



Restoring America's Greatest River

*A vision of nature tourism and sustainable economic development
for the Lower Mississippi River*

As a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River in the mid-1800s, Mark Twain witnessed a time of great transition for the river. The once free-flowing, meandering river was tamed for reliable shipping navigation, and fortified levees protected against seasonal floods while vast areas of the fertile river valley yielded agricultural prosperity most had only dreamed about.

In the Lower Mississippi Delta, cotton was, and still is, king. As agriculture became mechanized, the need for human labor declined. In the river counties of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the population has faced economic displacement and lack of opportunity.

Despite the abundance of river-related historical, cultural, and natural assets, the region persists as one of the nation's most economically distressed areas where poverty levels significantly exceed the national average and per capita income is approximately half the national average.

There is growing consensus that the Mississippi River itself could be the star attraction needed to increase tourism and transform the regional economy. Tourism on the Mississippi River already generates some \$20 billion in annual revenue and supports more than 300,000 jobs, yet most of this activity takes place on the pooled portion of the river north of St. Louis, Missouri where significant investment in public access infrastructure has been a priority. The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge alone draws 3.5 million visits a year; more than the annual number of visitors to Yellowstone National Park.

While the Lower Mississippi River is on par with the Florida Everglades as a wildlife and wilderness experience, public use is hindered by private ownership of nearly all riverbank on both sides of the river. Flood prone islands and land between the main line levees and the river are immensely popular as private duck, deer, and turkey hunting areas as well as top quality river fishing destinations. However few public access points exist for the general public to use the river for outdoor recreation.

American Land Conservancy is working with the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee (LMRCC), state and federal resource agencies, industry, elected officials and nonprofit organizations in a collaborative effort to increase nature tourism and economic development opportunities for struggling towns along the river.

One strategy that is being met with great enthusiasm by river advocates and local chambers of commerce is the creation of the Mississippi River Fishing and Boating Trail, a recreational river trail from St. Louis, Missouri down to the Gulf of Mexico. The purpose of the trail is to increase public use of the river by establishing a series of publicly owned islands, boat ramps, primitive campsites and parks for people to enjoy, thereby generating economic opportunities for river communities.

ALC and LMRCC have identified the 106-mile stretch between Helena and Arkansas City, Arkansas as the first segment of the new trail. Arkansas Game & Fish Commission purchased the 8,300-acre Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area near Arkansas City in 2001. When the 1,500-acre Buck Island next-door to Helena came up for auction in 2005, ALC acquired the property with the goal of transferring it to a local, state or federal public agency. By connecting two exceptional wildlife and recreation resources on the Mississippi River, the Buck Island project brings the first segment of the fishing and boating trail closer to reality.

Located below the confluence of the St. Francis and Mississippi rivers, Buck Island contains 1,500 acres of forest and a huge sand bar where migratory birds and water fowl flock in abundance. Three minutes by boat from the Helena state boat ramp, the island offers exceptional recreation opportunities for hiking, camping, bird watching, fishing and picnicking.

This stretch of river contains a wealth of complementary natural and recreational resources. On the Arkansas side of the river north of Helena is the St. Francis National Forest, a rugged landscape of woodland surrounded by the fertile farmland of the Delta. A national scenic byway provides stunning views of the Mississippi and St. Francis River valleys. Further south, the Mississippi River meets the Arkansas and White rivers and connects to the White River National Wildlife Refuge, a haven for migratory waterfowl. On the Mississippi state side of the river, visitors find the Great River Road State Park, several boat ramps, Native American sites and a growing number of visitor education centers.

Several trail initiatives on land will complement the Mississippi River Fishing and Boating Trail as it evolves, including the Delta Heritage Trail, the Audubon Society's Great River Birding Trail, the multi-use Mississippi River Trail, and for automobiles, the Great River Road. Together these trails provide as many ways to enjoy the river as someone can imagine – a boon to local residents and tourists alike.