

Time's running out for conservationists to preserve 1,500-acre Buck Island

By Tom Charlier
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HELENA, Ark. -- After trudging across acres and acres of sand -- a wind-swept expanse interrupted only by animal tracks and sun-bleached shanks of driftwood -- Tim Richardson and Carter Speed get ready to plunge headlong into the wilds of Buck Island.



Photos by Ben Fant/Special to The Commercial Appeal

"We're in a must-sell situation," says Tim Richardson, referring to the Mississippi River island (background) just east of Helena, Ark. Richardson is government affairs director for the American Land Conservancy, a conservation group that owns Buck Island.

For months now, Richardson, government affairs director for the American Land Conservancy, and Speed, a broker with Southern Land Co., have been trying to find a buyer for the 1,500-acre island. They'd like to see it protected for the public as part of a fishing and boating "trail" being developed along the Mississippi.

It's the latest in a series of efforts to encourage recreation on the river by acquiring and protecting islands and wetlands.

"America wants to rediscover the Mississippi River -- and it's going to," Richardson said.

"Now we bushwhack it," Speed says as he clambers into thickets of greenbrier and dewberry bushes.

The dense undergrowth, freshly foraged by deer, gives way to a mature forest of hackberry, sycamore and pecan trees running the length of the island. Surrounding it on a breezy fall day are glistening sandbars and the churning waters of the Mississippi River.

But this patch of wilderness, located just a few minutes' boat ride from Helena, is more than just a place for a Mark Twain adventure.

It's real estate.



Conservationists hope to see Buck Island, about 70 miles downriver from Memphis, protected for the public as part of a Mississippi River trail of islands preserved for fishing and boating.

Up and down the Mississippi, almost all the land is privately held. Public access is limited.

The proposed fishing and boating trail, extending 106 river miles from Helena to Arkansas City, Ark., would provide the public a chain of recreation areas.

Similar efforts are under way in Tennessee, where the conservancy and other groups hope to incorporate islands and other sites in recreation plans.

"With all those islands, we hope one day to have an actual river road, if you will," said Diana Threadgill, executive director of the group Mississippi River Corridor-Tennessee.

Richardson's group acts as an intermediary in buying threatened tracts and holding them for eventual purchase by a government agency or public entity. But two years after paying a Jackson, Miss., businessman \$1.18 million for Buck Island, the group so far has been unable to conclude a transaction with either the state of Arkansas or a federal agency.

Now, having dropped its price to \$950,000, the conservancy seeks some other arrangement. One possibility is a sale to private buyer who would donate a conservation easement on the island. After holding the acreage for a year and a day, the owner, using the tax benefit, could sell it to a public agency at a reduced price of perhaps \$650,000.

As a result, the owner would realize a profit of about \$150,000 and the public would get the island, Richardson said.

But that kind of deal needs to be done by Dec. 31 because tax laws regarding easements change next year, he said.

Another option is to pursue a loan for the conservancy, with the island used as collateral. That could buy time for a deal with state or federal agencies, Richardson said.

Members of Arkansas' congressional delegation have voiced support for extending the boundaries of the nearby St. Francis National Forest to include the island.

Also, the Arkansas Legislature, in a 135-0 vote, authorized the purchase of the island for up to \$1.5 million -- its estimated fair-market value. But no state agency has been willing to take on the purchase by itself.

"The easy way is for a public agency to buy it. That didn't happen -- on the federal level or state level," Richardson said.

Buck Island, which is 70 miles downriver from Memphis and shown on navigation charts as Prairie Towhead, is laced with trails that traverse a sandy ridge-and-swale terrain and course through an extensive forest. Wildlife abounds, with species such as otter and bald eagles.

As real estate goes, the island has one all-important asset: location. Its proximity to Helena and West Helena and a bridge make it ideal for public use, Richardson said.

"I don't know of another island that has such a strategic location to a population center and commercial center."

But if no buyers come forward, the conservancy might be forced to put the island up for auction. In that case, it could end up in private hands.

"We're in a must-sell situation," Richardson said.