

# Sister Rivers Project Unites Watersheds in North Dakota, Eastern Europe

By Angela Magstadt

There are many stories in existence about the uncanny similarities of twins separated at birth. There are true accounts of brothers who married women with the same name and unknowingly gave their sons the same first and middle names. There is also a true story about sisters who, among other things, both pursued careers in journalism and, as children, sucked not their thumbs, but index and middle fingers. For these siblings, distance didn't play a part in their extensive similarities – it was nature that made them the same.

The same is true for the Dniester (pronounced neester) River in Eastern Europe and the Red River in North Dakota. These rivers are separated by some 5,100 miles, but thanks to the efforts of two nonprofit groups, River Keepers in Fargo, a group formed to protect and preserve the integrity and natural environment of the Red River of the North, and Eco-Tiras, a group that unites 38 Moldovian and Ukrainian environmental nonprofits, these two rivers are now formally known as "Sister Rivers."

The Sister Rivers project began two years ago when River Keepers Executive Director Bob Backman and Chuck Fritz, director of the International Water Institute, a flood research

**The Dniester River in eastern Europe (pictured) has much in common with the Red River of the North.**

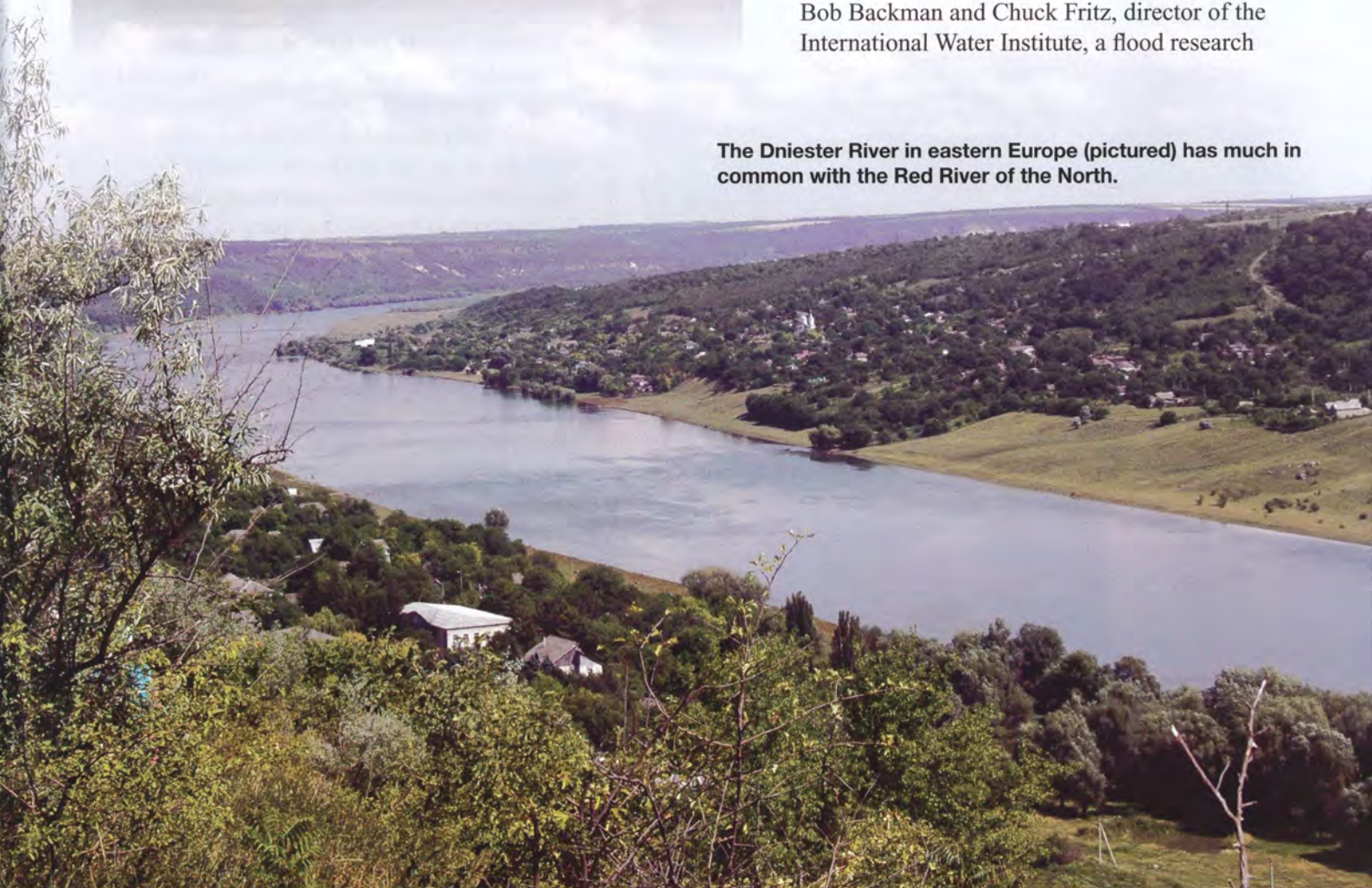




Photo courtesy of the River Keepers

Those involved in the Sister Rivers Project are true believers in the concept that all the world's water is connected. Participants show here that they are working hand-in-hand across the ocean at the Science Museum of Minnesota.



Photo courtesy of the River Keepers

Project partners tour the River Keepers' Living Lab, which is an urban riparian demonstration site.



Photo courtesy of the Chahinkapa Zoo

Partners participate in a mixing of the waters ceremony.

and watershed education organization for the Red River Basin, were invited to speak at an international river basin management conference in Moldova in the former Soviet Union. During this visit, these groups determined there was a lot they could learn from each other because of the two rivers' many similarities, including:

- Both are international, transboundary rivers. The Red River of the North flows through North Dakota and Minnesota and into Canada. The Dniester flows through the countries of Ukraine and Moldova.
- They share a similar climate.
- Similar management issues, such as flooding resulting in property damage and urban runoff, affect both basins.
- Like the Red River Valley, the Dniester Basin has fertile clay soils and produces similar crops, including wheat, corn, barley, vegetables, sugar beets, and sunflowers.
- Both rivers serve as the primary source of drinking water for their regional populations.
- The Dniester and Red River of the North both provide recreation for the people who live in the area.
- People in both river basins have similar views and beliefs about the importance of keeping their river healthy.

"The basis for this project is that, because these two rivers are so similar, those of us living in their basins can learn from each other," Backman says. He says one thing in particular that the project has taught him is the extreme appreciation the Moldovian people have for the Dniester River. "They don't take water for granted like many Americans do. It seems that we spend all our time trying to control our rivers – stop them from flooding, keep them clean, which are good things, but maybe we should take a lesson from our friends near the Dniester.

They experience problems with their river, too, and they have a lot less money to deal with these issues, but they still take time to celebrate and revere their rivers." One example of this was that, during a visit to America, they visited the headwaters of the Red and Mississippi rivers. The Moldovian people knelt down, cupped their hands and held the water, then let it slowly run back into the river. "It was almost a spiritual experience for them – to be in the place where these mighty river systems begin. So we did the same when we visited the headwaters of the Dniester," Backman says.

The Moldovians have learned a lot from those from the Red River as well, including how the American government helps restore wetlands and retrofits dams. They have also learned how to use hands-on activities to teach watershed education to youth and to include hands-on exhibits in their museums.

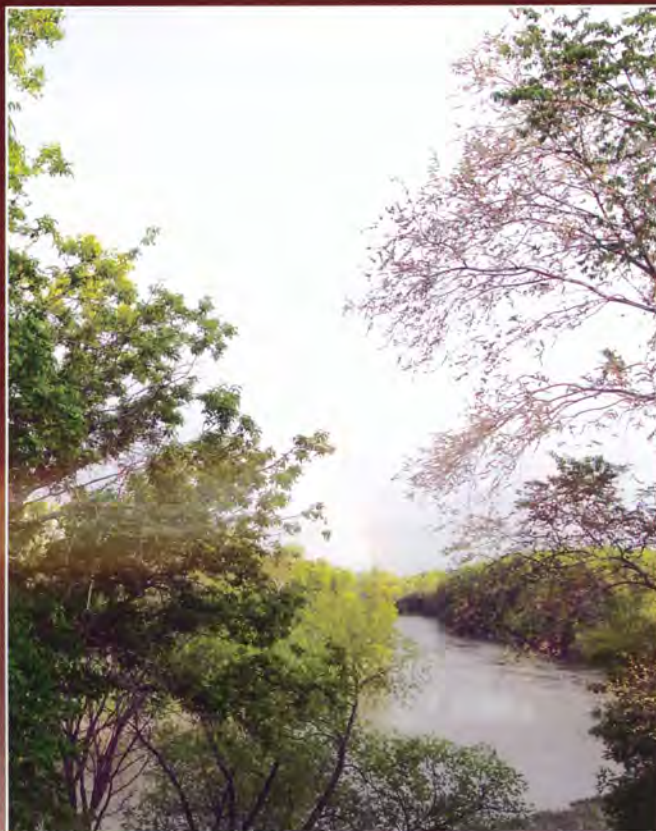
The Sister Rivers project is not just a touchy-feely project created to symbolize brotherhood between these countries – there are several well thought-out goals and activities that are being carried out as part of the project, including:

- Visiting each river basin to get a firsthand look at the water issues affecting them
- Raising awareness of international rivers and their role in the environment
- Stimulating understanding of diverse cultures, history, and immigration
- Providing tools for increased and sustainable community involvement
- Increasing volunteerism and community knowledge of natural resources
- Creating tools and experiences for continuing teamwork and communication between students, museum staffs, nonprofit organizations, and community members
- Increasing the use of volunteers at museums in both countries
- Developing exhibits to educate the public about water issues
- Developing a youth water festival in Moldova. Water festivals are proven educational, hands-on events designed to teach youth about water, watersheds, and related environmental issues. Water festivals are already being held for this purpose in Wahpeton and in Fargo in the Red River Basin.

“Those involved in the project are true believers in the concept that all the water in the world is connected, and therefore issues affecting one water body affect them all. That’s why this project is so important,” Backman says. He says this concept really hit home when, the day the U.S. delegation left for Moldova, he received the news that the invasive zebra mussel, a species native to Asia, had made its way to the Red River in North Dakota. “We have to start concerning ourselves with the issues affecting watersheds in areas other than our own. What happens in one watershed will eventually affect us. Look at the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Even if it’s just the price of shrimp, we will be affected by what happens in other watersheds in some way. Public understanding of water issues is essential to the wellbeing of all the water in the world.”

Just like twins separated at birth have many similarities, they also have differences that can only be attributed to the environment in which they were raised. The same is

the case for the Red and Dniester rivers. They are both managed and viewed differently by the two different cultures that live in their basins. “There is so much we can learn from each other – whether it is the scientific methods we use to manage the rivers or the cultural way we celebrate them,” Backman says. “This program will definitely accomplish its goal – to recognize the importance of water resources in the world. Both river basins will benefit greatly from this program.”



## Funding for the Sister Rivers Project

River Keepers worked with its funding partners to develop a proposal for the American Association of Museums, which provided a large grant to fund the project. Partners include:

- River Keepers, Fargo**
- International Water Institute, Fargo**
- Roger Ehnstrom Nature Center, Wahpeton**
- Eco-Tiras, Chisnau, Moldova**
- Bendery Museum, Bendery, Transdnier**