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# Missouri River float trip inspires interest in history, conservation

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More than 100 people participated in the Big Canoe Float on the Missouri River on Saturday. The event was sponsored by the Missouri River Communities Network. The participants canoed 9.5 miles and were able to stop at various points during the trip for activities and lectures that explained more about the history and ecology of the region. † [Chelsea Sektan](#)

BY [Claire Meyer](#)

COLUMBIA — A scattered bunch of brightly colored kayaks and drifting canoes dotted the Missouri River, gliding slowly toward a bright sandbar with a single pavilion. Passengers either paddled calmly, dipping plastic oars into the murky water, or simply let the gentle current drift them to their destination.

The Big Canoe River Float 2009, held Saturday afternoon, aimed to reconnect Missouri residents with the Missouri River, its wildlife and the history surrounding it through a variety of speakers and demonstrations during a 9.5-mile float.

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- Rainer Glaser, a Columbia resident, points to the storm clouds in the distance while floating down the Missouri river for the Big Canoe Float on Saturday. The Big Canoe Float was postponed once due to weather but eventually was rescheduled. The event did eventually get rained on, but most canoers found it a welcome relief from the heat of the sun on the river.



- A two-person Mad River Canoe sits on the sand at California Island during the Big Canoe Float on Saturday. At least 100 people showed up for the float. Not only did participants float 9.5 miles, they also were able to stop along the way and listen to presenters talk about the river's history and ecology. The California Island stop offered a history of African Americans in Missouri, and the opportunity to learn more about fish in the river, including a hands-on opportunity to learn about shovelnose Sturgeon.



- Linde Hardie of Topeka, Kan., takes a cool dip in the Missouri River after paddling her canoe for about four miles. This is the first time Hardie has gone on this float trip, and she thought it was a great way to take a break. Marcia and Gene Reed float in the background while getting ready for the second part of the trip.



• Aaron DeLonay, an employee for the Columbia Environmental Research Center, shows David Walchshouser a shovelnose sturgeon on California Island during the Big Canoe River Float on Saturday. Many of the sturgeon in the Missouri River are electronically tagged and monitored because of their status on the endangered species list. Sturgeon were around with the dinosaurs and many found in the river are more than 15 years old.

The float started after a brief lunch at Katfish Katy's in Huntsdale and ended at Cooper's Landing, with stops at two sandbars along the way, including California Island — an outcropping of glistening white sands surrounded by murky, cool water that provided a welcome reprieve from Saturday's stifling humidity.

This year's float was an obvious increase from previous events. The float was not organized for 2008, but 2007's float only had about 70 or 80 participants, according to Bill Polansky of the Missouri River Communities Network, the main sponsor of the event.

The Missouri River Communities Network also organizes river cleanups and focuses on education, outreach and restoration, Sarah Pennington of the Missouri River Communities Network, said.

"We collaborate to do river cleanups, but this is the big education float of the year," Pennington said.

Polansky hopes to have another float in the fall so floaters can enjoy cooler weather while experiencing the bluffs and autumn leaves.

"We'd like to make (the float) a regular event," Polansky said. "We're taking really good notes so we can replicate what we did right."

The float cost \$30 per person, which went toward lunch, transportation, insurance for the float and various other expenses.

"It's not a fundraiser," Polansky said.

Some of the floaters were experienced fishers or canoeists, such as Marvin Nikolaisen, an elderly man proudly wearing a hat rimmed with the spurs of turkeys that he shot on his farm. Nikolaisen came to the float with his family and took a particular pleasure in explaining the finer points of his favorite types of fishing on the Missouri River.

Other floaters were not so experienced. Megan Fostich attended with her father, Rick Downs from Excelsior Springs. Although Downs has canoed on many different rivers, his daughter was slightly less enthusiastic.

"My dad is very outdoorsy, a fly fisherman," Fostich said. "He thought this would be a pretty good father-

daughter bonding thing,” she shrugged.

At the first, smaller sandbar, the floaters got to see a sample of the Missouri River’s ecosystem, including turtles and plants. Members of the Big Muddy National Wildlife Refuge put on the short demonstration and then sent the floaters off to the next location, California Island.

By the time the floaters reached the larger sandbar, more than two miles from the launch point, most were happy to wade into the swirling, muddy water, gulp down cups full of icy water or stand under the bright blue tent. The speakers quickly prepared their presentations, unrolling posters and filling tubs with river water.

As dark clouds approached, the temperature began to cool, and the floaters were ready to learn more about the Missouri river’s ecosystem and history.

Shauna Marquardt, a wildlife biologist and manager from Eagle Bluff Conservation Area, spoke to small groups about what Eagle Bluff does to help the river system.

“We use treated waste water from the city of Columbia to flood out pools and do wildlife management,” Marquardt said. “We do pump some river water in November and December to provide habitats, though.”

Eagle Bluff’s primary mission is to provide an adequate habitat for migratory birds in the Missouri River area, Marquardt said.

“In Missouri and all up and down the Missouri River, there’s been extreme wetland loss,” Marquardt said. “It’s an 87 percent loss. Only 13 percent of the area’s original wetlands remain.”

She also stressed the importance of managing the entire ecosystem, including everything from microscopic invertebrates to the great blue heron.

Eagle Bluff also provides a hiking trail that runs along a 5-mile stretch of the river and an overlook for bird-watchers and wildlife enthusiasts. It is also a popular area for waterfowl hunting, Marquardt said.

Another popular topic at the stop on California Island was the local sturgeon population.

“Some people call them living fossils,” said Aaron DeLonay of the U.S. Geological Survey. “But they aren’t fossils because they’re still around.”

The shovelnose sturgeon is a small, long freshwater fish with a ridge of sharp spikes along its back and a sucker for a mouth. The sturgeon is a very old species, fairly related to sharks, DeLonay said. He described the fish as elegant race cars.

DeLonay was happy to teach his audience how to hold the sturgeon, one of which was more than 10 years old and two feet long.

“This sturgeon tastes, smells and detects movements all at the same time,” DeLonay said with a smile on his face as he turned the long fish over in his hand, gesturing at the barbels on its nose that contain a multitude of taste buds. It was also covered with several plate-like scales along its body made of cartilage that add to its streamlined appearance.

Although the shovelnose sturgeon was the fish on display that afternoon, the real goal of fish biologists and conservationists like DeLonay is to save the pallid sturgeon, an endangered species that lives primarily in the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

The sturgeon is a popular fish for harvesting roe, or caviar. A 14-ounce tin of shovelnose sturgeon caviar would sell for \$225 to \$300, according to a [recent article](#) by the Missouri Department of Conservation. However, even if fishermen are aiming for shovelnose sturgeon, it is inevitable that the very similar pallid sturgeon is mixed into the catch.

Also, the average female shovelnose sturgeon matures in five to seven years, though the female pallid sturgeon takes 10 to 15 years to reach maturity. They also don't spawn annually, DeLonay said. The low population and infrequent spawning makes it difficult for pallid sturgeon to mate successfully, resulting in hybridization instead of fortifying the dying pallid breed.

"All of this makes a fish that was tailored to be endangered," DeLonay said.

Another popular speaker was Angela da Silva, a Ph.D. student of American Cultural Studies at Lindenwood University in St. Charles. Da Silvia is also a heritage tourism specialist for the National Black Tourism Network and was very excited to share her enthusiasm for Missouri's history with the floaters.

Even as storm clouds approached with short bursts of rain and distant booms of thunder, da Silva was determined to inspire her audience.

"We are the ones who can tell our story," da Silva said. "Kentucky can't tell our story; Illinois can't tell our story. River communities need to be ready to tell our story."

Together with the Missouri River Communities Network, da Silva is trying to prepare the area for the 150-year commemoration of the American Civil War, focusing on tourism.

"We're trying to tie it all together and tell several thematic stories," da Silva said.

She spoke to a mesmerized crowd about the history of Missouri, especially about the roles of slaves and Native Americans during the formation of the state and local controversies during the Civil War.

"At Lindenwood, we're trying to tell it from a woman's point of view and the ethnic point of view," da Silva said. During the Civil War, Missouri women were arrested for sewing, cooking or delivering messages for Confederate soldiers, and slaves were locked in barns during the night to prevent them from running away after the Emancipation Proclamation, she said.

Da Silva said Missouri has a big story to tell, but no one seems to be telling it. She hoped to inspire interest in the history surrounding the river area.

"Don't let anybody else tell your story," da Silva said. "It's not valid because they weren't there."

The light bursts of rain caused many of the floaters to leave the island paddling faster, aiming to finish the float without being caught in any dangerous weather.

The canoes all arrived safely at Cooper's Landing several hours after the float began. Some floaters jumped in their cars to head home to a shower and dinner, and some stayed outside despite the lingering humidity to

listen to some bluegrass music and discuss the river with newfound friends.

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