



## Group sees island's potential for public use

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If a poll was conducted asking Americans what the most recognizable and symbolic natural feature of their nation is, it's highly likely many would say the Mississippi River.



Some would talk of adventurous daydreams spawned from reading Mark Twain, others, the first time they crossed the river on a bridge.

But how many would tell of their latest canoe trip down the winding "Old Man River," fishing out catfish and bass for dinner and sleeping on sandbars under the stars? How many could speak of actually venturing onto that river of rivers that timelessly carries much of America itself out to the the Gulf of Mexico?

Tim Richardson of the American Land Conservancy would say not enough. Richardson, government affairs director for the ALC, is at the helm of a project to establish a series of publically owned islands and landings on the Lower Mississippi River collectively known as the Mississippi River Fishing and Boating Trail.

The ALC is working in conjunction with the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee to create the trail that would allow boaters, canoeists and kayakers the opportunity to hop up and down the Mississippi; fishing, camping, hunting and intimately experiencing the world's third largest river.

"Getting outside and exploring and having adventures in wild areas was always a big aspect of American life that is not so much present now. So finding and creating access for people to undertake those types of experiences is one of the missions of this project," Richardson said.

Ninety-eight percent of the shoreline along the Lower Mississippi River, which stretches from the mouth of the Ohio River in Cairo, Ill., to the Gulf of Mexico, is currently privately owned by

hunting clubs and timber companies, making the task of merely getting to the banks formidable. Yet much of the Lower Mississippi with its myriad backwaters, sidechannels and oxbows remains extremely wild and virtually untraveled.

“This is still Mark Twain’s river to a large extent. It is a vast and totally untapped natural recreational resource,” Richardson said.

The current focus of the ALC is finding a public buyer for Buck Island, a 1,500 acre island just east of Helena, Ark., that the organization purchased in 2005 from a private Mississippi landowner. Containing dense forests with five miles of already developed trails, stretching sand bars and a vast array of wildlife, the ALC believes Buck Island is perfectly suited to be a primary link in the fishing and boating trail.

The Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area, a publicly owned 8,000 acre island 106 miles down-river from Helena is already an established docking point.

An additional draw of Buck Island is the duality of its isolated, almost wilderness-type setting and close proximity to Helena. Local youth organizations and individuals alike could easily access the island and still be immersed in the wilds of the river.

Richardson acknowledges the raw power and potential danger of the Mississippi, especially at high water stages, but says that with common sense approaches and respect, it is completely possible to safely recreate along the river.

“I think America wants this,” Richardson said. “It is on their minds and hearts, but there is a big ‘not welcome’ sign saying ‘danger, fear.’ Getting people to overcome their fear of the river is a big part of this.”

John Ruskey, owner Clarksdale-based Quapaw Canoe Company, has been guiding canoe and kayak expeditions down the Lower Mississippi and its tributaries for over a decade and says that people’s preconceptions of the river are often what prevent them from experiencing it.

“You are always told it is nothing but a big drainage ditch and industrial canal, but you get out there and discover it’s islands and trees and sandbars and something completely different than you thought,” Ruskey said.

After unsuccessful efforts last year to find federal and state agencies willing to purchase Buck Island, the ALC was reaching its time limit to hold the land, as they needed the capital from the sale to fund other projects. However, funds recently became available and Richardson says they now have until the end of 2008.

With a reduced price of \$950,000, he now sees the most likely scenario involving funding from different agencies such as The National Forest Service and Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln and Congressman Marion Berry, both of Arkansas, have also reportedly pledged support.

Creating recreation opportunities through the river trail is only one facet of ALC's multi-pronged mission for the Mississippi. A more far-reaching goal is restoring many of the wetlands and habitats by purchasing flood-prone farmland and allowing the river to reclaim some of its natural floodplain.

“What we are trying to do is ‘re-wild’ some of this river. We want to restore its wetlands and prevent much of the nutrient loading that has occurred from agricultural runoff,” Richardson said.

He points to the 8,000 square-mile deadzone in the mouth of the Mississippi River as evidence of neglect and says the only way it will be highly valued is if it is actually used by the public.

“Buck Island is the battleground of this effort to get public recreation out here and build this trail, thereby building the political influence to restore this resource. To get elected officials involved in restoration activities, you have to give an identity to an ecological region and that is part of the mission of this trail,” Richardson said.

Beyond addressing recreation and environmental issues, there is also a great economic incentive for the project to happen say supporters.

The ALC believes the trail could jumpstart a regional economic revitalization by drawing in tourism to the often financially struggling communities in the river's delta. With each new addition to the trail, there would be opportunities for local businesses to provide food, gas, bait, tackle, canoe and kayak rentals, and boat rides for tourists.

This is nowhere more possible, says Richardson, than in Helena, where he sees the possibility of a canoe and kayak hub emerging.

Ruskey himself is currently in the process of opening an additional outpost in Helena that will offer canoe, kayak and even mountain bike rentals for the nearby St. Francis National Forest.

“Being the only town within 300 miles that actually sits right on the river, I think Helena is going to become a popular destination point for people who want to see the river and get on it,” Ruskey said. “People come to the river from long distances, from Europe, California, New York, and they don't want to just walk along the bank. They want to swim in it and paddle in it and become immersed in it. There is real strong potential for Helena to develop that type of access.”

A recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service impact study for eastern Arkansas estimated that public ownership of Buck Island could help create some 360 jobs, over eight million in job income, \$18 million in retail expenditures and \$23 million in economic output.