its origins in the Upper Mississippi Basin. Two roundtables to discuss ideas for Rivers as Bridges are planned in China and the US.

2012: Rivers as Bridges inaugural events begin a 10-year, bi-national focus on sustainability through conservation, commerce and culture in the Yangtze and Mississippi Basins. The events take place in both the United States in the Mississippi River Basin and in Washington DC and in China in the Yangtze River Basin and in Beijing.

Examples of River Lands’ Rivers as Bridges Assets

- The National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque with its knowledge of the river and Gulf and possible connections to museums and nature centers in China;
- Two Grinnell College graduates and their work of children’s fiction tentatively called “River Sisters” about two girls growing up on the Yangtze and Mississippi Rivers;
- The International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, WI with credibility in China and habitat projects in the Yangtze Basin and solid foundation in citizen conservation;
- The Kickapoo Nature Reserve and its sharable experiences about water, land, governance and mending community;
- The Lower Wisconsin River-Way and its sharable experiences about restoring and protecting lands adjacent to rivers;
- The Upper Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Refuge and its experience in restoration, experimentation and learning about nature, commerce and recreation;
- Dozens of citizen-based basin restoration and management efforts in Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin that are part of the Great Rivers Partnership and other initiatives;
- Public and independent colleges, universities and technical colleges that serve the Upper Mississippi through teaching, research, community service and technical education;
- The University of Wisconsin – Platteville’s Wisconsin Confucius Center with its focus on language and cultural awareness;
- Businesses in the Upper Mississippi Basin that produce goods, offer services, make investments and are opportunities for investment in land and river related matters;
- Ho Chunk Nation and other Nations that offer river and land based traditions and practices that fit a Rivers as Bridges theme: “for our ancestors; because of our children.”

Questions for River Lands

1. Is Rivers as Bridges an opportunity for River Lands to add culture and tourism as a third, globally-connected leg of a three-legged stool that includes bio-mass and food?
2. Are there River Lands citizens, businesses, organizations, colleges and communities who see value for themselves and their stakeholders by volunteering for the 2011 young adult River Spirit Exchange to China?

For Information: Contact Xiaojun LU, president, Environment and Public Health Network for Chinese Students and Scholars: Lu_xj@hotmail.com

