

The Big River

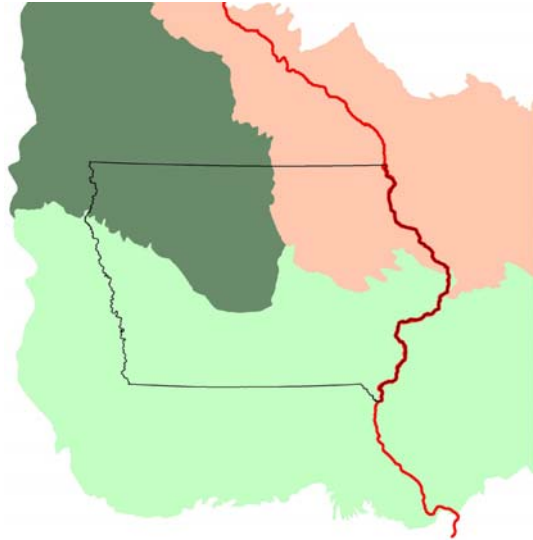
From the northern woods of Minnesota to the floodplain of Missouri, the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) is a crucial artery sustaining many of the nation's natural communities and its economic strength.

The word Mississippi comes from the Ojibwe name for the river, "Messipi," which means big river. The river forms Iowa's eastern border. Its extensive network of streams, floodplains, lakes and uplands provide habitat for a significant portion of the Earth's biological diversity and comprise the largest area of contiguous fish and wildlife habitat in the central United States.

The UMR basin is a globally important flyway for 60 percent of all North American bird species and harbors diverse amphibians, reptiles and mammals. The UMR system supports 25 percent of the continent's fish species, including sturgeon



Bluffs along the Mississippi River (©Carl Kurtz)



and paddlefish, which co-existed with the dinosaurs. Nearly 200 species of fish and a rich diversity of mussels, crayfish and invertebrates are found in the basin.

More than 30 million people live and work in the UMR basin and rely on it for food, transportation, drinking water, power production and recreation. Some agricultural practices have put the river at risk.

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Bald eagle (©Charlie Ott)

Excess fertilizer and sediments travel down the river to the Gulf of Mexico, leading to hypoxia — oxygen depletion — and creating a growing “dead zone” each summer around the mouth of the river that threatens both commercial fishing and important marine habitats. Levees have isolated much of the Mississippi floodplain south of Clinton, Iowa, altering seasonal flows and habitat for native plants and animals.

Given that two-thirds of the basin is used for agriculture, the UMR presents a challenge and an opportunity. There is an urgent need for action. The National Research Council named the Mississippi River as one of only three large floodplain rivers in the United States with sufficient opportunity for ecological recovery.

The Conservancy has produced a scientific report that guides our work in the basin: “Conservation Priorities for Freshwater Biodiversity in the Upper Mississippi River Basin.” The Conservancy is monitoring aquatic species and river-dependent biological communities, working to conserve natural areas and focusing on large-scale agricultural production and waterway transportation practices that are ecologically compatible. Conservancy programs in Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin and Minnesota are joining forces to reach these goals, along with universities, government agencies and private organizations.

The Big Muddy

One-sixth of the nation’s water eventually finds its way to the Missouri River, which plays an important role in the Great Plains economy as it flows 2,341 miles from its Montana headwaters to meet the Mississippi River at St. Louis.

Two hundred years ago, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark headed up the Missouri River to explore unknown territory into one of North America’s most diverse and dynamic ecosystems. They discovered an ever-changing landscape of meandering channels, sloughs, islands, sandbars and backwater wetlands and woodlands. The River is nicknamed “The Big Muddy” because of the high silt content in its flow.

Since the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Missouri River has been greatly altered. All of the 735 miles below Sioux City, Iowa have been engineered for barge traffic, eliminating most sandbars and vegetation that wildlife need to feed, reproduce and rest. Habitat loss and altered flows have contributed to the decline of paddlefish, sturgeon, flathead catfish and other species. Bald eagles lack nesting trees and continue to decline along the Missouri.

The Conservancy’s new Missouri River Program is creating partnerships among public and private organizations to study potential opportunities to restore some of the habitat that Lewis and Clark encountered in 1804. The Nebraska program leads the multi-state effort.