



Friends of the Mississippi River

Working to protect the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities area

www.fmr.org

Fall 2005

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Creatures of Habitat

By Harland Hiemstra

"The outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little we know about it. The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: "What good is it?" If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

- Aldo Leopold

Aldo Leopold, the father of conservation ecology, once compared the natural world to a complex mechanism such as a clock, with all its gears and wheels and other tiny busy parts.

Should we as humans tinker with this mechanism – as tinker we must – the first thing to remember is the importance of saving all the pieces, Leopold said. Then we might learn to understand individual functions and work to better care for them. Finally, all the pieces must fit together into something that's more than the sum of its parts – a functioning ecosystem.

The Mississippi River serves as an important flyway for neotropical songbirds and is used by up to forty percent of North America's ducks, geese, swans and wading birds.

For the past eight years, Friends of the Mississippi River has worked to save important pieces of the Mississippi River ecosystem and make sure its parts keep working together as one of the most important flyways in the North American continent, a sprawling network of woods, streams, prairie and wetlands in a major metropolitan area. From meeting with individual landowners to influencing local and regional conservation policy, FMR has been at the forefront of efforts to make sure the Father of Waters still provides a wealth of habitat for fish and wildlife in the times of our daughters and sons.

Warblers and waterfowl

Steve Wilds has spent much of his career as a biologist around the Mississippi River, most recently as regional migratory bird chief for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Fort Snelling.

"It's an incredibly important area for migratory birds," Wilds says of the metro Mississippi. "It provides that riverine habitat that's just missing in so many places today. They can move through that corridor and find the habitat they need – whether it's warblers or waterfowl."

Wilds remembers when this piece of the river was in trouble, when fish and insects couldn't live there because it was a biologically dead soup of rotting crud. After point sources of pollution such as sewage discharges were cleaned up, the river came back to life and people returned to the river. Some began realizing there was more to the Mississippi than just the water in its main channel, that the river is the sum of everything that happens within its watershed, all that occurs on the land and all the lesser streams and lakes and wetlands that feed it. To take care



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Mission

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) advocates a new vision for the Mississippi, especially the river and its watershed in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Through active leadership and education, FMR seeks to preserve and restore the river's fish and wildlife, its vital floodplains and scenic bluffs, its natural and cultural treasures, its beauty and its romance. We envision a river on which small boats are safe and welcome, to which we have clear and easy access and in which we can safely swim and fish. We envision a river that is cleaner, healthier, more alive and more inviting, a river no one can ignore or take for granted.

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From the Director

"The Mississippi River is not only the grand natural feature which gives character to your city and constitutes the main spring to its prosperity, but it is the object of vital interest and the center of attraction to intelligent visitors from every quarter of the globe, who associate such ideas of grandeur with its name as no human creation can excite. It should be placed in a setting worthy of so precious a jewel."

- Horace Cleveland



Whitney Clark, *Executive Director*

One hundred years ago and more, when landscape architect and planner Horace Cleveland and the city fathers and mothers in Minneapolis and Saint Paul set out to build their cities, they deliberately (and at considerable expense) set aside land along the city lakes and the Mississippi River. These natural features would be protected from private development and owned and managed for the benefit of all citizens and future generations. Today this interconnected network of parks, trails and parkways is widely understood to be among our community's most prized assets, providing natural beauty, recreational opportunities and enhanced property values in close proximity to jobs, housing and commerce.

Compare this far-sighted, civically minded vision with the approach that most communities take today as they consider how their communities will grow. High value natural features such as lakes, rivers and wetlands are typically privately developed for the exclusive benefit of the adjacent landowners. In many cases critical ecological functions that benefit the broader community such as water filtration and wildlife habitat are compromised in favor of urban land uses.

In 1998, Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) set out to identify larger patches of riverfront land in the Twin Cities that remained undeveloped. Our goal was to work with the landowners, surrounding communities and natural resource agencies to protect these lands from development and to restore and manage these lands to improve their health.

...this interconnected network of parks, trails and parkways is widely understood to be among our community's most prized assets, providing natural beauty, recreational opportunities and enhanced property values in close proximity to jobs, housing and commerce.

Since then, FMR has applied itself to the painstaking task of reaching out to private landowners of larger and higher quality natural lands along the river. We've met so many wonderful people who care deeply about their land and the Mississippi River. A good example is the late Dwight Malcolm who, before he passed away, arranged to sell his Inver Grove Heights blufftop property to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to be set aside forever as a state Scientific and Natural Area.

Along the way we have also met many folks who want to actively manage their property for the health of the native plant and animal communities that live there. Harry and Patty Benjamin have planted five acres of native prairie on their land overlooking the Mississippi near Hastings. The City of Inver Grove Heights is currently working with FMR staff to develop a natural resources restoration plan for an old rail yard along the river, which will soon be known as "Heritage Park."

As communities rediscover and redevelop their riverfronts, there are often competing interests and priorities that citizens, elected officials and landowners must sort through and balance. What are the highest and best land uses for property on one of the great rivers of the world? How can a community celebrate the Mississippi while at the same time protecting the qualities that make it so special? For me, the answer to these questions can be summed up by returning to the time-tested words of Horace Cleveland, whose plans are still paying dividends a century later: "It should be placed in a setting worthy of so precious a jewel."

Program Highlights

Can River's Edge live up to its name?

Homes are parading into the Twin Cities these days—some that inspire, others that don't. Developments planned near natural waterways often capitalize upon those resources with names like "Riverview", "River Pointe" and a little mega-proposal on the Mississippi in St. Paul Park and Grey Cloud Island Township known as "River's Edge." In most cases, it's only a name. The creation of places to live, work and play that truly embrace a river setting and celebrate its unique qualities are much less common.

For over two years, FMR has been working with citizens and public officials to encourage a different approach for River's Edge—one that will respect the values of the river that it is named for. As proposed, the development would include 1,950 residences and a small commercial area on 400 acres that surround a small backwater bay in the state designated Mississippi River Critical Area. FMR, the DNR, the National Park Service and others have repeatedly raised concerns about intense development encroaching upon the river's bluff and floodplain habitat. State law protects the critical area lands within the township from being urbanized in order to maintain the rural and open space character of the river corridor.

Developers use words like economics, tax base, smart growth and progress to get around these laws and compromise the river environment. But what really makes a smart, economic, river-centered development that both serves the community and protects its resources? FMR wanted to find out, so we teamed up with the University of Minnesota Metropolitan Design Center to create a new set of design alternatives for the site.

On July 19th, the design alternatives were presented to over 70 interested citizens and elected officials. The designs offered one low-density and two high-density alternatives, and each provided ample space for habitat protection and a spacious riverfront park. Community members were enthusiastic about all the designs.

"The designs are not binding," says Irene Jones, FMR's outreach director, "but that doesn't mean they won't stick!" FMR hopes the new designs can inform St. Paul Park's upcoming decision to amend their comprehensive plan to accommodate River's Edge.



Aerial view of the proposed River's Edge site showing a small backwater bay in the lower center.
Used with permission from the University of Minnesota Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank.

Vermillion River Watershed Plan nears completion

Over the past two years, FMR has been closely engaged in developing a ten-year plan to protect, restore and manage the Vermillion River watershed, which hosts the nation's last remaining metro world-class trophy trout stream.

This fall, the plan is expected to be ratified by both Scott and Dakota counties. It will guide how the Vermillion is treated and outline how tax dollars will be spent to protect water quality, wildlife habitat and, ultimately, drinking water.

Throughout the process, FMR has been committed to protecting the watershed's ecological features (including the trout stream), its recreational opportunities (such as swimming and boating) and the quality of its drinking water. To achieve these goals we focused on three priorities: 1) establishing river-friendly standards for new development (three of Minnesota's fastest growing cities lie within the area), 2) pursuing effective septic system compliance that prevents untreated human sewage from entering the river and its tributaries and 3) creating water- and wildlife-friendly buffers along the river and its major tributaries and promoting agricultural best manage-

ment practices. We are pleased that the draft Vermillion River Watershed Plan reflects these priorities.

Of course, planning is one thing, implementing is another. The resolve of elected leaders who manage the watershed will be tested in coming months as they determine both the resources that will be dedicated to carrying out the plan and the rules that will require local communities to carry it out.

Last year, community workshops solicited input from the public. Two things were clear: watershed residents want tough standards and they are willing to pay to protect and clean up the river.

This August, the watershed's management board proposed a budget that would cost just under \$30 for the owner of a \$300,000 home. As part of a ten-year plan, this modest amount would go a long way to restore and protect the river.

For more information about protecting the Vermillion River, contact FMR's watershed program director, Daniel Huff, at dhuff@fmr.org.

Program Updates

Gorge takes shape at 36th Street

The unique geography of the Mississippi gorge where it meets 36th Street in Minneapolis includes remnant mesic prairie, oak forest and oak savanna. Since 1998, many volunteers and numerous partner organizations have been working to restore the savanna and increase the diversity of native plants in the area.



Gorge volunteers collect woodland seeds that will be redistributed at the site.

This spring and early summer, volunteers have worked diligently to enhance this special area. A dozen volunteers cleared out invasive and non-native vegetation and planted 300 new prairie plants. Another group collected and redistributed woodland seeds, including wild ginger, meadow rue and bloodroot. Volunteers were thrilled to see a large crop of bloodroot blooming where invasive sumac had been removed the previous year.

Another important focus of our gorge work has been the removal of garlic mustard. Garlic Mustard Days started volunteers scouting out this invasive, non-native plant. Trained foray leaders continue to watch for the plant, and then report it or remove it. A nice community network has grown up through gorge events to keep an eye on this aggressive plant's propagation.

To see more on gorge events, check out the latest Gorge Quarterly newsletter at www.fmr.org/stewards.html.

Rosemount Trail plans nearly complete

Plans are nearly complete for an interpretive trail that will guide bicyclists and hikers through a diversity of landscapes and connect the city of Rosemount to Spring Lake Park Reserve on the banks of the Mississippi River. It will also help visitors see the connection between development or industrial use and the scenic and ecological value of the land.

FMR staff met with landowners and city officials to develop a trail alignment plan that honors greenway corridors and offers interpretive elements. The finished trail will traverse land developed in different ways—industrial, natural, developed and developing. Visitors may see residential neighborhoods, stretches of natural areas—including rolling hills, wetlands, ponds, forested and agricultural areas, and heavily industrial areas with oil refinery operations. Interpretive information will educate trail users about the sites and focus on how land use affects water resources.

Watch for an open house this fall, where FMR will publicly present the trail plan.

Lakeville a partner in low-impact development design

Can a fast-growing community, such as Lakeville, grow and still protect its sensitive natural resources? FMR has recently partnered with the Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Organization, the city of Lakeville, the Department of Natural Resources and the engineering firm Emmons and Oliver Resources to determine if, and how, this can be done.

Emmons and Oliver Resources will take an existing design for a project slated to be built within the Vermillion River Watershed in Lakeville – one of the ten fastest growing cities in Minnesota – and redesign it, using river-friendly design principles. This new design, using cutting edge practices known as Low Impact Development, will then be compared with the original, traditional design for parameters such as stormwater runoff, cost to install and maintain, habitat value, etc. The goal is to show how the incorporation of innovative design criteria will allow for resource protection while maintaining the economic benefits of development.

The City of Lakeville has been an enthusiastic and receptive partner in our effort. Their concern for water quality and willingness to participate will impact future development all over the Twin Cities.



The proposed trail corridor includes opportunities to protect and restore adjacent natural areas that would give trail users a chance to experience and learn about water quality and wildlife habitat. Photo courtesy of Hoisington Koezler Group, Inc.

Wetland Health Evaluation Program wraps up another season

A busy and successful 2005 WHEP season is beginning to wind down. More than forty new volunteers were trained in field methods and the identification of plants and invertebrates in May and June. They spent July and August collecting invertebrate samples, taking wetland vegetation surveys and documenting their findings.

Collecting invertebrate samples is a multi-step process which involves setting bottle traps on the emergent edge of shorelines, sorting the collected bugs into sample jars and – back in the lab – organizing them by type and recording the data.

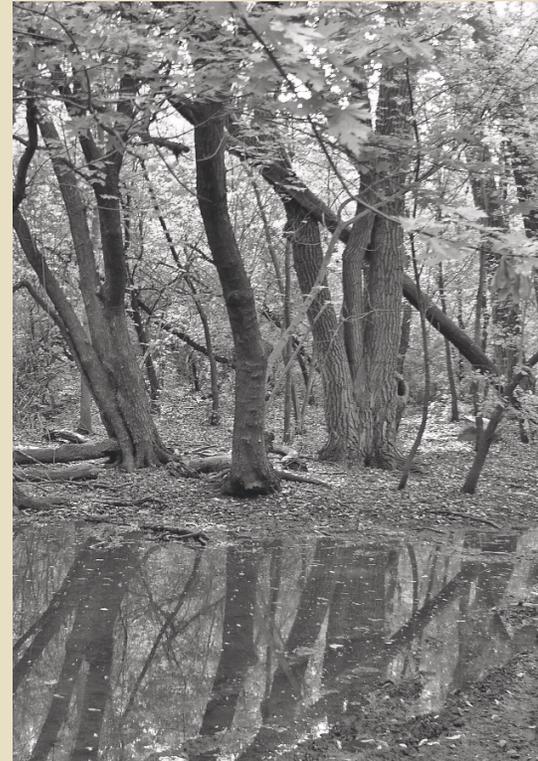
Vegetation surveys involve staking out a 100-square-meter plot (called a relevé plot), walking the area to identify plants and recording the data.

An exciting feature of this year's program involves participants exhibiting their work in the Mississippi River Gallery at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Each of the fifteen WHEP teams spends a weekend day in the gallery to show off petri dishes of cool macro invertebrates such as leeches and dragonfly and caddis fly larvae, hand out information and tell visitors about this exciting hands-on program.

Heritage Park comes to life

Along the Mississippi River just south of 494 in Inver Grove Heights sits a 50-acre park that looks anything but inviting. A former railroad yard, the park's land is contaminated and has sat idle for many years. But that is changing.

The city of Inver Grove Heights has developed a plan to clean up the contamination and turn the park into a welcoming natural area offering recreational opportunities, a performance space, restored natural areas and interpretive components. Working with the city and the Minnesota Environmental Initiative, in collaboration with Emmons and Olivier Resources (EOR), FMR's restoration ecologist, Karen Schik, recently completed a management plan for the restoration. EOR completed a vegetation survey and recommended phytoremediation, a process using plants to draw contaminants out of the soil. Debris will soon be cleared from the site so the restoration and remediation work can begin. A clean and healthy park will begin to take shape as we work to restore natural areas and create a space with access to the river and respect for its character.



The floodplain forest at the Heritage Village Park site is one of the remaining natural area remnants that will be restored as part of the plan for the city park

Rice Creek partners with Minnesota Lakes Association

A new partnership between FMR and the Minnesota Lakes Association (MLA) has the potential to enhance the work we can accomplish in the Rice Creek watershed. What we share is a focus on improving water quality. But our differences also make us great partners.

MLA brings its expertise in working with individual lakes associations across the state to address water quality issues, while FMR has solid connections in the Rice Creek watershed and knowledge of issues specific to that area.

Our partnership will leverage those strengths to help community members work with their local officials for more protective stormwater management guidelines. We will serve as a resource for those who are concerned about how growth and development will impact water quality of their local lakes and streams. Like FMR, MLA understands that changes in standards come from the watershed level, and together we can make a greater difference than either of us alone.

Continued from cover

of the river is to take care of the network of habitat that sustains it. That habitat-based watershed approach is at the heart of FMR's work on river conservation.

Today there are freshwater clams in reaches of the Mississippi where they hadn't been for decades. Pool 2 from Ford Dam to Hastings has become a nationally recognized catch-and-release walleye and sauger fishery. There are heron rookeries and bald eagle nests within miles of the state capital, trout streams and large wetland complexes where sandhill cranes dance in the spring – features few urban areas can claim.

"The river is an incredible piece of habitat," Wilds says. "This piece was in jeopardy 30 years ago. People have recognized that and tried to make a difference."

Below top: View of the Mississippi River valley from the McGill property in the Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area (SNA).

Below bottom: FMR Conservation Director Tom Lewanski walks with Mayjel Anderson on the Malcolm property that is now part of the Pine Bend Bluffs SNA.



Bluff with a view

Sometimes Tom Lewanski gets invited in for cookies and coffee with people who have lived on lands near the Mississippi all their lives, lands rich in stories. Then he'll go for a walk with them to hear and see the land's stories firsthand, its rocks and streams and trees, its wildflowers and wildlife. As FMR's conservation director, Lewanski oversees its on-the-ground work to save pieces of the Mississippi ecosystem. That job, he says, always begins with landowner outreach.

"My experience is that most landowners want to be good stewards and do the right thing," Lewanski says. "But they don't always know what the right thing is, or how to do it. We help them find ways to better manage for habitat and water quality, while meeting their other needs as well."

FMR's landowner outreach efforts have yielded a wide range of habitat benefits, from individual streambank stabilization projects that provide a healthier fishery, to permanent protection of hundreds of acres of relatively pristine woods. At the Sand Coulee just

south of Hastings, FMR's restoration ecologist, Karen Schik, has been working with five landown-

ers and the DNR to restore 60 acres of dry prairie that's home to a dozen rare species, including the Blue Racer snake, as well as more common critters such as turkey, deer, hawks and coyotes. Guided by a management plan that includes prescribed burning, tree removal and seed collection, the area is slowly regaining its vigor and biological diversity.

Some of the biggest landowners aren't people, but corporations, and FMR has been busy establishing important connections there as well. A large portion of the 1,300-acre Pine Bend Bluffs Natural Area in Dakota county is owned by Flint Hills Resources, the state's largest petroleum refiner. For the past six years, FMR has worked with the company and other partners to restore oak savanna and prairie. Just across the river, in Cottage Grove, a natural resource management plan developed by FMR is guiding restoration of 200 acres of quality habitat owned by 3M as part of a green corridor extending through much of south Washington county.

While the general aim of landowner outreach is to improve stewardship of privately owned lands, sometimes Lewanski's kitchen conversations result in the permanent protection of valuable habitat as publicly owned parkland or a nature preserve. Several years ago, during public meetings for Dakota County's Farmland and Natural Area Program, Lewanski struck up an acquaintance with Dwight Malcolm, who held an abiding respect and affection for the Inver Grove Heights property his father had purchased in 1918, and for the variety of plants and animals it supported. When Malcolm was diagnosed with a terminal illness, he worked with his sister, Mayjel Anderson, and Lewanski to forever preserve as a state Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) his 216 acres of old oak woods and prairie openings that tumble down to the river at Pine Bend Bluffs. Subsequent additions to the Pine Bend Bluffs SNA have included a blufftop overlook that provides what many consider the most breathtaking, panoramic view of the Mississippi River valley in the region. The Malcolm estate also donated more than \$200,000 to FMR for ongoing stewardship efforts to improve habitat at Pine Bend.

"In the end, it's not so important who owns the land, but what they decide to do with it," Lewanski says. "We help people understand the value of what they have, and what their options are."

"Conservation really starts here, over coffee with individual landowners."

Parts of a whole

Just as the Mississippi River ecosystem is a complex of many different parts, protecting its unique habitat values requires a wide variety of activities. In the Vermillion River watershed, for instance, FMR's efforts have ranged from restoring wetlands, grasslands and shoreline habitat at the Metropolitan Council's Empire Wastewater Treatment Plant, to protecting one of the few remaining trout streams by working with local units of government in order to better manage stormwater that runs off into the Vermillion River. Elsewhere in Dakota County, the organization has worked with nearly a dozen communities along the Mississippi to develop greenway plans aimed at long-term protection of an interconnected network of habitat and other open spaces. FMR was a key player in development of the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Area program, which identified priority areas for conservation, and it spearheaded citizen outreach and education efforts that resulted in successful passage of a \$20 million countywide referendum to protect those key pieces of habitat and agricultural areas that buffer them.

But protecting and restoring habitat on a piece-by-piece basis, important as it is, will not suffice to preserve the long-term ecological functions of the Mississippi River corridor. For that, a larger regional perspective is also necessary.

"Over the last century, Twin Cities leaders have had the foresight and vision to protect key pieces of habitat," says Whitney Clark, FMR's executive director. "Today we have a better grasp of ecology, and we understand the importance of operating at a larger scale to make sure the pieces all work together as a biologically diverse and interconnected natural system."

That broader perspective has guided FMR's participation in a number of major efforts, from advocating for better natural resource-based planning at the Met Council to helping found both Metro Greenways and Metro Conservation Corridors, multi-million dollar programs that have involved numerous local, regional, state and federal partners in coordinated protection and restoration of a regional habitat network.

Such efforts are critical to maintaining the Mississippi's unique role as a flyway that serves an estimated forty percent of the continent's migrating waterfowl. But it's not only birds and other animals that benefit from conservation of the area's green infrastructure. Clark cites a recent Metropolitan Council survey that identifies the feature Twin Citians value most about the seven-county metro region: our wealth of open spaces and healthy natural amenities.

"It's not just fish and wildlife that need clean water, woods and wide open spaces," Clark says. "We need them, too – for both our physical and spiritual health. We, too, are creatures of habitat."

Harland Hiemstra is a writer and conservationist who lives near the Mississippi River in St. Paul Park.



Mississippi River Challenge



Many thanks go out to all Friends of the Mississippi River who paddled, volunteered sponsored or pledged a paddler for this year's Minnesota Chiropractic Association Mississippi River Challenge! You made the event a huge success. We had tremendous luck with the weather this year – 85 and sunny on Saturday and a bit warmer on Sunday with a slight headwind, but nothing to rival 2004. We raised more than \$90,000 for our Mississippi River, and paddler after paddler told us how much they were enjoying themselves and how smoothly everything was going. We had a grand ol' time at Fort Snelling with live music and an incredible meal served by French Meadow Bakery and Cafe and Thousand Hills Cattle Company, along with dessert provided by Blue Sky Creamery. Along the way, fabulous rest stop refreshments were provided by many other generous sponsors. Some paddlers even complained of being fed too well!

If you would like to be involved in next year's event as a sponsor, please contact Kay at 651/222-2193 x19.



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FMR launches Mississippi River Field Guide

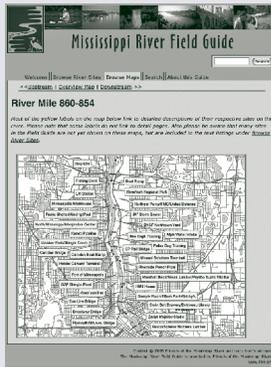
Want to learn about Boulanger's Bend, the murder of Mary Price or the B.S. Cafe? Ever wonder what that pile of stuff at the barge terminal is, or why a person's name was placed on a riverside plaque?

Friends of the Mississippi River is proud to announce the Mississippi River Field Guide, a resource providing information about sites of cultural, historic, natural and recreational significance along the Twin Cities stretch of the Mississippi River. Browsing the Field Guide, you can find answers to the questions above and learn more about the river than perhaps you've ever thought to ask.

The Field Guide is built around the work of local amateur historian, river enthusiast and FMR member Steve Lee, who responds to and plans for environmental

emergencies for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Two years ago, Steve approached FMR, looking for help to publish his collection of notes and stories about interesting sites along the Mississippi River, which he had compiled through research in the field – tooling along the river on his bike and interviewing people he encountered – and at the library, reading up on the history behind the places he discovered.

There must be thousands of special places and stories known to FMR members! We all hope the Guide will help visitors to appreciate the many faces of the great river and to get out and explore it for themselves. If you have a description of your favorite site to include in the Field Guide, e-mail it to Gabe at gormsby@fmr.org.



A Work In Progress

The Mississippi River Field Guide available today is just the beginning of a work-in-progress, with many improvements planned for the near future. In coming weeks watch for:

- "Add a Site," a feature that allows you to add information about your favorite sites along the river
- "Comment on a Site" - Add your own thoughts and comments about sites already listed in the Field Guide
- "Essays," a section that includes longer pieces about the river that are not specifically oriented toward a particular site
- An ever-increasing amount of photographs
- An expanding reach – north to Ramsey and south to Goodhue counties

Begin exploring the Mississippi River Field Guide at

www.fmr.org/fieldguide/

The Mississippi River Field Guide features photos, maps, stories and a searchable database.



FMR is proud to be a member of the Minnesota Environmental Fund (www.mnenvironmentalfund.org)



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