



Outdoor expeditions expanding in region

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Recreation opportunities on the lower section of America's greatest river just got a little more accessible this weekend.

On Friday afternoon, Clarksdale-based Quapaw Canoe Company, which has been offering canoe and kayak expeditions on the Lower Mississippi and its tributaries for 10 years, officially opened up a new outpost in Helena-West Helena, Ark.



Located just beside the levee on Ohio Street and a stone's throw away from the river, a main focus of the Helena store will be on offering affordable canoe and kayak rentals, says owner John Ruskey.

Stressing the Clarksdale base will continue serving as the main hub of operations; Ruskey says the new outpost will allow more opportunities for shorter day-trips on the river.

He also says the location will give him and his crew of Mighty Quapaw apprentices the chance to continually teach self-rescue workshops so that new paddlers can learn what safety precautions are involved with venturing out onto the Mississippi.

"Our whole mission with Quapaw Canoe Company is to get you out on the river and experience that awesome wilderness into the heart of our country here in the Deep South," Ruskey told a crowd who gathered Friday to celebrate the ribbon cutting ceremony.

Ruskey spoke of his initial discovery of the Mississippi, and the strong pull it has had on him ever since.

"It sure has hit me in the heart. I followed the river downstream just like a lot of other people who have ended up here. I found out in 1982 when you get the mud between your toes, you're

not going to be able to kick it out,” he said.

But Ruskey is not the only one excited about the Helena location.

Tim Richardson is government affairs director for the American Land Conservancy, an organization involved in a variety of land conservation projects around the U.S.

One of these projects the ALC is currently undertaking is the establishment of a series of publicly owned islands and landings on the Lower Mississippi, collectively known as the Lower Mississippi River Fishing and Boating Trail.

Boaters, canoeists and kayakers could hop up and down the river on such a trail, camping fishing, hiking and even hunting in some areas.

Richardson says a similar trail already exists on the Upper Mississippi, especially the section between St. Louis and Cairo Ill., where over 25,000 acres of shoreline and islands are in public ownership and widely used.

The current priority for the Lower Mississippi, says Richardson, is finding a public buyer for Buck Island, a 1,500 acre island in the Mississippi just east of Helena that the organization purchased from a landowner in 2005 for \$1.2 million.

Richardson says the ALC has unfortunately had a hard time finding an appropriate buyer for the island and are running out of time they can afford to hold on to it.

With a reduced price of \$950,000, he says the most likely scenario for Buck Island now involves a joint purchasing agreement between various entities the National Forest Service and Arkansas Game and Fish Commission being two possibilities.

“We are mildly optimistic we will find a funding source in the near future,” he said. “We took a risk doing this, but we totally believe in it and we would do it again.”

Richardson says Quapaw Canoe Company’s new base in Helena, just downstream from Buck Island, fits perfectly into the overall vision for the river trail. With such a respected establishment leading the way, Richardson says he hopes Helena can one day find a new identity for itself as a main canoe and kayak hub in the South.

“This is a big day for us,” said Richardson. “Having a Quapaw base here goes from being an idea to a reality. There has never been a Quapaw base right on the river.”

Richardson acknowledges that changing widespread preconceptions about the river is one of the biggest challenges the idea of a river trail is facing.

“Recreation is really a new concept on the lower part of the Mississippi. It is a wilder river here than in upper sections and without a doubt there is more fear. There are over 24 million paddlers in America but not many people know you can do the Lower Mississippi. That is going to change though,” Richardson said.

The long range mission of the river trail, explained Richardson, is multi-faceted with a major focus being placed on jumpstarting economies in river communities such as Helena with recreation tourism.

Taking on some of the Mississippi river's environmental issues is also reportedly a high priority for the ALC. Richardson says one specific measure involves "re-wilding" sections of shoreline by purchasing marginal, flood-prone farmland and allowing the river to reclaim its natural floodplain.

Such actions, according to the ALC, would have a great reduction in the amount of nutrient loading in the river caused by agricultural runoff and evidenced in the over 8,000 square mile dead zone in the mouth of the Mississippi.

Richardson explains his organization can only move on these types of far-reaching goals, however, if people actually start using the river and putting it on the radar screen of elected leaders.

"In today's funding climate, without a connection to jobs and the economy, politicians do not want to move on things and I can't blame them," Richardson said. "But conservation efforts can't stop even if we are in tough times. Conservation in fact can be a solution to tough times. Here it would create jobs and bring more people to the Delta."

In the case of Ruskey's new outpost, which was established through the assistance of the Phillips Community College Small Business Incubator, he has seven employees currently working.