



Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

River Facts

The Mississippi is much more than a ribbon of water; it is a watershed that drains all or parts of 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces. It is the dominant watershed in North America, and drains 41% of the continental United States; it is the third largest watershed in the world.

The name "Mississippi" comes from the Anishinabe people (Ojibwe Indians.) They called the river "Messipi" or "Mee-zee-see-bee," which means "Big River" or "Father of Waters." Dakota Indians called the river "Hahawakpa," meaning "River of the Falls" in reference to the falls we now call the Falls of St. Anthony.

The Mississippi River is the third longest river system in the world when including the Missouri River tributary. The Mississippi itself stretches approximately 2350 miles from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico. The actual length of the river may vary from year to year; its length is now shorter than it was a century ago due to the cutting off of meanders, engineering and other factors.

Over geological time the river has grown by the depositing of sediment at its mouth it even helped to create the Gulf States! Today approximately 230 million tons of sediment are carried annually to the Gulf by the river.

The Upper Mississippi River carved its path with the meltwater of receding glaciers from the last Ice Age more than 10,000 years ago. In geological terms, the Upper Mississippi from its headwaters to the Twin Cities is a very young river.

The glacial River Warren Falls, thought by some geologists to be the largest waterfall ever seen in North America, occurred in what is now downtown St. Paul 11,700 years ago. At that time the falls may have been 200 feet high and over a half-mile wide. It was fed by a torrent of meltwater from Glacial Lake Agassiz coursing its way down what is now known as the Minnesota River valley. The falls gradually receded upstream as the layer of soft sandstone underlying the limestone caprock was eroded away. By 10,000 years ago the falls had passed the point where the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers now join, and the falls we know as St. Anthony Falls was carving a gorge on its way to its present location. St. Anthony Falls is the only waterfall on the entire length of the Mississippi, and the gorge below it that divides Minneapolis and St. Paul is the river's only true gorge.

The place where the Minnesota River meets the Mississippi River was called "Makoce Cokaya Kin" by the Mdewakanton Dakota Indians, meaning "Center of the Earth." The river confluence was also referred to as "M'dota," a Dakota word used to name the present-day city of Mendota. The area is sacred to the Dakota.

On Sept 21, 1805, Lt. Zebulon Pike first set foot on the island that bears his name at the mouth of the Minnesota River. (Dakota Indians called the island Wita-Tanka meaning "Big Island.") Pike's objective was to secure permission for the construction of a fort (Fort Snelling) on the bluff overlooking the rivers, which he did two days later in a historic treaty. At that time the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul did not exist, though in the early 1800's the Dakota Indian village of Kaposia (led by Little Crow) was located near what is now Mounds Park in St. Paul, and other Dakota villages were located along the Minnesota River valley.

241 species of fish are at home in the Mississippi River watershed; 292 bird species use the Mississippi Flyway. Other wildlife of the river, bottomlands and bluffs of the Mississippi watershed includes 57 species of mammals, 45 species of reptiles and amphibians, 40 different species of mussels, and countless invertebrates.

The river and its major tributaries supply drinking water for more than 18 million people. The Mississippi River is both sewer and drinking water source!

To enable towboats and barges to travel upstream from St. Louis, 29 locks and dams have been built between there and Minneapolis.

From 1880 to 1930, Minneapolis was the milling capitol of the world because of the enormous power of the river's only natural waterfall, St. Anthony Falls. The falls were first used to power sawmills, and later flour mills.

The Mississippi River is the reason the Twin Cities exist. Minneapolis grew around St. Anthony Falls as a source of waterpower, while St. Paul was at the upper end of the commercially navigable river in the 1800's, and thus served as major link in the transportation of people and products.

The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and its immediate surroundings in the Twin Cities metropolitan area contain 114 designated hazardous waste sites.

At the mouth of the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico there is an area of 5,000-8,000 square mile called the "dead zone." The Dead Zone is severely depleted of oxygen due to an overabundance of nutrients (from fertilizers, decaying plant matter, etc.) and contaminants carried into the Gulf from the Mississippi. Because the everyday practices of people, agriculture and industry are responsible for the Dead Zone, it is changes in our everyday practices that can lead to restoration of the Dead Zone.

A leading cause of Mississippi River pollution is runoff from urban streets and rural farmland. Such runoff carries pollutants directly to the river without treatment.