

Executive Director, Audubon Minnesota

Testimony to the

Subcommittee on National Parks

Mississippi River Trail Study Act, H.R. 1796

April 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Audubon Minnesota, a state office of the National Audubon Society and 10,300 members among our 14 chapters in the State of Minnesota, thank you for the opportunity to present our views regarding the Mississippi River Trail Study Act.

The purpose of our testimony is to support authorization of the Mississippi River Trail Study Act, which we view as a significant opportunity for hundreds of communities along the river. The mission of Audubon Minnesota and the National Audubon Society is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds and other wildlife for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. In our office we have an active program called the Upper Mississippi River Campaign which we started in 1997. That program strives to improve habitat for birds and other wildlife along the river, and educate our citizens about this outstanding, working river resource. The National Audubon Society is now embarking on an ambitious effort to expand its work along the river from its headwaters to the Gulf of Mexico, bringing together Audubon's 69 chapters, 4 state offices and several education centers and sanctuaries that are adjacent to the river. Towards that end, we have just signed a Memo of Understanding with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, agreeing to work together with them on specific projects regarding river education and restoration.

First I want to recognize Congresswoman Betty McCollum's vision and determination in championing this legislation for the Mississippi River. We are ever grateful to Rep. McCollum for her leadership on Mississippi River issues and so many other issues important to Saint Paul, Minnesota and the nation.

We can all agree that the Mississippi River corridor is one of the most outstanding resources our country enjoys. Therefore, we strongly support the effort to recognize the river as part of the National Trails system in this country. Because it's a river and not land-based route like the other national trails that have been esignated, we do not advocate at this time a specific type of trail designation. We believe this legislation properly recognizes that trail designations can take many forms, including perhaps, a water trail. We therefore support a study to be conducted by the National Park Service to examine all options and make their professional recommendation on what designation would be most appropriate for the Mississippi River and the benefits to be achieved.

Importantly, we do believe that such a designation would encourage greater cooperation among the many municipalities, 123 counties, 10 states, numerous federal initiatives and the private sector to work better together in seizing opportunities and communicating more effectively regarding the river. In this manner we will more fully realize the educational, recreational and economic benefits that the river can provide directly to the 11 million Americans living along the river, but also millions more who will come to the river to take advantage of its many amenities.

The original National Trails System Act created three categories of trails: national scenic, national recreation, and side-and-connecting. National scenic trails are long-distance (over 100 miles) trails which link superb resources in a continuous corridor for non-motorized recreation. In 1978, Congress added a fourth category – national historic trails. These trails do not have to be continuous, but have to satisfy three criteria: be nationally significant, have a documented route, and provide for significant outdoor recreation. Regardless of the type of trail that may be recommended through a study, these criteria are very relevant and helpful as we consider the worthiness of the Mississippi River for special designation. Let me examine how the proposed Mississippi River Trail would superbly qualify these criteria.

A Documented Route

One criteria for a National Historic Trail is a documented route. In some historic trails that the National Park Service is studying, considerable research is needed to determine the route of the trail. Largely erased by time and confounded by a lack of precise directions from journal entries, there can be controversy over where the path was trodden. Such is the case, for example of the Old Spanish Trail in the southwestern U.S.

Obviously this is not the case with the Mississippi River. We know precisely where the river and proposed trail would begin -- at its headwaters in Lake Itasca State Park in north-central Minnesota. We know where the river ends as it empties into the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana's Delta country. In between, we've mapped every twist and turn in its 2,350 miles that spans 10 states and drains 41 percent of the continental United States.

Nationally Significant

Of the national trails Congress has designated to date, or those that are being studied for designation, it is hard to imagine any that better meet The National Significance criteria than the proposed Mississippi River Trail. The Mississippi River is well known to every American and around the world because of its place in our nation's history, our folklore, our commerce and its natural bounty. From 12,000 years of Native American occupation evidenced by archeological sites, to early white explorers looking for the Northwest Passage, fur traders opening up this route of early commerce, the beginning of the Lewis and Clark expedition, to European settlers, steamboats, navigation projects, Mark Twain, shipping and fueling urban growth, it is hard to imagine any trail with a richer history that captures the historical span of our country's development.

Because of this rich history, there are nearly 4,500 properties in the corridor that are considered significant cultural landmarks, most of which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Cultural resource tourism along the Mississippi River is estimated to generate over \$20 billion per year.

It is also nationally significant, indeed, internationally significant, because of the rich habitat it provides. The river is home to 300 bird species, 260 fish species, 50 mammal species, and 45 amphibian and reptile species. In the Upper Mississippi River Basin alone, the river provides crucial habitat for 286 state-listed or candidate species and 36 federally-listed and candidate species of rare, threatened, or endangered plants and animals considered endemic to the basin. It is well-known as a vital migratory flyway for 60 percent of all bird species in North America (326 bird species). Indeed, in the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, Congress acknowledged and reaffirmed the importance of the river, declaring it "a nationally significant ecosystem."

Providing Significant Outdoor Recreation

Of the national trails Congress has designated to date, or those that are being studied for designation, it is hard to imagine any that better meet the criteria for provision on significant outdoor recreation better than the proposed Mississippi River Trail. Millions of people annually recreate on and along the Mississippi's waters. Here they take advantage of fishing, hiking, birdwatching, swimming, camping, canoeing, biking, wildlife photography, and many other outdoor recreation activities the River provides. In so doing, they produce significant economic benefits that will be enhanced with the creation of the river as a national trail. According to the 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 15.9 million people participated in eco-tourism in the 10 states along the Mississippi River, generating \$9 billion in economic output in one year.

Forty percent of all North American waterfowl travel along this river corridor and thus waterfowl hunting in the flyway is of great importance generating \$58 million per year. Sport fishing contributes over \$100 million annually.

Up and down the river there are 38 National Wildlife Refuges and hundreds of state and local parks and other conservation areas. The National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area Program has thus far identified 86 sites along the river of critical value to migrating and nesting birds.

Like the birds coming to the river, the recreationists follow. Recent data estimate that outdoor recreationists take about 33 million visits to the river corridor each year, creating and sustaining thousands of jobs. Audubon has also identified some of the best birding sites along the river and published a series of maps called "The Great River Birding Trail" since 2002. Public interest has been so great in this topic that we have distributed nearly 450,000 of these maps to date.

In summary, we believe the concept of the Mississippi River Trail easily meets the Congressional requirements for a national trail, and that given the river's importance and stature in our country, and tourism potential, such a designation is long over-due.

We greatly appreciate this opportunity to provide the Subcommittee with our views on the Mississippi River and potential national trail designation. Thank you.