

CHAPTER SEVEN

Recreation

In 1988, Colonel Joseph Briggs, outgoing district engineer of the St. Paul District, related that the Corps' "recreational business is growing in leaps and bounds."¹ The Corps received the responsibility from the federal government to develop recreational opportunities in conjunction with its civil works projects in the mid-twentieth century. As Briggs explained, recreation had become an increasingly important function of the Corps as the century progressed, although it was never considered as important as the navigation and flood control missions. Emphasizing the value of recreation, however, a 1996 Corps' engineering regulation declared that one of the primary goals of the Corps was "providing quality public outdoor recreation experiences to serve the needs of present and future generations." By the twenty-first century, the Corps had become one of the largest operators of recreation units on federal land.² Yet the Corps sometimes shied away from fully developing recreational opportunities, in part because of environmental concerns and in part because of conflicts with other missions and federal agencies. An examination of the recreational function in the St. Paul District in the late twentieth century highlights some of these features.

Although Congress has never authorized the Corps to build a dam and reservoir solely for recreational purposes, the Corps obtained authority in the 1944 Flood Control Act to build recreation facilities. The 1965 Federal Water Project Recreation Act allowed the Corps to include recreation as a contributing factor to benefit-cost ratios, while also mandating that non-federal sponsors bear at least fifty percent of the construction costs.³ With these authorities, the Corps developed campgrounds, day-use areas, boat ramps and swimming beaches around the bodies of water it managed. As more and more Americans participated in outdoor recreation in the 1960s and 1970s, Corps' resources became increasingly popular. The Corps estimated in 2003 that 360 million people annually visited the 2,500 recreation areas at the 463 projects that it operated, as well as the 1,800 other sites leased to state, local or private recreation managers. However, the Corps' responsibilities did not merely consist of providing areas of enjoyment. According to one manager, they also extended to "insur[ing] the public safety and health of the visiting public, ... protect[ing] natural resources for future generations, and ... charg[ing] fees where appropriate to offset operation and maintenance costs." Because of these diverse duties, Corps' regulations required that its Natural Resources Management Program staff be drawn from "personnel having expertise in areas such as forestry, wildlife management, recreation management, fisheries management, parks management, landscape architecture, biology, soil science, interpretation, visitor assistance and contract administration."⁴

In the St. Paul District, recreation management was a part of the Natural Resources section of the Construction-Operations Division. Project managers within the Construction-Operations Division administered project sites, and recreation personnel reported to the on-site supervisor. The main recreational attractions in the district included the Mississippi River, its headwaters and several other reservoirs and waterways scattered across North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Essentially, the district's recreational operations lay in four major areas: developing new opportunities on civil works projects; maintaining existing projects; conducting public outreach ventures, including safety programs; and assisting in natural resources management. Most of these functions could best be carried out at the projects themselves, meaning the district did not have a large recreation staff in its St. Paul office. Instead, most recreation and natural resource employees were located in the field, and these individuals labored to ensure the public had ample recreational opportunities and satisfactory experiences.⁵

Developing New Opportunities

One of the main functions of the district's recreation staff included the development of recreational features as part of new civil works projects. After 1936, the Corps built numerous large dams for flood control, and the resulting reservoirs were some of the major attractions for the general public. Numerous factors, including the environmental movement and increasing costs, however, reduced the Corps' dam/reservoir construction in the 1970s in favor of more non-structural solutions.⁶ Yet recreation opportunities still existed, and the Corps continued to develop these possibilities whenever feasible.

One of the major successes for the St. Paul District stemmed from the construction of the South Fork Zumbro River Flood Control Project in Rochester, Minnesota, completed in the 1990s and the recipient of several awards (see Chapter Four). Recreation was an important component of this project from the beginning.⁷ According to Frank Star, an outdoor recreation planner for the district, the involvement of the recreation staff in Rochester was typical of its participation in most civil works projects. First, Star related, the district had to determine whether recreational aspects were feasible. If so, it had to discover whether local entities were willing to share the costs of these developments. The City of Rochester expressed an early willingness to pay the fifty percent cost requirement, meaning the district's recreational staff worked closely with the city to determine just what features were desirable. "Once we had figured out what the project was going to consist of, which was channel work in the city itself," Star stated, "then we looked at what kind of recreational opportunities ... that afford[ed]." The two sides ultimately decided that the best utilization lay in bicycle and pedestrian trails and picnic areas along the Zumbro River where much of the Corps' work was occurring.⁸

During the project's construction in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many citizens in Rochester grew excited about the opportunities. As one newspaper report related, "Not only will the



Recreation: (Above) Swimmers at the Crosslake Recreation Area in Cross Lake, Minnesota. (Photo by Shannon Bauer, courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers) (Left) Ranger Kyle Curtiss, Pokegama Dam and Recreation Area, Grand Rapids, Minn., assists Ben Miner in making a pinecone bird feeder. (Photo by Tammy Wick, courtesy St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

project protect the city from flooding, but it will provide outdoor enthusiasts with an array of new opportunities through a network of bike trails, a series of reservoirs and new parks and campgrounds.” These features, the newspaper concluded, showed that the Corps, as well as other entities involved in the project, was “work[ing] hard to combine flood protection and fun.”⁹ In essence, the recreation developments consisted of 6.5 miles of walkways and bicycle paths along the Zumbro in downtown Rochester, as well as pedestrian plazas, picnic shelters and better access points to the river. Even before the project was completed, the general public extensively used these features, and frequently commented favorably.¹⁰ One woman was grateful for the bike paths because her daughter could ride without worrying about automobiles and curbs. Another man, on an “after-dinner stroll,” expressed his pleasure with the trails, stating that the area was “much improved over what it was.”¹¹ According to project manager Deborah Foley, the well-accepted recreation developments, funded in part by the city, were “key” reasons why the project received “top honors” in 1996.¹²

The South Fork Zumbro River Project was representative of the way the district developed recreational aspects on civil works projects. Although not all local parties were as willing to foot fifty percent of the bill, other undertakings, including the St. Paul and the Grand Forks/East Grand Forks Flood Control Projects, also had significant recreation features. However, as with the Zumbro, once the Corps completed construction of these developments, it turned the recreation units over to the local sponsor for operation and maintenance. Thereafter, the Corps had little to do with the projects, aside from periodic inspections to ensure they were being operated and maintained correctly. Local assumption of responsibility commonly occurred in the last half of the twentieth century. According to Richard Otto, who began working with the St. Paul District’s recreation program in 1975, because most of these facilities were “small areas and parks ... used by local people,” common sense dictated that local governments operate them.¹³

However, the Corps quickly learned that local governments sometimes caused problems in the management of recreation facilities. In 1980, for example, Vernon County, Wisconsin, which leased Blackhawk Park on the Mississippi River from the Corps, decided to terminate its operating lease and return the park to Corps’ control. The county also informed the St. Paul District it would no longer maintain the access road to the park, even though the street provided service to private residences and public utilities. In addition, the county refused to construct safety features on the road, including warnings at a railroad crossing. Because of the county’s unwillingness to take responsibility for the road and the safety concerns, the Corps closed Blackhawk Park for a couple of months in the spring of 1984. The loss of tourist revenue hurt the surrounding communities, leading 2,843 people to sign a petition demanding the county assume responsibility for the road. The county finally accepted that duty in May, allowing the Corps to reopen in time for the Memorial Day weekend. Although the situation eventually resolved itself, it showed some of the difficulties that could result from a local government’s lack of participation in recreation

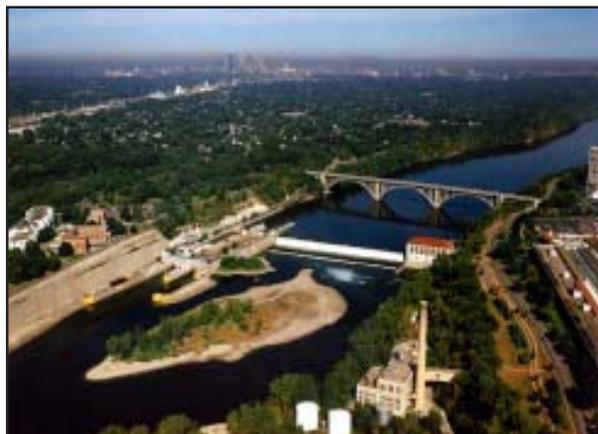
projects.¹⁴

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

The Mississippi River was another site for recreational development in the last quarter of the twentieth century, although the Corps was at times dubious about pursuing recreation on the river. As part of the Great River Environmental Action Team's (GREAT I) study of the Upper Mississippi River in the 1970s (see Chapter Three), a recreation work group, consisting of representatives from the Corps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service and the states of Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota, issued recommendations in 1979 for increasing recreation on the Mississippi. The work group suggested that:

- The Corps should consider recreation enhancement when disposing of dredged material on the river;
- Congress should give the Corps authority to maintain recreational areas on federal lands along the river in cooperation with other agencies without local cost-sharing;
- The Corps should maintain backwater accesses;
- Federal agencies should "provide a diversity of recreational opportunities" on the river; and
- Recreation should be included as a "project purpose" of the Nine-Foot Navigation Project.¹⁵

When the St. Paul District issued its report on the implementation of GREAT I's recommendations, it noted that its nine-foot navigation channel increased recreational boating opportunities on the river and recognized the popularity of islands in the Mississippi created by the disposal of dredged material. However, the district only promised to give "additional consideration" to recreation on the river, recognizing that other programs, such as environmental management, took priority.¹⁶ Accordingly, when the district later received authority for its Upper Mississippi Environmental Management Program in the 1980s, the recreation component received no funding



The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area extends from the mouth of the Crow River below Lock and Dam 1 (shown here) north through the Twin Cities to the mouth of the St. Croix River. (Photo courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

from Congress “due to a low” federal priority.¹⁷ As Frank Star explained, “The big problem is that the recreation community is not [as] well organized as some of the environmental community is ... There’s no big group of campers or hikers or somebody to raise the stakes.”¹⁸

Although GREAT I’s recommendations did not significantly alter recreational opportunities on the Mississippi, it enabled Congress and environmental organizations to examine how recreation could be integrated more fully into river management plans. These dialogues eventually culminated in the introduction of legislation in the late 1980s by U.S. Representative Bruce F. Vento (D-Minnesota) for the establishment of a Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. It would encompass an 80-mile stretch of the river beginning near the Crow River in Minnesota and running through the Twin Cities to the confluence of the Mississippi and the St. Croix rivers at the Wisconsin-Minnesota border. Vento foresaw this area as falling under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, with a coordinating committee aiding its governance. He believed the designation would “maximize the River’s potential and assure a fair balance between commercial and recreational interests.”¹⁹

The St. Paul District, however, was not enthusiastic about Vento’s plan, believing, in the words of District Engineer Colonel Briggs, that “another layer of coordination would unduly delay the essential time required to accomplish the things that we have to do,” such as navigation, flood control and environmental regulation. Vento disagreed with the Corps’ complaints, believing the real reason why Briggs opposed the project was because he did not want the National Park Service infringing on the district’s “turf,” a charge Briggs denied.²⁰

Despite the Corps’ reservations about the new system, the bill had enough support to become law on November 18, 1988. Along with designating the 80-mile section of the river as a national river and recreation area under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, the law also established a Mississippi River Coordinating Commission “to assist federal, state, and local authorities in the development



Wildlife Refuge: Don Powell served as project manager for the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Trempealeau Refuge Project as part of the Upper Mississippi Environmental Management Program. (Photo by Shannon Bauer, courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers).

and implementation of an integrated resource management plan.” Representatives from the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the state of Minnesota and the Corps all had a seat on the commission.²¹ This helped the St. Paul District work closely with the National Park Service to develop recreational activities on the Mississippi, including installing interactive kiosks at visitor centers and initiating the Mighty Mississippi Passport program, whereby children could earn a Mighty Mississippi Junior Ranger Badge and certificate by visiting a certain number of sites on the river. Although district officials were initially reluctant to support the designation of the river as a national recreation area, they eventually accepted it as a good way, in the words of Frank Star, to “encourage people to come down and look at the river and [our] stewardship.”²²

Lower St. Anthony Falls Whitewater Park

Other possibilities for Mississippi River recreation also existed. In the late 1990s, the Corps began discussions with the Minnesota DNR about the creation of a whitewater park at Lower St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis. The Mississippi Whitewater Park Development Corporation provided the impetus for the facility, forming specifically to outline plans for the park. The development corporation envisioned



Recreation Boating: Canoeists paddle through the Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam in Minneapolis during an annual Independence Day event. (Photo courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

the establishment of a rapids channel adjacent to the Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam, along with a park and trail system on the east bank of the Mississippi. The channel would be 40 feet wide and 2,000 feet long and would utilize the dam's vertical drop of 25 feet. Proponents believed that canoeists, kayakers and rafters would use the conduit, which would also provide fishing opportunities. In addition, not only would the channel restore the whitewater rapids that existed on the river decades before, but the park itself would enhance the aesthetics of a desolate portion of the river. In 1999, Minnesota's DNR completed a feasibility report on the park, and Congress authorized the project in the Water Resources Development Act of 2000. The Corps and the DNR entered into a cooperative agreement in 2002 to begin planning and design, but the outcome of the project was unclear after President George W. Bush omitted it from his fiscal year 2003 budget. Regardless, most supporters believed it was only a matter of time before the park would be constructed, and, when completed, it would, according to the Mississippi Whitewater Park Development Corporation, "expand the concept of a 'user-friendly' river, increasing environmental awareness, [and] giving Minnesotans the opportunity to make the Mighty Mississippi a part of their lives."²³

Maintaining Existing Facilities

Along with planning new recreational developments, the St. Paul District also maintained existing facilities under its control. Several of these were located at the headwaters of the Mississippi in northcentral Minnesota, including the Cross Lake, Pokegama Lake, Sandy Lake, Leech Lake, Gull Lake and Lake Winnibigoshish recreation areas. The Corps created these reservoirs between 1884 and 1912 by constructing several dams at the Mississippi Headwaters to store water for release during the summer to support navigation below St. Paul. After the Corps developed the nine-foot navigation channel on the Mississippi River in the 1930s, these reservoirs became less important for navigation but more significant for wildlife habitat and recreation. In 1964, the first official recreation facilities were designated at the lakes with the completion of a recreational development master plan for the Pine River Reservoir, another name for Cross Lake. After that time, the Corps developed master plans for the other lakes as well.²⁴ In addition to the headwaters, the St. Paul District supervised recreational facilities at several other locations, including Orwell Lake, Lake Traverse and Lac Qui Parle Dam in Minnesota; Homme Lake and Lake Ashtabula in North Dakota; and Eau Galle Lake and Blackhawk Park in Wisconsin. Finally, the Mississippi River itself provided numerous recreational resources, including beaches and islands made from dredged materials.²⁵

One of the Corps' essential responsibilities in managing these facilities was determining public needs and improving parks accordingly. Most of the sites, whether in Minnesota, North Dakota or Wisconsin, offered essentially the same water-related activities: boating, swimming, camping, fishing and picnicking. Some provided hiking, playground areas and visitor centers as

well. With so many facilities scattered throughout the three states, district employees spent much time maintaining resources and ensuring the public's satisfaction with the areas. In 1985, for example, the Corps decided that changes were necessary at Leech Lake Dam. Traditionally an excellent spot for fishing, the lake had experienced only nominal annual increases in visitation in the 1980s. The Corps determined that more appealing activities for families, retired couples and persons with disabilities might increase visitation, so it installed a game area with horseshoe pits, shuffleboard, volleyball, badminton and basketball courts. The district also constructed landscaped stairways, ramps and walkway bridges to increase access. The improvements worked, and visitation increased by seventeen percent in 1986 and nine percent in 1987.²⁶



Pine River Dam in Cross Lake, Minnesota, received a facelift from 1999 to 2003. Improvements included an accessible fishing pier. (Photo by Shannon Bauer, courtesy St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

The number of campers, coupled with a decreasing number of Corps' employees at Leech Lake, compelled the district to instigate a volunteer campground host program. Under this plan, volunteers became the principal contact point for visitors to the area, handling questions and distributing information. According to the Corps, "hosts never enforce rules and regulations or become involved in any domestic disputes." Instead, they performed "common daily duties, allowing rangers additional time to perform more professional duties." Although the district never widely implemented the volunteer host program, it helped Leech Lake cope with a lack of personnel in the late 1980s.²⁷

Funding and personnel issues were always problems for the St. Paul District and the Corps in general. Not only did recreation recommendations made by study groups such as GREAT I receive little money, but existing recreation areas, dependent on congressional appropriations, sometimes faced paltry funding as well. In 1989, for example, President Ronald Reagan's fiscal year 1990 budget slashed the St. Paul District's recreation operations and maintenance budget by nearly twenty-five percent. This meant most sites had to cut back on activities.²⁸ The St. Paul District was not alone; in 1989 the Bush Administration called for the closing of 654 Corps' recreation areas nationwide. Fortunately for the Corps' recreational employees and local economies depending on these sites, Congress rejected the plan. Because of these budget constraints, the Corps examined new ways to fund recreation projects in the early 1990s. As Frank Star said, funding was "always an issue" for recreation, in part because of its "non-essentiality." Whereas transportation networks needed highway repairs, the

maintenance of campgrounds was less important. This made recreation an “easy target” for budget cuts.²⁹

User Fees

One of the ways the Corps attempted to bolster its funding was by charging user fees at its facilities. Congress first authorized the Corps to impose recreation fees in the 1965 Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. This law stated that federal agencies administering outdoor recreation sites could levy recreation use charges, mandating that such costs be “fair and equitable.” Other than campground fees, however, the Corps did not implement any charges at that time. With funding cuts for recreation in the 1990s, however, the agency decided user fees could rectify the situation. Accordingly, Congress included in the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act a provision allowing the Corps to implement day-use charges at appropriate areas.³⁰

Subsequent Corps’ regulations claimed that the fees had five major purposes: to recover some of the operation and maintenance costs of facilities, to reduce overcrowding, to provide quality recreational experiences which would support the national economy, to control vandalism and disruptive behavior and to foster a responsible user ethic among its guests. The resulting revenue went into a special Corps’ account in the U.S. Treasury and was ultimately returned as Special Recreation Use Funds to those projects producing the revenue.³¹ Although fees meant increased costs for the consumer, the public generally accepted the charges, in part because it knew the Corps used the revenue to offset operation and maintenance costs. As Star related, “If you can show them that the money is coming back and you’re actually making use of it to improve facilities, then [the public is] more accepting of it.”³² In addition, the fees were not burdensome. At the beginning of 2003, the public could purchase annual passes allowing yearlong day-use of Corps facilities for \$30, while persons 62 years of age and older could buy a Golden Age Passport, which provided a fifty percent discount on all recreation fees, for \$10. Individual day-use charges ranged from \$1-3 per person, depending on whether or not the individual accessed a boat ramp or a swimming area.³³

National Recreation Reservation System

Another change the Corps implemented was the creation of the National Recreation Reservation System. In the late 1990s, the Corps joined with the Forest Service, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management to establish a national reservation system for federal campgrounds. According to the Corps, this would “enhance customer service for users of our public lands by providing, with a single phone call, the ability to make reservations for fee-based, recreation facilities.” The organizations contracted with ReserveAmerica to provide this service, thereby facilitating the camping experience for those willing to make and pay for advance reservations. Although the Corps characterized this program as a “win-win-win service for our customers,” it did lead to some problems early on, mainly with the service provided by

ReserveAmerica. Company representatives at times provided misinformation about the availability of campsites, while others placed non-disabled people on sites set aside for those with disabilities. The Corps also discovered the reservation system made it easier for individuals to skirt around policies such as the number of days a group could stay at a campsite. Frank Star expressed some frustration with the contractor, stating it was “not responsive at times to some of our complaints or problems,” but he still recognized the system was valuable at least for “reduc[ing] some of our workload.”³⁴

Public Outreach and Safety Programs

The Corps faced other problems at its recreation sites. Some trouble arose because of the proximity of these areas to urban regions. The Corps prided itself on providing recreational opportunities to cities, but this same feature created difficulties in the twenty-first century. Alcohol had long been a source of concern at Corps’ facilities and forced the agency to conduct periodic assessments of its prevalence at larger sites, but the appearance of methamphetamine labs at some Corps’ campgrounds was disturbing as well.³⁵ So, too, was the danger that some Corps’ rangers faced. Because rangers did not have any law enforcement authority, working only to implement rules and regulations, they could not carry or use weapons, meaning they sometimes had little means of protecting themselves against assaults. The need to provide for ranger safety was emphasized in the 1970s when escapees from the Oklahoma State Prison abducted two park rangers in Arkansas, critically injuring one and killing the other. Such incidents caused concern, and, in 1995, the government appointed a task force to investigate ranger safety. This group issued a report and policy letter in 1996 addressing concerns and providing recommendations. One of the results of this study was the implementation in 1999 of a pilot program in the Fort Worth District allowing rangers to carry pepper spray. Based on the success of this experiment, the Corps issued a circular in April 2002 allowing all of its park rangers to carry and use the spray for self-defense. St. Paul District rangers welcomed this authorization, especially after discovering that in the summer of 2002 a highly dangerous sex offender



Water safety: Frank Star, wearing his ranger uniform, introduces the Corps’ Seamoor the Sea Dragon to children in LaCrosse, Wis. Seamoor’s job is to teach water safety. (Photo by Shannon Bauer, courtesy St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

was located not many miles from one of its camping sites in Minnesota. As Star related, “It’s getting a little more scary out there for our employees.”³⁶

As visitation at Corps’ facilities expanded, littering problems increased as well. The St. Paul District, for example, had trouble with trash problems on the dredged material islands in the Mississippi River. Richard Otto, one of the district’s natural resources managers, explained there was little the district could do to ensure that visitors to these islands cleaned up their trash because “we don’t have any staff to patrol on the water.”³⁷ Instead, the district sponsored annual volunteer cleanups at the islands, but littering continued. At other sites manned by the Corps, rangers regularly patrolled campgrounds and water areas both for safety reasons and for trash control, but as one district engineer related, “with limited resources, we cannot assign 24-hour ranger patrols to each recreation area.”³⁸

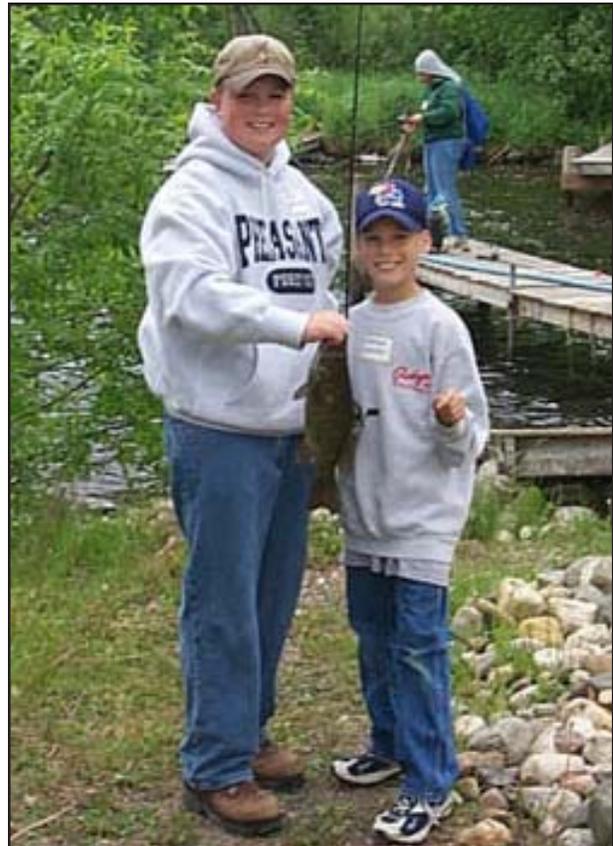
In large part because of its staff and its outreach programs, the St. Paul District was able to provide a satisfying experience at its recreation facilities. The district received numerous letters from pleased visitors applauding Corps’ personnel and various recreation programs. One couple expressed their approval with the district’s Gull Lake campground. “It is nice to know that there is always such a great place to go for camping,” they commented, “and it is especially nice to know that we see the same familiar, friendly and helpful staff.”³⁹ Neil R. Hunt, the president of a local Parent-Teacher Association, echoed these sentiments after a grade-school class toured the Cross Lake Recreation Area with two summer interns. “The kind of human level, service-oriented actions” exemplified by the employees, he observed, did “more to improve the attitude of taxpayers than any program or brochure coming out of Washington.”⁴⁰

Outreach programs provided an excellent means for the Corps to interact with the public, especially youth. School groups routinely visited recreation areas for tours, environmental workshops and fishing lessons, while youth also attended summer fishing clinics and contests. In 1978, for example, several recreation sites sponsored “Eco-Expoz,” where students participated in tours, games and exercises dealing with the environment. According to Richard Otto, the students enjoyed the different programs, convincing the district to continue them in future years.⁴¹ In a similar way, the St. Paul District participated in the Mississippi River Project in 1993, where different federal agencies coordinated a day of water quality awareness education for youth along the Mississippi from its headwaters to the Gulf of Mexico. As part of this program, students in the St. Paul District went to Lake Itasca, Harriet Island in St. Paul and Locks and Dams 3, 7 and 9 to help with water sampling and testing. At Lock and Dam 7, Otto and Corrine Hodapp, a park ranger at Blackhawk Park, discussed commercial navigation and water safety before the students conducted their experiments. As a district account of the event concluded, “By the end of the day, more than 300 future stewards of the Mississippi River had a better understanding of the river and its problems and promises.”⁴²

Fishing activities were also popular. In June 1991, the staff at Sandy Lake Dam sponsored a clinic for campground visitors and a local 4-H club. Forty youth attended the event and learned how to identify different species of fish and how to tie various knots, while also gaining knowledge in artificial lures, casting, the uses of live bait and the proper way to release fish. At the conclusion of the workshop, the 4-H group asked the Corps to hold such clinics every year.⁴³ Meanwhile, the Lake Ashtabula staff conducted an annual program entitled “Take A Kid Fishing Day,” held each June in conjunction with National Fishing Week. Rangers helped the children fish in the morning, and then talked to them about water safety and the “Mr. McGruff” safety program in the afternoon. Upon leaving, each child received a bag with safety literature, coloring books, a National Fishing Week Educational Activity Book and various prizes donated by Valley City, North Dakota, businesses.⁴⁴

Safety Programs

As the Lake Ashtabula clinic showed, safety was an important feature of the Corps’ outreach programs. Because so many recreational opportunities revolved around water, the Corps was concerned about the public’s safety. The locks and dams on the Mississippi River constituted some of the most dangerous places because of the strong currents and powerful undertows close to the structures. To combat this problem, the Corps established restricted areas both above and below the locks and dams, but accidents still occurred.⁴⁵ The safety hazards that water posed led lock operators and park rangers to gain training in rescue, CPR and first aid, and this preparation was sometimes very useful. In May 1989, for example, park rangers at Leech Lake conducted two separate rescue operations within three days of each other. The first involved a fisherman who had become lost on the lake, while the second saved two couples stranded in a boat filled with water. Park Rangers Clint Fishel, Corrine Hodapp and Jeff Steere all participated in the rescues, leading one Corps’ publication to express its gratitude for the “training and expertise of the park rangers at our recreation areas.”⁴⁶



Recreation: Young fishermen at Lake Ashtabula in North Dakota. (Photo by Jeff Kapaun, courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers.)

In addition to ensuring its employees had proper rescue skills, the Corps conducted safety programs at its recreation sites. Lake Ashtabula, for example, presented “Kids in Boats” workshops to teach children about personal flotation devices, hypothermia, rescue techniques and knot tying. Although students could attend the session at the lake, rangers also took the program to various locations in North Dakota in support of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and the North Dakota Safety Council. According to one ranger, the workshops were so popular the staff could not fill every request. Likewise, personnel at the Cross Lake Recreation Area provided water safety presentations to grade school classes at the end of every school year in preparation for summer water activities.⁴⁷ According to park ranger Kevin Berg, these programs helped “the public better understand the importance of thinking ‘safety’ while on the water.”⁴⁸

Other forms of outreach included Corps’ participation in outdoor recreation conferences and professional societies. The St. Paul District often had booths at recreation and sports shows, where it explained its recreation operations. Frank Star claimed these shows enabled the Corps to “tell our story” to people unaware of “how big the Corps was and what it did.” Several district employees, some in leadership positions, were also active in professional societies, including the National Association of Interpreters, the National Recreation and Parks Association and the National Society for Park Resources. All of these efforts resulted in increased public exposure of the Corps’ recreation mission.⁴⁹

Assisting in Natural Resources Management

Recreation employees also helped the Corps manage its natural resources. Part of this mission consisted of ensuring that recreation use on reservoirs and rivers did not harm the surrounding environment. One way the St. Paul District accomplished this was through environmental studies. As part of the Upper Mississippi River-Illinois Waterway System Navigation Study in the 1990s, for example, the district undertook an examination of the effects of recreational boating traffic on the Upper Mississippi River for the project’s EIS. The study related that recreational vessels caused “wake waves, propeller turbulence, noise in air and under water, release of petroleum and combustion products into air and water, and consumption of petroleum fuels.” In addition, they contributed to “shoreline erosion, sediment resuspension, and land use changes for marina facilities and boat landings.” Finally, although boating was an enjoyable activity, the plan stated, it produced “conflicts for lockage with commercial vessels, boating accidents, use of nonrenewable resources for leisure, and disturbance of other recreational users.” The study addressed how an expansion of navigation on the Mississippi River would affect these conditions but offered few solutions to the problems.⁵⁰

This was not the first time the district examined the difficulties of recreational boating on the Mississippi. In 1977, the Corps held public workshops on locking delays faced by recreational boaters on the Mississippi River. Because commercial barges had priority at the locks, recreational vessels sometimes had to wait as long as two-and-a-half hours for the availability of a lock. The

Corps commissioned a study on the issue, and this report contained seven alternatives for relieving the congestion, including using signs to inform boaters of the length of the wait, providing special tie-up areas for recreational boaters, implementing designated lock times for recreational vessels and constructing separate recreation locks.⁵¹ In 1978, the Corps examined the feasibility of these alternatives, and the district eventually decided that the best ways to alleviate the congestion were to use signs and to establish better waiting areas. Unfortunately, these methods did not resolve the issue. In 2002, Frank Star still considered lock delays “a problem” for recreational boaters.⁵²

Additional studies of the environmental effects of recreation on waterways also occurred. The Long Term Resource Monitoring Program of the Corps’ Environmental Management Program, conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, studied the characteristics of waves from recreational watercraft in 1992 in order to determine their effects on the environment. The report recognized that waves from recreational vessels could exacerbate bank erosion and “cause resuspension of fine sediments and increased turbidity, which can then be carried to the side channels and backwater areas and may impair riverine ecosystems.”⁵³ Meanwhile, in 1996 the River Resources Forum Recreation Work Group, an interagency organization chaired by Richard Otto, studied water-based recreational activities in Pools 7 and 8 of the Mississippi River in order to gather information useful “in determining future recreational uses of the river.” The group discovered that the most popular activities on the river were boat fishing and recreational boating and that personal watercraft, such as jet skis, were becoming more prevalent. Such conditions led “a large number of boaters” to “avoid certain parts of the river because there are ‘too many other boats’ or ‘too many [boat] wakes.’”⁵⁴ However, as with the Upper Mississippi Navigation Study, these reports did not offer many solutions.

But as a Minnesota DNR brochure explained, there were measures that could be taken. It was the boater’s responsibility to reduce his or her speed and wake size in order to mitigate shoreline erosion and other problems, the brochure claimed, but the Corps could implement mandatory speed and wake restrictions. “If all boaters become aware of the wakes their boats create and take action to reduce them when necessary,” the brochure concluded, “the shoreline erosion can be reduced and conditions should improve.”⁵⁵ The St. Paul District did not necessarily disagree. Richard Otto, for example, believed if the Corps did a better job of getting information to boaters, environmental effects could be lessened.⁵⁶

In the meantime, district officials continued to serve on natural resource studies. In the first years of the twenty-first century, Frank Star participated in an examination of a system-wide operating plan for the headwaters of the Upper Mississippi. Called the Reservoir Operating Plan Evaluation Study, or ROPE study, it was conducted in partnership with the Forest Service, attempted, in the words of the St. Paul District, “to evaluate alternative plans and to recommend a new operating plan for the Mississippi Headwaters Reservoirs system with consideration given to tribal trust, flood control, environmental concerns, water quality, water supply, recreation, naviga-

tion, hydropower and more.”⁵⁷ In essence, Star explained, the ROPE study would enable the Corps to operate the headwaters “more as a system.” Some of the alternatives the study examined were allowing more natural flow releases from the lakes in the spring and changing the levels of some of the lakes. It remained to be seen how extensively the study would change the Corps’ recreational practices at the headwaters, but the coordination of different purposes would at least provide better communication between agencies and groups responsible for the headwaters.⁵⁸

Mississippi River Boathouses

One of the major controversies involving recreation and natural resources in the St. Paul District occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, but its beginnings stretched back into the 1920s. In 1924, Congress established the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge along a stretch of the river running from Wabasha, Minnesota, to Quincy, Illinois, and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Fish and Wildlife Service. In order to preserve habitat, the Fish and Wildlife Service purchased land along the Upper Mississippi. When Congress authorized the nine-foot channel navigation project in 1930, the Corps began buying land as well. This resulted in a checkerboard pattern of land ownership along the Upper Mississippi, in which the Corps owned some land and the Fish and Wildlife Service held other tracts. As people purchased property along the Mississippi River, the shoreline remained under the control of the two agencies. Against the wishes of the Fish and Wildlife Service, however, the Corps allowed individuals to place boathouses and docks on shorelines and did nothing to regulate this until 1960, even though some people moved amenities into the structures in order to have a place to stay on the weekends.⁵⁹

In 1960, the Corps, concerned that these property owners were using public land for private purposes, developed Special Use Licenses for anyone wishing to place a structure on the shoreline, and these licenses specifically prohibited human habitation in the units. The Corps revised the license in 1973 to state that specific items, such as beds, stoves and heaters, were not allowed. Four years later, the St. Paul District, led by District Engineer Colonel Forrest T. Gay, strictly implemented these provisions and issued both public statements and private letters stating the Corps would remove units out of compliance. It was unclear why Gay decided to take a stand at this time, but it is likely that he was partly motivated by pressure from the Fish and Wildlife Service, which considered the boathouses to be incompatible with the river’s wildlife refuge designation.⁶⁰

Whatever Gay’s reasoning, a public outcry arose against enforcement. Minnesota State Representative Tom Stoa from Winona prepared a state resolution opposing the Corps’ licenses, arguing that “the vast majority of boathouses are neither a hazard to navigation nor detrimental to the river environment.” Stoa suggested the Corps target industrial pollutants, such as the Metro Waste Commission, “rather than harass the little guy who likes to spend the weekend at his boathouse.”⁶¹ At the same time, the city of Brownsville, Minnesota, the site of numerous boathouses, supported the property owners; the city council declared that they saw “no harm with an



Boathouse: An individual fishing from a boathouse on the Mississippi River. (Photo courtesy of Richard Otto, St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

overnight or weekend stay, to be able to relax, do a little fishing or boating, providing [property owners] keep their area respectable and refrain from polluting.” Finally, citizens formed CARP (Concerned About River People), an organization which championed an owner’s right to stay in his or her boathouse on occasional weekends.⁶²

The conflict continued into the 1980s, when the St. Paul District announced it would begin on-site inspections of structures near Brownsville that it suspected were out of compliance with the regulations. On September 30, 1980, Ted Loukota and Joe Murphy of the district’s real estate section conducted the inspections. One newspaper reported that “there was no apparent animosity between the inspection team” and the boathouse owners, but citizens were still displeased. La Crosse County Supervisor William Ipsen wondered whether the crackdown would “push our kids back on the streets” because they would not want to go to the river “and sit in a bare room.” Loukota and Murphy expressed sympathy but argued that “if we allow the boathouses to be improved so they can be lived in we are granting exclusive rights to a few.”⁶³

After these inspections, the issue remained dormant until 1982 when the Corps and the Fish and Wildlife Service began preparing a Land Use Allocation Plan for the Upper Mississippi. In a

discussion of how to handle private use of the shoreline, the Fish and Wildlife Service declared that the boathouses, whether livable or not, were incompatible with the river's designation as a wildlife refuge. The Fish and Wildlife Service claimed that lands purchased with tax dollars should be public land – they should not be leased out for private exclusive use. In a spirit of cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Corps agreed as part of the Land Use Allocation Plan to refuse to issue any new licenses for boathouses on the river and to phase out all existing boathouses and docks by grandfathering them only for the life of the current owner. Once that owner died, the Corps would demolish the structure.⁶⁴

The Land Use Allocation Plan and the Corps held public meetings in towns along the river throughout 1982 to announce this plan. But, in the words of Richard Otto, who operated as the district's spokesman on the issue, "We got crucified pretty badly." Hundreds of people attended the meetings and were almost universally opposed to the plan. "They made a very strong point that they wanted their ... privileges to continue," Otto related.⁶⁵ In order to bolster their case against the Corps, CARP and other concerned citizens turned to the National Inholders Association, an organization whose mission was to fight bureaucracy on behalf of private property interests. The National Inholders Association pledged \$35,000 annually to battle the Corps.⁶⁶

Despite the National Inholders Association's efforts, the Land Use Allocation Plan, as published, called for the elimination of the boathouses, stating that the grandfathering would occur in 1989. A Corps' newsletter published that same year unequivocally stated the Corps' reasons for instigating the plan: "Special private use of Federal land is becoming increasingly less appropriate and is not in the best public interest ... All available Federal land along the river will be needed to help meet future public use demands." Although it seemed that boathouse owners had little recourse after this policy was issued, the National Inholders Association assured them there were several avenues still open. Even Otto admitted that "though the plan is in the very final stage, there is a chance that the public could have it changed through legislation." This was the exact approach that the National Inholders Association took.⁶⁷

For the next few years, the National Inholders Association lobbied Congress to allow the boathouses to remain; and in 1986, its dedication paid off. In the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, Congress mandated that no existing structure could be phased out on Corps' land. Because of this legislation, the Corps had to change its plan to say it would grandfather the structure instead of the owner, meaning that transfers of ownership could occur. As Otto explained, the boathouses thus "could be perpetuated way on into the future," although the Corps still refused to grant permits for new units. This meant, essentially, that the number of structures was frozen. "If there's 92 structures," Otto said, "there will never be 93." This new plan went into effect in 1988 and forced the Corps to use one full-time person to inspect the structures every year to ensure they were up to code. According to Otto, "habitation [was] still prohibited; it [was] just very

difficult to enforce.”⁶⁸ The presence of the Mississippi boathouses, then, represents a good example of the conflict that arose between private property and the Corps’ mission to manage its waterways for the benefit of the general public. It also showed that at least in some instances, public opinion could change Corps’ policy.

Conclusion

Whether the St. Paul District was developing recreation opportunities at new projects, maintaining existing facilities, providing outreach programs or managing natural resources, its recreation staff interacted to a great extent with the public. Although at times the district, and the Corps in general, was reluctant to embrace its recreational mission fully, whether because of interagency conflicts, environmental concerns or the preeminence of other functions over recreation, the St. Paul District offered numerous services to the public. Indeed, recreation provided good exposure for the Corps, established good public relations and offered services many people appreciated. Because of this service function, recreation officials sometimes considered themselves to be public servants rather than just Corps’ employees. “I often tell people I don’t work for the Corps in the same sense that you work for General Motors,” Frank Star related. “I work for the public.”⁶⁹ With this commitment, the St. Paul District’s recreation program effectively brought information about the Corps and its mission to the people, enhancing the Corps’ visibility in the process.

Chapter Seven Endnotes

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