

SOUTHEAST MISSOURIAN

Federal official says Mississippi River ripe for tourism revenue

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By Rudi Keller ~ Southeast Missourian

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been changed to reflect the fact that the American Land Conservancy has one parcel of Marquette Island under option for purchase, not the entire island.

The Mississippi River has always been a corridor of commerce. That has been true whether American Indians or European settlers lived along its banks.

But for most of U.S. history, commercial exploitation of the valley focused on its ability to move goods or trying to keep the river off adjoining land during floods. The new growth industry, a small group of Cape Girardeau-area residents heard Tuesday night, is recreational tourism as some of the same agencies that once treated the river as a great canal have refocused their efforts to include wildlife and wild lands as part of their mission.

Dr. Ron Nassar of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is coordinator of the Lower Mississippi Fisheries Coordination Office in Vicksburg, Miss., and coordinator of the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee. He told the gathering at Port Cape restaurant that the time is at hand to tap into the \$628 billion national industry that caters to wildlife watching, sport fishing, canoeing, biking and camping, among others.

"People are beginning to realize this, that places that are not well developed have the kinds of experiences that people want to have," Nassar said. The Mississippi River is internationally known and foreign tourism is a growing part of the U.S. travel industry, he said.

The Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee brings together federal agencies, including both the fish and wildlife service and the Corps of Engineers, with state conservation and water quality agencies, to study how to make the river more attractive. Through studies, the committee has identified 239 restoration projects that would enhance the river.

900,000 jobs

Already, he said, river tourism in the 113 counties lining the river from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico provides 900,000 jobs, making it the biggest nonmanufacturing industry in the region.

Sponsored by the American Land Conservancy's Mississippi River Program, the talk pointed out that Cape Girardeau could take more advantage of the river. The conservancy purchases prime habitat within the floodplain of the river, preserving it until it can be purchased in turn by a state or federal agency willing to manage it. Examples of the conservancy's work include Windy Bar, a five-mile-long Missouri conservation area five miles north of Cape Girardeau, and Devil's Island on the Illinois side, which is six miles long and begins a little more than two miles north of the city.

That location is one of only two places on the river between St. Louis and Cairo, Ill., where both banks of the river are in public hands, said Jenny Frazier, director of the Mississippi River Program for the conservancy. The other is at Chester, Ill., 57 river miles to the north.

Other properties near Cape Girardeau that have either been obtained for the public with the help of the conservancy include the East Cape Wetland in Alexander County, Ill. The conservancy has one of four parcels on Marquette Island, just downstream from the city, under option for purchase.

"There is a hunger in the community in general and the country as a whole to experience this type of property," Frazier said.

In Arkansas, tying together public lands along the river into an organized tourism offering is paying benefits, Nassar said. From Helena, Ark., to Arkansas City, Ark., the 106-mile Lower Mississippi River Fishing and Boating Trail is becoming a tourist destination. Using the slogan "Experience Mark Twain's River," the trail ties 30 sites, developed at a cost of \$377 million, into a single entity that is expected to produce \$9 billion in economic activity over the next 20 years, Nassar said.

The same could be done here, Frazier said. Along with public lands acquired by the conservancy, the Middle Mississippi Wildlife Refuge and other public lands could be developed by companies providing day trips or guides for extended travel. "We are creating by default a recreation destination," she said. "We have the outline of a fishing and boating trail."

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