

Ripple Effect # 70

Recognizing the Red

We most often take it for granted—the river that runs across the northern prairie from its headwaters near South Dakota’s Lake Traverse to its mouth in Manitoba’s Lake Winnipeg. But the Red River in Manitoba has recently gained attention by being designated as a Canadian Heritage River. This designation, celebrated this past June 11th at the historic Forks in Winnipeg, means more deliberate attention and resources will go to the Red’s cultural, natural and recreational values in Manitoba.

We shouldn’t be surprised at the honor for the Red River, for the Red is the only major river on the North American prairies that flows north, and its broad, level clay plain, an 8,000-year-old remnant of a lake bed, is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world.

Because it has provided both rich soils and a navigable route, the Red had much to do with the development of the region through which it flows. It served for thousands of years as both travel route and living sites for Aboriginal peoples and, in recent centuries, those roles expanded to include explorers and settlers of European origin. The very names of the towns and municipalities that dot the landscape in both Canada and the United States capture something of the origins of those who have lived and settled in the large basin drained by the Red River.

The June 11th celebration recognized the fact that a number of groups and cultures have depended on the Red River. The program re-enacted a scene of the arrival by canoe of David Thompson, a fur trade geographer and map-maker, together with a greeting by First Nations people that demonstrated multiple elements of their culture.

So what about the Red River the US—what are the possibilities of gaining recognition for the Red upstream of Manitoba?

A comparable program to the Canadian Heritage Rivers, the American Heritage Rivers Program, is available in the US. The US program offers special assistance to rivers that achieve the designation as an American Heritage River. Like the Canadian program, the impetus and plans for improving and preserving a heritage river come from local people and communities—with no restrictions or strings attached.

Organizing an effort to achieve the US designation status would take the effort of many local groups and communities working together to define what they would like their Red River to be as a natural resource, as a player in economic revitalization and as a defining component of the area’s historic and cultural preservation.

Led by Manitoba’s Rivers West, the Red River in Manitoba has achieved the recognition it deserves. Congratulations to those who made this possible. The question remains of whether the entire stretch of this great river can one day share Heritage River status.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.