



WETLAND MATTERS

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OLD WATERY HIGHWAY COULD LEAD TO NEW DEVELOPMENT ON THE ILLINOIS

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The Illinois River is one of America's oldest highways, carrying people, goods, and ideas across the prairie. Today we can reclaim it as an important artery—this time not only for commerce, but also for living, working, retirement, and enjoying life.

In this article, I seek to reawaken our minds to this “lost” river and the riches it offers to this and future generations. We need a new way of looking at the river, based on its unique communities, geology and landscapes, illuminating how it might become a new and important part of our lives—much as it was for people over the last 5,000 years.

Long before Illinois was settled in the 1830s, Native Americans used this waterway for trading and transportation. In 1673 Louis Jolliet and Father Marquette traveled the river and mapped its resources. Jolliet correctly foresaw that a canal linking Lake Michigan with the Illinois River would make this route America's super-highway of the day—an idea that took almost 200 years to come to fruition.

Jolliet's insight has helped many of us become familiar with the upper reaches of the

FROM DECLINE TO DEVELOPMENT

Much has been written about the pillage and decline of the Illinois River since the wholesale arrival of European settlers almost two centuries ago. The river has been over-fished, dredged and diked. It has lost hundreds of thousands of acres of its wetlands. Its tributaries have been turned into ditches, delivering vast amounts of sediment-rich water to its already silt-laden channel. The river's commercial aquatic resources—fish,



What is down this 200-mile stretch? What forgotten treasures await the modern explorer? How might this river resonate for us today?

Illinois River from its origin at the confluence of the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers west to LaSalle. Here the visitor can enjoy the historic I&M Canal, as well as the popular Matthiessen and Starved Rock state parks. This “corridor of history” has been well-known and loved by generations of tourists, artists, and naturalists.

But west of LaSalle, the Illinois River turns south and, for many, vanishes from view and from mind. What is down this 200-mile stretch? What forgotten treasures await the modern explorer? How might this river resonate for us today?

mussels, and clams—have been devastated by the triple blows of pollution, siltation, and the introduction of invasive species.

Is it any wonder that this historic mid-American highway of travel and commerce, of great beauty and benefit, became an ecological orphan in the 20th century?

Yet times have changed. Passage of the Clean Water Act in 1970 cleaned up much of the local dumping along the river, and water clarity has improved. Today work is underway to resurrect this natural treasure.

A key place to start is with the backwater lakes that once defined this river—most of them long-since leveed, drained and turned into agricultural fields. In 2001, the Wetlands Initiative spearheaded one of the first private efforts to restore the Upper Illinois River floodplain. Working on 2,600 acres of cropland in the floodplain at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes, the Initiative restored a natural landscape today known as the Sue & Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge. The mosaic of lakes, wetlands,

savannas, provides habitat for native wildlife. Downriver, the Nature Conservancy also is at work restoring nearly 7,000 acres of the Middle Lakes region at Emiquon.

Towns, too, are re-awakening. A drive through downtown Peoria reveals a fresh spirit and revitalization. Other riverfront towns highlight their unique local lifestyle. Meredosia, for example, once an important town along the river, keeps its history alive and seeks to involve newcomers in its traditions and resources. I saw this same spirit in many other riverfront towns I visited on a seven-day tour of the Illinois River from Alton to Morris.

ILLINOIS RIVER AS A SPINE

On my tour, I developed a vision of the river as a spine—the connecting link between five dynamically different landscapes created by nature and altered by human use. Join with me as we re-imagine the Illinois River as a community-builder, just as it was centuries ago, when the Native American towns, such as Dickson Mounds, were brought together by this watery artery.

Let's look at the potential of these five landscapes, as I have named them, and consider the opportunities that each offers for activity and development (*see map, page 4*).

1. CANYON/PENINSULA AREA

Squeezed between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, this is one of the most beautiful landscapes in the Midwest. It was formed from wind-blown soils deposited during the time of the last glacier, 12,000 years ago. This hilly peninsula is largely given over to specialty crops, particularly peaches south of Pittsfield. Its scenic opportunities remain largely undiscovered since, except from the north, it can be reached only by seasonal ferries crossing the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

The west side of the river below Pittsfield

should be declared a scenic and agricultural reserve because of its tremendous potential for tourism and food production. The American Farmland Trust (www.farmland.org) discusses many ways that landowners can band together to preserve their regional landscapes.

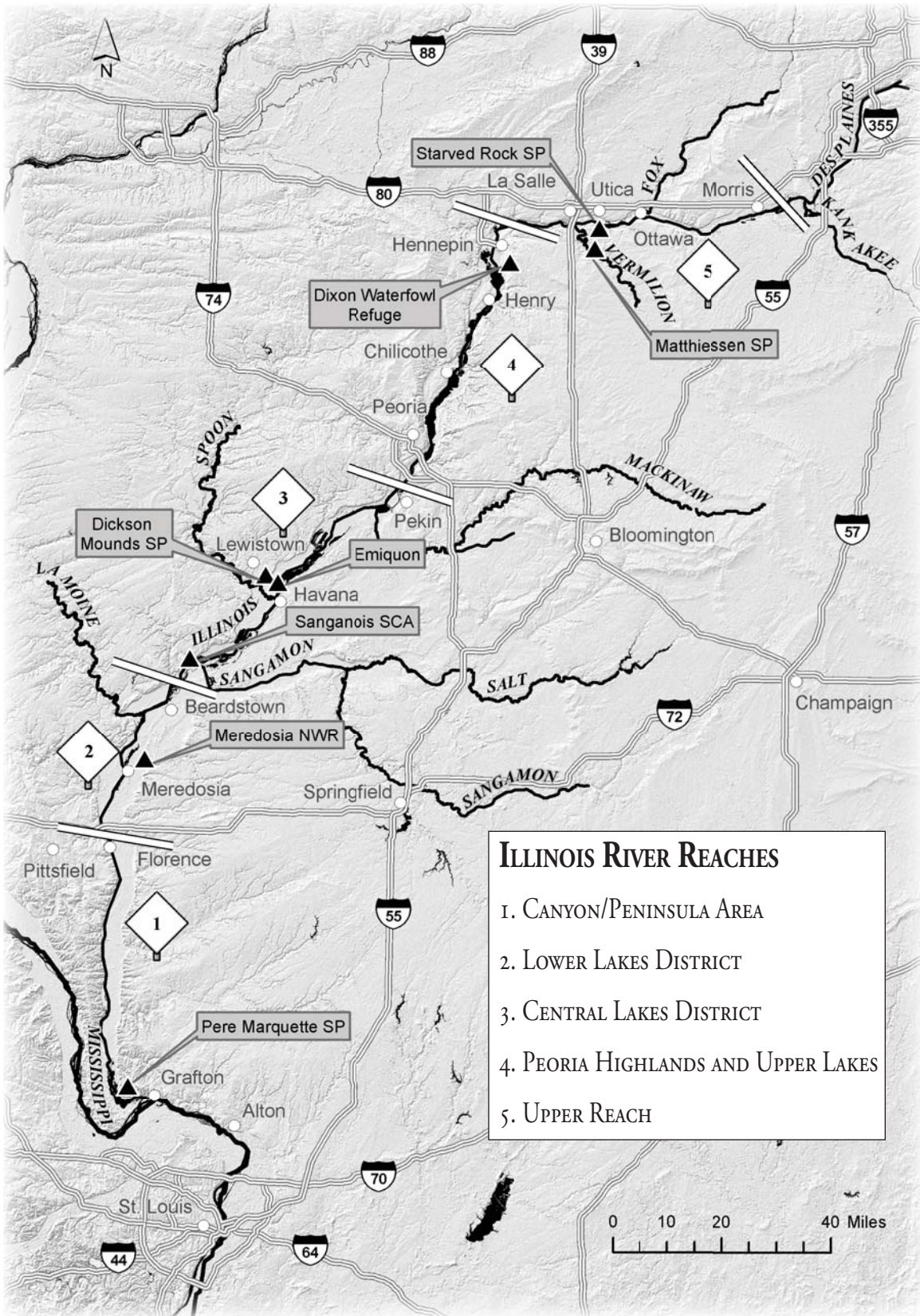
East of the Illinois River, a relatively-narrow floodplain, now completely converted to agriculture, sits below wooded bluffs. This is the Illinois River “canyon.” The area is rich in history and culture, including Pere Marquette State Park, Alton, Grafton, and St. Louis just across the river.

On the east side, some of the floodplain should be restored to inland lakes and marshes, as this is the only stretch of the entire river where all traces of these have been removed by levees. The floodplain east of Florence, along with its tourism draw of a ferry, would be a good location for this work. Note that any new development should subscribe to the tenets of conservation subdivision design to preserve the local landscape and make the most efficient use of land. The Smart Communities Network (www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/greendev/subdivision.shtml) gives a good overview of this process.

2. LOWER LAKES DISTRICT

From Pittsfield to Beardstown, the river once backed up before its final plunge to the Mississippi, creating a series of inland lakes. These lakes once provided for wildlife and recreation, but are now much reduced in size and number. Meredosia Lake in the Meredosia National Wildlife Refuge gives a glimpse of what the Illinois River was and what it could become again.

Meredosia and Meredosia Lake should be declared a state scenic area for both the historical and cultural influences at work in this area. Good references for this effort would be scenicillinois.org and landtrustalliance.org for



Jim Monchak, The Wetlands Initiative

information on using conservation easements in land protection.

3. CENTRAL LAKES DISTRICT

From Beardstown to Pekin, multiple inland lakes survive, defying all efforts to drain them. Goose, Jack, and Crane lakes are the most prominent. The Central Lakes District is divided into two strikingly different areas:

Sangamon Valley: Stretching east of the river between Beardstown and Havana towards



Lincoln, this area speaks of the majesty of what many expect Illinois to be: broad and expansive. While the Sangamon River itself has long since been ditched and straightened, the southern uplands of the valley are extraordinarily scenic and varied and have many opportunities for new retirement and recreational communities.

The Sangamon Valley, with its rich lands, should be declared an agricultural reserve. (See www.montgomerycountymd.gov/agsservices for early examples of such efforts, dating from the mid-1980s). At the same time, parts of the Sangamon River should be restored to its original course and additional lakes and wetlands be re-created too.

The lower reaches of the Sangamon, at its confluence with the Illinois (embracing the Sanganois State Conservation Area), should be expanded so that the vast delta of the Sangamon River and the adjacent lakes, are preserved and restored.

Spoon River Valley: To the west of the river, the landscape is dramatically different and steeped in history. Aboriginal people settled here thousands of years ago, as visible in the Dickson Mounds site, and 500 generations of humans have made the area home. This region embodies the very essence of the Illinois—with steep hills to the west and flat and far-reaching plains to the east. The foothills are the site of the Nature Conservancy's vast Emiquon project, where restoration of 7,000 acres of former cropland is currently underway.

Historic Lewistown dominates this area, which is rich in local cultural and literary history. Native son Edgar Lee Masters penned the 1915 poetic masterpiece, *Spoon River Anthology*, based on small town life in the area.

The Spoon River Valley is well on its way to promoting tourism and appreciation for local cultures. It should be designated state scenic areas.

4. PEORIA HIGHLANDS AND UPPER LAKES

One city dominates the Illinois River: Peoria. Henry Schoolcraft in 1821 was one of the first to note the area's potential importance:

Situated . . . where the splendid prairies of the upper part unite with the heavy forests of the lower, and enjoying such an excellent communication with the Mississippi, a town at this place must, we suppose, command considerable advantages.

Peoria is perfectly situated in the landscape that first favored its founding. The intense narrowing of the river valley directly north of the city, which made this spot the best place to cross the river, today marks it with scenic highlands on both sides of the river, particularly the west side. Chillicothe dominates the northern edge of this district. The combination of scenic values

and a strong local city make this area a strong site for future river-related growth.

Large sections of the bluffs to the north should be preserved as local scenic areas with the implementation of mandatory conservation development ordinances. These would promote efficient housing and retirement communities, as well as preserve the character of this unique area.

The vast flatland at the base of these highlands, extending south from Chillicothe to Peoria itself, should become a new state park or wildlife refuge and be restored to wetlands, lakes, and marshes. The area's flatland is an unusual geological feature. Restoring it would greatly improve the water quality of Upper Peoria Lake, dammed decades ago at the city.

The Peoria Highlands and Narrows also embrace the Upper Lakes region. Here huge floodplains still contain significant lakes, including Goose, Senawachine, and Sawmill.

The town of Henry stands as the last outpost paying homage to the culture that characterizes the lower reaches of the Illinois River that are free of the urban influences of Chicago. It should be designated a historic town. Near Hennepin, the Hennepin & Hopper Lakes Project, developed by The Wetlands Initiative, is drawing visitors to its scenic expanse of wetlands and prairies. It could become a significant regional draw for tourism and volunteer activities, if supported with the right facilities.

5. UPPER REACH

As far as most people know, this is "the end of the world" for the Illinois River. This was the river's first course, fed by the Kankakee and Des Plaines rivers and, in glacial times, the torrent from Lake Chicago—our current Lake Michigan, but up to 60 feet higher back then. Here the Illinois meets the former course of the Mississippi River at Bureau. This area is rife with history, commerce and, in more recent times, development.

Towns along U.S. Route 6—LaSalle, Utica, Ottawa, and Morris—are revitalizing and, because of their proximity to the megalopolis of Chicago, have great potential for expanded tourism and development. Before Chicago overwhelms them, the major towns in this reach should form a regional entity so that development and historical/scenic resources protection can proceed hand-in-hand.

Matthiessen and Starved Rock state parks offer additional draws. These popular parks should be greatly expanded to embrace the entire confluence of the Illinois and Vermillion rivers.

CONNECTING IT ALL

All these landscapes should be joined together to promote community and a sharing of the Illinois River's resources by both residents and visitors. These efforts should first include:

INTERGOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES: River counties should join together and agree to promote the unique character of these lands. There are many models for this, such as the Canal Corridor Association (www.canalcor.org), which promotes the region surrounding the Illinois & Michigan Canal in the Upper Reach.

Municipalities, agencies, and citizens should join together to seek national recognition for river reaches that have extraordinary scenic or recreational value. Currently a small section of the Vermillion River is the sole designated stretch in the entire state; more are needed (www.rivers.gov).

ROADS: Several highways between Ottawa and Havana have been designated as the Illinois River Road National Scenic Byway (www.illinoisriverroad.org). This is a good start and marketing efforts to promote this byway should increase.

BIKEWAYS: Many abandoned railroad right-of-ways follow the Illinois River. Experience since the 1970s has shown in the Chicago area



“He who travels least,
travels furthest.”

—Mark Twain

that these are very popular and do not lead to any disruption to local life. A study should be done on how to connect these and adjacent scenic roads to promote tourist use. The Illinois Department of Transportation does have a map of bike routes along the river, but makes little use of railroad paths. The Grand Illinois Trail, a 535-mile loop trail from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River (www.bikelib.org/git), is less than grand, since it traverses only northern Illinois. It is up to river communities to bring this interest to the Illinois River proper.

TOURISM: The wine tour and bed and breakfast industries are way out in front promoting their efforts. The Illinois Bed & Breakfast Association (www.bbonline.com/il/ilbba/) has teamed up with Amtrak to create a Bed and Breakfast Guide, which lists local visits coupled with train service. Why not have a similar arrangement with sites on the Illinois River?

RETIREMENT: Surveys by the Del Webb Co. have shown that nearly half of all people want to retire within three hours of their home and 88 percent say they want to remain physically active. Outdoor activities, such as wildlife

monitoring and watching, are ideal for seniors. Sensitive development of new retirement communities along the length of the river is a tremendous future opportunity. All of these will add energy to the local towns, plus dollars to the economy.

THE RIVER ITSELF: This is the last and greatest connection. All the towns along the Illinois River should unite and have a seasonal boat/ferry/water taxi that connects them, as is common in countries in the Far East, so that tourists, workers, retirees, and others may move from one place to the other on water, as was done centuries ago. In this way the Illinois River itself will become the central link along this entirely reborn waterway.

Perhaps, as Mark Twain said, “He who travels least, travels furthest.” We need to open our eyes to this great gift here in the Midwest, the Illinois River.

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The Wetlands Initiative is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to restoring the wetland resources of the Midwest to improve water quality, reduce flood damages, and increase wildlife habitat and biodiversity. The Wetlands Initiative is committed to developing ecological and economic models for large-scale wetland restoration that can provide a solution to systemic water quality and other environmental problems.

Views expressed in Wetland Matters are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of The Wetlands Initiative board or staff.

TWI welcomes manuscripts for this publication that reflect on the history, science, ethics, or politics of wetlands and wetland restoration. For information about how to submit, please contact the editor at the address above.

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