



ALLISON HESFORD

MISSOURI RIVER



MIKE ANDERSON

MELTING POT

By Craig Bibrle



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The Missouri River is a treasured public resource in North Dakota, owned by all for use by all. Sometimes, uses conflict with each other. Part of the river group's initiative is to promote awareness and understanding among all user groups, so conflicts are minimized.



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New Effort Promotes Balance Among Multiple Users

At any one moment on a hot summer weekend afternoon, the Missouri River between Bismarck and Mandan might harbor families cruising lazily downstream in pontoons toward sandbar socializing spots, wakeboarders jumping wakes behind high-powered speed boats, personal watercraft slashing swiftly upstream, anglers watching over their lines from a sandy shoreline, young adults drifting with the current and absorbing the sun's energy atop inflatable tubes or rafts, kayakers working the shallows to avoid waves and wakes that might splash over their low-riding craft, and riverside homeowners watching all this seemingly frenzied leisure activity while relaxing on their waterfront lawn.

This stretch of Missouri River, five miles north and south of the Grant Marsh Bridge that funnels motor vehicles over the water on Interstate 94, is perhaps North Dakota's busiest summer recreation resource; a clean, cool waterway surrounded by more than 100,000 people who own more than 10,000 licensed boats, pontoons and PWCs. Responsibility for maintaining order amongst all these watercraft and people belongs to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's enforcement division, and falls primarily on the shoulders of two district game wardens, one on each side of the river, and each of whom has about 2,000 square miles of other territory to patrol as well.

For a long time, when fishing was the main recreation, that was enough. But over the past decade or more the amount of purely recreational boating traffic has increased significantly and more and more people were relaying concerns about safety and perceived conflicts. During a three-year period from 2004-2006, the number of boating-related citations issued on the river tripled from the average of 1999-2004.

Concerns about Missouri River traffic started boiling to the surface during that time, according to Bob Timian, enforcement division chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. "We held a public meeting (in summer 2007) so people could air their concerns and suggest solutions," Timian said. "These concerns were from a variety of user groups."

One of the main things people wanted, Timian said, was a greater enforcement presence on the river. "We have always supplemented our local warden force with officers from other parts of the state," Timian added, "but we had reached the limit of what we could do without seriously compromising enforcement services in those other areas."

That all changed last summer, when Game and Fish, the Burleigh and Morton county sheriffs' departments and Bismarck and Mandan police departments set up a cooperative Missouri River Patrol Task Force.

While local county and city officers are key responders to emergencies on the river, their regular patrols have not typically involved taking a boat out on the river. The task force didn't really change that, but it did provide, with the help of a legislative grant provided through the State Water Commission,

a pool of funding to support enough local officers willing to "volunteer" for river patrol during their off-duty time. While the officers receive overtime pay for their efforts, no one is required to participate.

Riverboat patrols need at least two officers per boat, Timian said, so the program provides another agency's officer to partner with a Game and Fish warden, instead of always having two wardens in a boat.

With four additional agencies involved, more than 30 different officers signed up to work patrol shifts on the river during the summer, a number of volunteers nearly equal to the entire Game and Fish Department's enforcement division.

Game and Fish set up the schedule and provided training. Local officers signed up for shifts if they wanted to help. The result, Timian said, was enough extra help to allow for at least one boat on the river every week day, "and we were able to significantly beef up our weekend patrols."

Internal review of the program was positive, and officers heard much favorable feedback from river users over the course of the summer. Game and Fish and the four local law enforcement agencies intend to continue it this summer. "It worked much better and with fewer problems than I anticipated," Timian noted, "but we really need to run the program longer than one year before we can start drawing any conclusions."

After this summer, the state legislature will need to renew the grant during the 2011 session for the program to continue.

The additional effort didn't eliminate concerns from river users, but the number of complaints did

The 2010 Missouri River campaign will build on a new initiative on litter awareness and prevention. The Keep North Dakota Clean organization, comprised of numerous government agencies and private organizations and individuals, got things going last summer with new signs placed at boat ramps and other access areas.



go down. "All the problems still exist," Timian said, "it's just that some of them exist at a lower level."

Much of that is due to visible or anticipated patrol presence as opposed to actual issuing of citations. "Success or failure of this program is not measured simply by the number of citations written," Timian stated. "More citations may be the result of this, but it's not the goal of the program. The program is meant to provide a higher enforcement presence ... to deter illegal activities rather than just citing individuals after the fact."

Game and Fish and the cooperating agencies want to work toward the goal of a reasonably safe

recreational environment. Timian said Game and Fish would like to accomplish that not by developing more regulations specifically for the river, but through promotion and awareness of existing regulations, in addition to increased patrols. With the help of the Missouri River users group "I think we've made a lot of good progress," Timian said, "but I'm sure there are people or groups who think we haven't done enough, fast enough ... we're just getting a good start on trying to address some of these problems."

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.



At the Missouri River SPLASH, game warden Courtney Sprenger helps a couple of youngsters find a good fit for a life jacket.

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Missouri River SPLASH a Big Hit with River Users

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, Cumulus Broadcasting and Gate City Banks are again sponsoring the Missouri River SPLASH – a recreation and boating safety event for everyone who enjoys the Missouri River.

The four-hour event is Thursday, May 20 in Mandan from 3-7 p.m. at Moritz Sport and Marine. Displays, hands-on activities, demonstrations, regulations, registrations and prizes are included.

Nancy Boldt, boat and water safety coordinator for the Game and Fish Department, said the event is free,

and people of all ages are invited to attend. "This has been a very popular event for the entire family," Boldt said. "There is a lot of public interaction with many different agencies, and you don't have to stay for the entire evening. People can come and go as they please."

Like the last couple of years, people who bring a completed boating safety exam to the event are eligible to win a special prize, Boldt said. "At the very least, if you present a certified boater card you can win a life jacket, tow behind tube or something else," she added.

State law requires youngsters ages 12-15 who want to operate a boat or personal watercraft with at least a 10 horsepower motor to first pass the state's Boat North Dakota safety course. In addition, some major insurance companies give adult boat owners who pass the course a premium discount on boat insurance.

The Boat North Dakota safety course is free and available at the Game and Fish Department, or in Bismarck and Mandan at any local boat dealer, all Gate City Bank locations, and at Cumulus Broadcasting.