

RiverFirst Ecological Significance

Transforming the Mississippi Riverfront From Ditch to Destination

- The 2,500-mile Mississippi River corridor is one of four migratory flyways in North America, as well as a globally singular ecosystem that drains a watershed stretching from the Rocky Mountains to the Appalachians and encompassing all or part of 32 states.
- The Mississippi River is an iconic American landscape. In 1988, Congress established the 72-mile, 54,000-acre Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, setting the Upper Mississippi River on par with the Grand Canyon and Everglades.¹
- Iconic Great Plains natural communities exist(ed) along the Upper Mississippi Riverfront, including Floodplain Forest, Xeric Prairie, Wet Prairie, and Mesic Prairie.
- Ninety-seven (97) Species of Greatest Conservation Need are known or predicted to occur within the RiverFirst area.²
- As one of the world's hardest-working rivers for more than a century, the Mississippi has been heavily impacted by commercial use and urban development: Dam installation, island removal, shoreline modification, sewage and storm water runoff changed the nature of the Upper Mississippi river corridor and reduced or eliminated habitat for fish, birds and other native species.
- A reliable 1892 map illustrates that more than 20 islands, along with wetlands and floodplains, lined the five-mile Minneapolis Upper Riverfront corridor; some wetlands and channels were filled-in as recently as the 1960s.
- Today, there are four small and sparsely vegetated islands dotting the same five miles; more than 25 islands exist from the City's northern limits north to the Coon Rapids Dam.
- Interference with native habitats contributes to toxic water conditions and vulnerability to invasive species, including Asian Carp. The Minneapolis Upper Riverfront has been found to be impaired with excess bacteria, and the river is being monitored for Triclosan, PFOS, EDCs, PCBs, and many other "contaminants of concern."³
- Multiple state and Federal agencies and non-profits are collaborating on habitat restoration. In 2012, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had 89 habitat projects underway, completed or planned on the Upper Mississippi.⁴
- Because of its urban setting and depauperation (lack of plants/animals), the Minneapolis Upper Riverfront hasn't been a priority for habitat restoration.
- A largely armored shoreline and paucity of island habitat distinguish these five miles as a "missing link" in the Mississippi River ecosystem; it has been described as a "desert" and a "ditch."



RiverFirst Vision: A 21st Century Definition of Working River

RiverFirst transforms the "ditch" by restoring island and shoreline habitats on both banks with multifunctional, ecologically sustainable parks. Habitat restoration is critical all along the Mississippi Upper River:

- **Cleans the water** – reducing the concentration of E. coli and other contaminants
- **Protects against invasive species** – healthy native communities resist colonization
- **Creates economic and recreation opportunities** – National and Regional Park visits will increase

1 National Park Service
2 Association of State Wildlife Agencies
3 State of the River
4 Rock Island District – USACE