

'Rebirth,' the inspiring story of our local national park

Press statement from Whitney Clark

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Back in the 1970s, from the deck of his boat, the Turtle, Tom Kelley fell in love with the Mississippi River. Though the river was very polluted and private industrial land uses dominated much of the river's banks at that time, Kelley understood the river's power. He knew that despite having been mistreated and underappreciated for decades, the Mississippi, with its mythic stature as America's River, was at the heart of the history and identity of the Twin Cities.

Tom Kelley saw, before others could, the potential of the river to be the Twin Cities' greatest asset and an ecological, recreational and cultural treasure that could restore our community's sense of place. If the river could be restored to health, Kelley thought, it could be a world-class public amenity around which the community could revitalize and redevelop.

Tom Kelley's far-fetched idea to establish a national park along the Mississippi River through the Twin Cities took some time to catch on but eventually he got the attention of Congressman Bruce Vento and Senator Dave Durenberger. After years of bipartisan work, they finally succeeded in convincing Congress to designate the 72-mile stretch of the river from Dayton to Hastings as a national park — the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) in 1988. According to MNRRA's Comprehensive Management Plan, "The Mississippi lies at the heart of what is American and more than any other natural feature is an unmistakable symbol of this nation."

I believe the designation of the park was a tipping point for the health and vitality of the river in the Twin Cities. After that moment public decisions about the river tended to have a gravitational pull toward, rather than away from improving public access and ecological health.

This is the story we set out to tell in our new documentary film, "Rebirth: The Mississippi's National Park," which premieres on Twin Cities Public Television this spring and is also part of the National Park Service centennial celebration.

Today, the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities is enjoying a renaissance. The river is cleaner, fish and bald eagles are abundant, new parks and trails are being planned and implemented, and river-adjacent redevelopment is driving economic growth and community vitality.

To guarantee the gains that have been made and to address the significant challenges still facing the river, it will be necessary for all of us to continue to see the desired future of the river as clearly as Tom Kelley did and to continue to speak up on its behalf.

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