

The Upper Iowa River Project

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At First Glance

On our first visit to Decorah, Iowa we did not know what we were getting ourselves into, until we saw the sun shining through the white clouds in the blue sky over a sparkling and spectacular view of the Upper Iowa River. We saw the hundreds of fish swimming along its floor and the eagles soaring through the air and knew that this river is something beyond worth protecting. The Upper Iowa River, as part of the driftless area, is a unique natural sanctuary that we must treasure and preserve right now, and for future generations. Research has shown that river restoration can help provide a community with physical and mental well-being, recreation, social cohesion, aesthetic, education, and cultural values (Social Benefits of River Restoration).

In our initial meeting with the Winneshiek County Conservation Board, Northeastern Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), and the Department of Tourism, we became familiarized with the key stakeholders on the river including those attending the meeting, liveries, tourists, and river users in general. We learned about the different viewpoints from all of the attending stakeholders and decided to investigate these perceptions further.

In the past, the river has been viewed as a safe zone for under-age teens, college students and middle-aged adults to drink on, but what if it could be a safe haven for recreation and education for all ages instead? What if it served as a model for a regenerative and sustainable recreational hub? Every being that interacts with the river has the opportunity to take small steps in either direction.

One large concern that was presented by the Winneshiek County Conservation Board was the behavior of certain users on the river. From this discussion, it was our understanding that the way to change this behavior would be to communicate the river differently to users. According to the stakeholders attending the meeting, the troublemakers on the river stemmed from the liveries. However, this was not the only issue at hand. In order to preserve the river for future generations, it would not only require the support of all of its stakeholders, but also an increased awareness in the community to maintain the cleanliness and safety on the river.

After this meeting, it was clear river users were something that needed to be addressed. It was detailed in this meeting that a contributing factor to the misuse and mistreatment of the river might be attributed to the varying attitudes, level of care, and involvement of the landowners along the river. It was noted that a few past events held by livery owners have significantly contributed to poor behavior and littering issues. It was also noted that more raucous river users have often times turned out to be customers of particular livery owners, indicating that

there may be a correlation between how a river user behaves on or around the river and which livery he or she might be a customer of. We closed this meeting in reflection to process and absorb all that we learned.

Research & Development

In the weeks following this initial meeting, the University of Iowa Marketing Department Field Studies group brainstormed a multitude of ideas. This included modifying and updating printed materials pertaining to safety, attracting a new market of river users through tourism messages, and instilling more rigid regulations and standards for livery owners. A ‘roundup’ donation campaign in local businesses around the river was suggested as justification to the possible budget constraints any new implementations may instill, as well as an option for supplementary funding for existing river conservation efforts. Research was conducted to support and specify these big ideas.

Identification of Key Stakeholders:

Stakeholder	Purpose
River users	Locals and tourists who want to continue to use the river for enjoyment and the beauty it brings
Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D)	Implements different programs throughout the region in collaboration with other groups such as the Winneshiek County Conservation Board
Winneshiek County Conservation Board	Wide variety of tasks, but provides funding to various projects throughout the county and educates the locals
Livery owners	Interact directly with the tourists who visit Winneshiek County to utilize the river through their business services of providing rental equipment such as canoes, kayaks, and campgrounds
Winneshiek Department of Tourism	Wants to drive tourism to Winneshiek County through various attractions in the county
Iowa Department of Natural Resources	Mandates overall standards and regulations pertaining to natural resources in Iowa while maintaining a specific budget to allocate across many counties

Round-up for Donations:

A roundup donation concept was introduced as a method of point-of-sale fundraising for local businesses around the river. People paying for goods or services in these businesses could choose to round up their totals to the next dollar, and that extra change would be donated to efforts for sustainability of the river. California Parks and Recreation currently acquires funds from a strategy similar to this. Problems related to this may concern who will be in charge of funds and willingness of participation.

Updated Maps and Signage:

As learned in the initial meeting, the existing map of the river is not only difficult to read and understand, but is also too large to hold in a tube or boat on the river. An initial thought was to go digital. Organizations like National Geographic supply interactive, phone-application maps to park users. These applications utilize GPS capabilities and show the user where he/she currently is on the map, how far they are from their destination, and even gives them an option to mark their campsite or parking spot for an easier return (National Geographic). A map on mobile app could be convenient and user friendly, but it might not be practical. The app would take a massive amount of pre-planning and implementation stages, as the current map could not be digitized as is and would need extreme amounts of updating, as it already does. Additionally, during the initial visit and meeting in Decorah, many were struggling to find phone service near the river during the initial visit, which could prove extremely problematic in the execution of this concept. To be appropriate in this nature, the app would have to be pre-downloaded on a user's device – in which case, the map can simply be made available online in pdf format. However, considering most mobile devices are not currently waterproof, many users may not want to bring a phone along on their boating or tubing trip. It was decided that a more appropriate map update would be simply changing the current map to be more readable and make the printed copy smaller for better physical handling.

From viewing various river maps in other counties and national parks, map upgrade recommendations include incorporating estimated time of travel, prominent landmarks using shapes to include bridges and access points, color-coded designations for private and public property, and color indication of more dangerous or difficult to navigate areas (City of Chicago). Upon completion, consolidated, smaller maps can be laminated and zip-tied to tubes. ImageWorks Manufacturing provides a service like this to other institutions, and it would help maps become waterproof, and hard to lose.

The RC&D and the Department of Natural Resources attempted to post signs at designated access points and mile-markers, but the plan was postponed due to other budget constraints. Some signs were posted in various areas, but many were torn down by rowdy river users or destroyed in some way. The signage was not clear and readable enough to make notable changes in safety, and need to be revamped. Research on various other areas like this supplied alternative ideas. The City of Boise, for instance, uses the Directional and Orientation Trail System (DOTS). DOTS are 20-inch white spots painted into pavement every tenth of a mile with painted numbers and letters that describe a user's location (City of Boise). This number represents how far a person may be from the 'zero' spot and act much like mile-markers on a highway. This could be something also implemented with the map system, so that river users can easily see where they are on the river. This signage could also include information on dangerous zones on the river or more difficult navigation areas to remind patrons to watch more closely in those zones.

Impactful Tourism Messages:

A case study from the University of Vermont details the vision held about positive impact tourism; the concept of enjoying the beauty and natural resources of an area as something that

must be sustained and respected, and leaving it better than it was upon arrival (Ceroni). Marketing the beauty in nature in Winneshiek county could attract the ideal, nature respecting, river user - one who leaves a positive impact. In the first meeting in Decorah, the Department of Tourism explained a large portion of the tourism budget is dedicated to promoting the town festivals and commercial aspects of Winneshiek County and Decorah. The study in Vermont suggests that small changes in advertisements such as more language about the nature and photos of the expansive landscape can help make small moves towards positive impact tourism. This research on positive impact tourism suggests that the Winneshiek Department of Tourism holds a spot as a stakeholder in the sustainability of the river. In addition to this, aspects of tourism encouraging positive impact tourism may not only pertain to the river. Numerous hiking trails, bike paths, and outdoor recreational activities available in Decorah can highlight the beauty available for those interested in respecting nature.

Safety and Cleanliness Messages From Livery Owners:

While researching options for communicating the value of safety and cleanliness to river users, the idea of a video was discovered. Many institutions use videos to convey a message clearly and with ease and interest to the person receiving the message. A video containing images and sound attracts much more attention than a detailed written paragraph. The City of Chicago and the City of Boise both have extremely helpful river safety tips and suggestions on their websites that could easily be turned into a short script, such as best practices for dangerous situations and tips on recognizing your location.

Since most Upper Iowa River users rent tubes and boats through livery owners, it was decided that the best outlet to expose river users to this proposed educational film would be through livery owners. As little background knowledge was known on livery owners and how they conduct business, it was difficult to determine how this would be integrated. This created a strong need for information about livery owners.

Regulations on Liveries:

Extensive research was conducted regarding any existing livery owner regulations. A desired discovery included any practices conducted in similar areas, or any further knowledge on what these landowners are required or currently doing to maintain sustainability on the river. A lack of discovery led to a realization that there is a gap in information regarding liveries and livery owners. Yet, this group seemed to be the closest to both daily river happenings and river users, and they also seemed to be the least accessible group. It became clear that to find an effective communication strategy, external primary research would need to be conducted on livery owners. This inspired another trip to Decorah for a focus group with livery owners.

Focus Group Luncheon with the Liveries

On Saturday, March 7th, the University of Iowa Marketing Department Field Studies students conducted a focus group in Decorah, Iowa with the support of the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities team. The focus group centered on four perceptions from livery business owners in Winneshiek County - cleanliness, safety, communication and the target

market for users on the river. Eight parties were invited to attend the study, with a final total of four attending - an additional representative stopped by the event but could not stay. There was a variety of experience present from 20 to 45 years as livery owners, as well as a marketing representative. These liveries are located along various parts of the river. In addition to the owners, Lilly from the Winneshiek Conservation Board and Josh from RC&D observed the event. Each topic was allotted twenty minutes for discussion with prompting questions. As the conversation proceeded, the target market for river users topic was distributed throughout all conversations, and therefore, was not explicitly discussed.

Cleanliness:

Throughout the conversation of cleanliness, it was brought up that many people make positive comments on the cleanliness of the river. From the livery owners perspective, the tourists visiting the river tend to be very appreciative and aware of their time on the river, whereas the local citizens may not be as focused on this aspect. For the most part, tourists are aware of the importance of cleaning up the garbage. When trash bags are provided to the river users, they are typically brought back to the livery full. It was noted that there are not receptacles at the river landing access points where users can dispose of their trash, which could be a contributing factor to the river's pollution. Some livery owners place mesh bags on the bridges for users to place their trash throughout their time on the river.

Beyond trash, one thing that affects the river, as well as its users, is the use of glass. Oftentimes, livery owners will not permit their customers to use glass on the river, but there is no law in the state of Iowa against it. This also leads into the issue of recycling. There is no place that livery owners can take the recyclable materials and glass is harder to get rid of in terms of recycling. Some distributors will collect back items, but this was only applicable to one livery.

While the river is still fairly pristine, sinkholes and runoff from farms are creating significant pollution on the river throughout the years, aside for the pollution from garbage, which concerns many livery owners. The Department of Natural Resources would be the primary group responsible for making decisions related to water quality and cleanliness.

Safety:

When the topic of safety was first mentioned, there was a general consensus that the busiest day on the river is Saturday. In addition to greater numbers of people, there tends to be more alcohol, nudity, strong language, etc. Most of the livery owners comply by the Department of Natural Resources' set of laws and convey these ideas to their customers. In addition, livery owners typically tell the users where unsafe parts exist throughout the river. One issue that was presented was the lack of the Department of Natural Resource's presence for cleaning up the dangerous parts of the river where there are snags. It is especially important to do this when the river has more hazards due to flooding. Many times, the livery owners will resolve these issues on their own.

The liveries tend to require waivers to be signed before the customers are allowed to go out on the water. If a lawsuit occurs, the insurance companies typically will settle outside of the courtroom and increase the premium for the owners. It is not unusual for large groups of renters to assume one person as the group leader who signs the waiver for everyone. This saves time for groups and holds one person accountable. Livery owners are often faced with ethical dilemmas when deciding whom to allow on the river. There are no guidelines that provide them with guidance in these decisions. One party brought up was teenagers under 18 years old who want to tube on the river, and whether or not they need an adult signature to rent the items. Additionally, there have been incidences where parents bring children in a car seat on the river.

The facilitators asked about river users getting lost and if it was a common occurrence. During the weekend, it is much easier to navigate because of the increase number of people. If people have trouble, there are large groups of people nearby to ask for help. The liveries provide their customers with contact numbers incase of an emergency. One issue that was brought up was the inconsistency between the bridge numbers. For years, the livery owners have been using one set of numbers, and now the new signage reflects different numbers. Moving forward, the livery owners mentioned that they would like to be contacted about things like this before materials are implemented.

The river users are usually given timeframes of how long it will take to arrive at a certain landing. On average, users travel at 2.5 miles per hour. This can fluctuate depending on water levels at any given time. Livery owners typically encourage their customers to make contact with them at various points of their trip. One livery owner includes pictures of the bridges to give better visualization than the mismatched numbers.

The final concern of the livery owners is the parking areas that created traffic. In some landing areas, there is no efficient way to load and unload canoes and kayaks. There tends to be an issue to turning vehicles with trailers around and this often makes it a dangerous situation. The livery owners primary recommendations to increase safety efforts are: adding more maps such as the one provided by the Winneshiek County Conservation Board, increasing the signage on the river, and ensuring literature is matching across stakeholders.

Communication:

The discussion began with the topic of who the ideal river user would be for these owners. There was a general consensus that it is best to have families or users who drink responsibly. For the most part, the owners agreed that a majority of their business comes from out of town people visiting the Winneshiek County area. Many times, locals have their own equipment, making it unnecessary to rent. There tends to be a large amount of repeat customers. In some cases, families have been coming for generations.

The livery owners wish there were more access points in Decorah. The river is promoted in such a positive manner in this town; it would be useful to give users more opportunities to get in and

out of the river. Moving forward, the livery owners think the Internet will be the primary source of advertising for the livery locations.

The facilitators asked: if you were hosting a forum on how to preserve the river, whom would you want at the table with you to discuss the topic? The immediate answer was the Department of Natural Resources. Others voiced their desire for the local governments to attend, as well as the Resource Conservation and Development representatives.

Conclusion:

In the near future, there will be roundtable events help to allow various stakeholders to voice their opinions on different topics. The first one focused on campgrounds. One of the issues that the livery owners struggle with is the fact their voices are not heard. While they have had some discussions in the past, there is not much action brought forth from their meetings. If the livery owners could provide feedback on the proposed ideas, they could predict the outcome of the action. The livery owners mentioned they are the ones who directly receive the feedback from the customers and this should make them a primary contact when suggesting changes on the river.

The final questions proposed the idea of creating additional opportunities for stakeholders to voice their opinions and whether it would be beneficial or not. The livery owners thought it was a good idea given that it does not run in the summer months and action occurs from the meetings. The most important group for them to directly work with could be the Winneshiek County Conservation Board.

Post Meeting, Secondary Research, and Focus Group

After all research, key roadblocks identified include lack of funding and communication. To be the most effective at conserving the safety and cleanliness of the Upper Iowa River, all stakeholders must effectively communicate. Both key roadblocks could be simultaneously improved.

Internal Communication Recommendations

A board created to improve upon internal communication between stakeholders will allow for ease of communication between those whose jobs and businesses are based around the river.

Who it includes:

To make sure that all stakeholders' comments and concerns are included one representative from each of the following would be included:

- Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D)
- Winneshiek County Conservation Board
- Winneshiek Department of Tourism
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources
- Each Livery

Because of the large amount of primary stakeholders, communication between each other is vital to preserve the river and allow all users to use it to its fullest. The board would elect a president, secretary, and treasurer (should the group decide to do any fundraising).

The president would be in charge of creating agendas, making the calendar, and reserving any rooms needed for meetings. The Secretary would be in charge of taking meeting minutes and keeping all board members informed. The treasurer (should the position be needed) would be in charge of collecting and depositing funds and checking on prices for possible projects the fund would cover. All these positions would be voted on at the last meeting of the year and the transfer of title should occur at the beginning of the year.

What is discussed:

The agenda, made by the president, would include old business, new business, and stakeholder reports. Old business would include anything covered in the previous meeting that needs to be recapped, discussed or voted on. A board member or the public can submit new business. An email address made known to the public would allow river users to recommend any actions they see need to be taken. Board members may add topics to the agenda by notifying the president. Any comments and concerns on river related topics could be included in the agenda. Each stakeholder (one leader from the group of liveries) can recap what their organization has done since the past meeting and announce what they are planning in the coming months.

When and where:

A meeting at the beginning of each quarter would allow for communication to keep everyone informed on what is currently going on with the river. These meetings would take place on a weeknight at the dinner hour so the timing does not interfere with business hours. A convenient place for all those participating with a separate room that allows for privacy, such as Good Times Bar & Grill, could be chosen.

The outcome of the group:

With increased communication between stakeholders, preservation of this natural resource can continue. Each organization is able to hear what other stakeholders think of any plans the organization is thinking about putting into place. This allows for each organization's funds to be allocated to projects that will benefit the most.

Note: This board is modeled after the Freeport Community Public School Fund, which has been successful for 32 years.

External Communication Recommendations

After all our research, we have identified that it is important to communicate the vitality of preserving the river to the river-users to help improve the cleanliness and safety of the river.

Who it includes:

There are many stakeholders of the river, but a few core ones that have key communication opportunities with Winneshiek County locals and tourists that use the river. The identified stakeholders include:

- Winneshiek County Conservation Board
- Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D)
- Winneshiek Department of Tourism
- Livery Owners

Identified Problem:

We have also identified that there is a gap between stakeholders in who the main river abusers are. At our initial meeting with Winneshiek County Conservation board and RC&D, tourists were identified as a main group that abused the river, but at our livery focus group, main river abusers were identified as a portion of Winneshiek county locals.

This makes identifying a specific demographic to focus communications towards difficult, but regardless, all channels of communication about the river could be improved. One suggestion to better identify this group, would be to send surveys to local schools and businesses asking citizens questions such as:

1. What age group/demographics do you think abuses the Upper Iowa River the most?
2. Why do you believe these groups abuse the river?
3. How do you think these problems could be improved?
4. Would you use trash receptacles along the river if more were provided?
5. Are you interested in attending a river conservation roundtable discussion?

This survey could be multiple-choice and online to make it easy and inexpensive to implement. This survey could also identify key community members willing to help communicate the value of the river to those who disrespect the river. The identified stakeholders could all benefit a lot from obtaining more information on the local community values and dynamics.

Stakeholder Communication (Who, When, & Where):

It is important for the four stakeholders to be very precise with how they communicate the river's virtues. One overall recommendation for identified stakeholders is to evaluate how they are currently communicating the river to river-users and the effectiveness of their programs and other efforts. Another overall recommendation is to improve their websites so the public can easily identify available educational programs.

1. Winneshiek Conservation Board

The Winneshiek Conservation Board is currently working on environmental education of the river to locals. While they are actively involved in schools and offer all of their programs free to schools and the community, they could market their programs to schools more in hopes to have more schools participate in their programs and specifically stressing programs that involve the river. They could also offer overnight camping trips at the river to help get kids excited to learn about conserving the river. It is vital that these programs are fun and engaging for the

kids. Another recommendation is to organize a school-wide or community-wide river cleanup day.

2. Northeast Iowa Resource, Conservation, and Development (RC&D)

RC&D is currently implementing several programs and other methods to help with the safety and cleanliness of the river including the Driftless Area Initiative Project, Northeast Iowa Regional Watershed Project and Environmental College for Young Leaders. These are impactful programs, but could be focused on even more and highlighted more on their website and in the community. Collaboration between RC&D and Winneshiek County Conservation Board could be useful to improve these communications.

3. Winneshiek Department of Tourism

The Winneshiek Department of Tourism does not currently put much money into marketing the river. Simple inexpensive changes could be made to frame the river as a sacred place and be one more channel of communication to emphasize the importance of keeping it clean and safe. These changes could include highlighting that Decorah is in the driftless area and educating people about the vast uniqueness right in front of their eyes. This information could be put on their website, tourism booklets, and even a small blurb on their river maps.

The Winneshiek Department of Tourism also has input on creating river maps and needs to work with other key stakeholders to develop a map that has the correct new numbers that match up with the numbers posted on the bridges. These maps should be compact, straightforward, and easy to read.

4. Livery Owners

Livery owners are the fourth key stakeholders that have many opportunities to communicate to river users. Livery users are currently implementing many resources for river-users to keep the river safe and clean. These methods include providing mesh garbage bags to customers, talking with their customers about how long it will take to go from point A to point B on the river, having customers call them when their trip is complete, and even sorting their own recycling.

The Livery owners could do even more by emphasizing sustainable use of the river in their buildings. This could be anything from a poster to verbal communications. The liveries could offer a very small 5 cent discount for anyone who brings back a trash bag, similar to how some grocery stores incentivize using reusable shopping bags.

Conclusion

Through improving signage along the river, creating better maps, providing trash bag to river users and improving internal and external communication we will effectively preserve and restore the cleanliness and safety of the river for river-users long into the future.

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