



River Keepers Dispels Myths, Promote Usage of Red River

By Angela Magstadt

Once something gets a bad reputation, it can take a lot to change the public's views about it. For many years, the Red River of the North had such a reputation. There were drownings at the low head dams. And the color of the river, which is due to the clay soils of the valley, made it look polluted even though it wasn't. Before modern sewage treatment and sanitary landfills, the Red was used as a dump making it unsightly and not safe. As recently as 1985, a local fire department warned people to stay away from the river because it was dangerous, and in the 1940s, the Jaycees put up signs along the river that said, "Taking chances doesn't pay, the river is dangerous night and day."

In 1990, River Keepers, a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating sustainable use of the Red River of the North in the Fargo-Moorhead area, was formed to promote a new attitude about the river. The organization sets out to help people rediscover the river's heritage, and teach them to appreciate it as they did in the past, before it was looked upon as a liability to be avoided.

"River Keepers began after a study showed that the Red River was misused and misunderstood," says Bob Backman, the group's executive director. A team of architects called the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) conducted an intensive review and analysis of the portion of the river that flows through Fargo and Moorhead. R/UDAT knew that in order to change the community's perception of the river, there needed to be an organization to act as a "river keeper." This organization could educate people about maintaining the ecological health of the river, come up with ideas for expanding its recreational use, and make plans to build a rediscovered riverfront area in downtown Fargo and Moorhead.

Now, 15 years later, River Keepers is still working on projects that improve the health of the river and allow people to enjoy all it has

to offer. Some of River Keepers' current activities include:

- **Advocating awareness, appreciation, and stewardship of the Red River.** Its storm drain awareness program provides decals for curbs near storm drains and educates volunteers about non-point source pollution. One of the program's many success stories involves a former student volunteer who later worked for a fueling station in the Fargo-Moorhead area. The student witnessed the dumping of chemicals down the drain, and because he knew from his experiences with the storm drain awareness program that this was illegal and harmful to the river, he was able to report the activity, and thus, improve the health of the river.
- **Advocating riverfront development projects.** River Keepers supports sustainable development along the riverfront. Pedestrian and vehicular bridges "connected" to the river, greenways, riverfront park and



The Lil' Fishermen's Derby & Clinic is held each spring at the Midtown Dam with over 200 youth participants.

trail development, study tours of other riverfront communities, and the facilitation of riverfront master plans will help bring potential partners together to make this goal a reality.

- **Encouraging and promoting river usage.** The use of nature trails along the river is one way it encourages river usage. River Keepers facilitated the construction of a nature trail in Moorhead's MB Johnson Park using student volunteers. Interpretive trails are also being developed in the Lions Conservancy Park and the Living Lab in Fargo.
- **Helping to develop economic opportunities in the Red River corridor.** River Keepers has facilitated training for cat fishing guides. It advocates for cultural and eco tourism opportunities. As attitudes about the river change, more housing and retail is being constructed adjacent to the Red.
- **Encouraging development of recreation amenities in the river corridor.** Canoeing and boating are just a few of the recreational activities that can be enjoyed on the Red River. River Keepers operates a canoe rental service and under contract to the State of Minnesota developed the first recreational map of the Red.
- **Educating residents on the river's environment.** Education is a component of all River Keepers' activities. One of its biggest events is the Red River Water Festival, held every September along the river. One of the largest in the country, more than 1,500 third and fourth graders participate in full or half-day hands-on activities where they learn about the river, watersheds, and how their activities impact these resources. This program is funded in part by Project WET (Water Education for Teachers). In addition, River Keepers has an active speakers bureau, and sponsors or co-sponsors events such as fishing clinics, and nature walks, which serve as methods to educate.
- **Addressing safety concerns regarding the river corridor.** One of River Keepers' first projects was to advocate retrofitting low head dams on the Red. Often referred to as "death traps," because the hydraulic undertow created by these dams contributed to as many as 20 local drownings. In addition, the dams impeded fish migration. The three dams in the city limits have



Concordia Limnology students assist with water quality monitoring.



Water Festival student participants use their senses and view the river in their "backyard."



Water festival participants make their own water treatment plant to see how drinking water is cleaned.

now been retrofitted, the most recent was completed in 2005. Two more dams, located south of the city are currently being studied for removal or retrofitting. Retrofitted with a 5 percent rock slope way, the dams are now safer for people and are more conducive to fish migration.

- **Assisting in providing cultural opportunities at the river's edge.** River Keepers has sponsored riverfront music festivals and participates with others on a weekly summer festival and a winter "polar" party.
- **Managing and encouraging riverfront restoration projects.** Sedimentation is a major problem in the Red. Working with many volunteers, and local, regional and national agencies, River Keepers is developing a "Living Lab" along the river in south Fargo. When completed it will showcase a variety of riparian forest restoration methods and materials. Signage, printed material and web based information help to interpret the ways rivers operate and methods that can be used to restore their shores, helping to reduce slumping, erosion and the resulting sedimentation.
- **Operating a tour boat service.** The S.S. Ruby, a U.S. Coast Guard licensed and inspected tour boat is operated by River Keepers. It is the only tour boat on the Red in the U.S. Each year, some 4,000 people are educated about the history, geography, and wildlife of the Red River during these 45-minute boat tours.



The S.S. Ruby offers tours of the Red River Memorial Day thru Labor Day.

These and all other River Keepers activities are supported by donations; memberships; grants government agencies, especially the Buffalo-Red Watershed District of Minnesota and Southeast Cass Water Resource District in North Dakota; and by money earned by doing contract work for other agencies.

Backman says the success of River Keepers is measured by the Fargo-Moorhead community's improving attitude toward the Red River. "Because of our efforts, more people understand and are enjoying the river, and many of the myths about the river are being dispelled," he says.

"Every day, we get questions from the public, which shows the concern there is about the river. Despite the way it looks, the Red River is one of the cleaner rivers in North America. It is a safe river and we want the area's residents to know that and use it as the precious resource it is."

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