

POETRY
—
CHOUTEAU
ISLAND
—
'93 FLOOD

Chain of Rocks Bridge / David Hinkson

WETLAND WARRIORS

**Environmental Organizations and
Community Engagement in
Madison County, IL**

CODES / autumn 2024

CONTENTS



PAGE 1

INTRODUCTION

PAGE 2

CHRISTINE FAVILLA AND THE
SIERRA CLUB

PAGE 5

JOHN O'DONNELL AND
HEARTLANDS CONSERVANCY

PAGE 8

THE NATURE INSTITUTE AND
RAMONA POLLAD, ANGELA MOAN

PAGE 10

NGRREC AND HANNAH GRIFFITH

PAGE 12

FINAL REFLECTIONS

PAGE 13

ASSORTED WRITINGS

PAGE 16

HISTORY OF THE FLOOD OF 1993

PAGE 18

HISTORY OF CHOUTEAU ISLAND

PAGE 20

PERSPECTIVES FROM A CODES
STUDENTS



INTRODUCTION



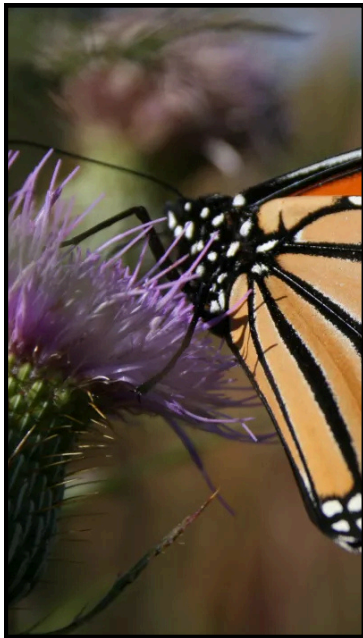
By Nicholas Muppidi-Fowler

Nicholas is a undergraduate student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville where he is a member of the Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars program. Over the past several years, he and his research team has worked with the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC) on a variety of different projects. This project is a culmination of his work with the program as a part of CODES 320 Digital Collaborations Class

This project is a part of the Digital Collaborations class of the Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES) Program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. As part of Team II of the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center research team, I have interviewed several individuals from environmentalist organizations around and active in Madison County, Illinois. The following sections of this article are stylized reports on my interviews, which were done with organizational representatives and employees of the Illinois Sierra Club Piasa Palisades Group, Heartlands Conservancy, and The Nature Institute (TNI), and NGRREC. The goal of these interviews was to garner more information about the active roles that environmental organizations have played in protecting and working with communities in a southwestern Illinois suburb of the city of St. Louis. More than just providing descriptions of this cadre of different environmental organization that operate in Madison County, IL,

and the work that they are involved in, I have decided to incorporate the life stories of the representatives which I have spoken to. The goal of doing this is to allow for readers to have a human “root” for which they can identify with whilst reading. Moreover, my choice to include an amateur ethnographic approach was done with the goal of exploring the diverse kinds of people who are involved with environmental organizations. In doing so, I hope to capture the silent human faces behind environmental organizations and give credit to them for their participation as valiant members of the local community.

The main goals of these interviews are to find out the varied reaction of these career environmentalists to federal environmental policy failures in order to understand the potential resistance these organizations would face under the future Trump administration. I will also look at the community engagement opportunities they offer and their impact.



sierra club

piasa palisades group

Located along the Great River Road in Alton, IL is the Piasa Palisade Group. Founded almost 45 years ago, this group is one of the 14 groups of the greater Illinois Sierra Club chapter. The group was formed by a group of Madison County residents passionate about preventing Pere Marquette State Park from getting logged. Today they hold monthly educational meetings about environmental topics and offer local outdoor outings. They are also active in issues that affect their local community such as air and water quality, land use, and forest issues. The organization works in Madison, Jersey, and Calhoun counties. Christine Favilla, a co-coordinator for the Three Rivers project of the Illinois Sierra Club, gave insights into herself, environmentalism policy, and the organization of small-scale local environmental groups.



Christine Favilla

her journey to environmentalism



During her time in college, Favilla studied both Sociology and Environmental Policy. For Favilla, the Sierra Club was her first real job outside of college. Despite people telling her that she would eventually move on to something "better," she stood with the organization for 23 years. "I love my job," Favilla stated, "and I get to, not necessarily pick and choose what I work on, but I do have a lot of autonomy with my work, which is wonderful."

Her job at the Paisa Palisade Group involves her working on water management, big river system management, floodplain water quality, and looking over every Illinois 404 permit (permits which entails the dumping of materials into freshwater or destruction of wetlands for alternative purposes). Besides the

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water work, Favilla works a lot with sustainable agriculture and pollinator gardens.

Whilst living in Colorado, she came to know the issues indigenous peoples faced with water rights. "In Colorado, I lived in the area that had three indigenous tribes that were still very much alive and well, and they were still dealing with water rights issues from when their lands were taken from them," Favilla recounted, "so, that really kind of catapulted me into working on water issues I'm working on the human side of things as well."

CURRENT PROJECTS

One major project that Favilla discussed is a wetland restoration on Alton Steel's property. This project arose due to a prior environmental violation by the company. Instead of pursuing legal action, the Sierra Club collaborated with Alton Steel on a Supplemental Environmental Program (SEP). "Instead of suing them," she explained, "you try and get them to do a SEP... it has to be done, basically on site where the violation occurred." Through such initiatives, the Sierra Club engages with corporations to mitigate environmental impacts directly, creating local benefits.

STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Favilla emphasized the value of student involvement, encouraging participation in local Sierra Club activities to foster environmental interest and experience. The club's monthly speaker series, held at Old Bakery Beer Company, features diverse topics in environmental science, conservation, and advocacy. Favilla also praised their outings



Piasa Bird for which this group is named / Great Rivers and Routes Tourism

group, which organizes hikes, biking trips, and canoe excursions, explaining that “we feel that it’s really important for people to experience nature. Fall in love with it before they want to take action on it.” Additionally, the Sierra Club offers hands-on volunteer opportunities, such as removing invasive species and conducting prescribed burns under the guidance of experts.

She expressed hope for broader youth engagement, particularly given the challenges of volunteer retention after COVID-19. “Any outreach at SIUE campuses or local high schools would be a huge help,” Favilla noted, welcoming ideas and collaboration on outreach initiatives that would support increased community involvement in environmental efforts.



**SIERRA
CLUB**

ILLINOIS CHAPTER

On American Environmental Policy

I asked Favilla about what effect America's “lackluster” environmental policy has had on her work: “Environmental laws have basically just been ripped them out from under us. I hate to say it, but the [last] administration got rid of everything that people have worked for 50 years to put in place. And so, the last four years have been us trying to get those reinstated.” With her job as a policy advocate being directly affected by the ebbs and flows of federal environmental policy, the reelection of Donald Trump would likely have a strong effect on her and the Sierra Club. According to The New York Times, Trump’s administration “dismantled major climate policies and rolled back many more rules governing clean air, water, wildlife and toxic chemicals.”

For more information on The Sierra Club Piasa Palisades group and their activities please go to their website <https://www.sierraclub.org/illinois/piasa-palisades>



Land administered by Heartlands / Heartlands Conservancy

Heartlands Conservancy

Heartlands Conservancy (HLC), established in 1989, initially operated under the USDA as a soil and water conservation district focused on combating erosion and nutrient pollution in agricultural areas. As federal funding shifted, the team rebranded as Heartlands Conservancy, evolving into a nonprofit. The organization has since expanded its mission beyond its origins, merging conservation with community planning to serve the broader southwestern Illinois area, with significant work in Madison County. They have maintained their foundational values by supporting land conservation, stormwater management, and environmental planning for urban areas. "Heartlands started with green spaces for farmers but now holds land for conservation and manages trails, parks, and bike planning for communities," explained John O'Donnell, Water Programs Manager.

O'Donnell, a water program manager for Heartlands, discussed his path into environmentalism: "I started off in engineering

but a senior project with public health sparked my interest in water quality and the environment." His role at Heartlands allows him to work directly with communities, integrating residents' needs into environmental planning. He emphasized, "We ensure projects reflect the community—gathering feedback and keeping communication open through the planning process."

CURRENT PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

O'Donnell shared that his recent focus has been on the Prairie DuPont Watershed Plan, a multi-year project aimed at mitigating flooding and wastewater issues in East St. Louis. Heartlands mapped flood-prone areas and developed recommendations, involving residents at every step. "It's good to see East St. Louis thinking about grant applications for detention basins that can serve as both flood management and recreational spaces," he stated. Working with these local communities are central to HLC.

JOHN O'DONNELL

Heartlands is also addressing structural issues, such as undersized culverts and infrastructure in need of repair. Their goal is to improve green infrastructure, ensuring it benefits residents as well as the environment.

ENVIRONMENTALISM IN MADISON COUNTY

Madison County has a unique environmental heritage, rooted in both agriculture and community-driven conservation. Heartlands Conservancy represents this legacy, extending conservation efforts to both rural and urban settings.

“Madison County's environmentalism has always connected community needs with land use and conservation,” O'Donnell shared, adding that Heartlands' projects are crafted to support this balance, addressing issues like water quality and green space accessibility.

Like I asked Christine Favilla, I asked John O'Donnell how Heartlands has been functioning despite the hostile federal environment to environmental policy. On wetlands he stated, “there has been another rule change regarding the waters of the United States, and what is considered a wetland or not, which basically reduced the amount of places that could be considered wetlands protected by the United States, and that's definitely something that is giving us problems, limiting the access to federal funding.” Despite this, however, Heartlands has remained flexible: “Okay, well, we can't depend on them for this. But you know there is USDA funding out right now for the inflation reduction act. We can use that and

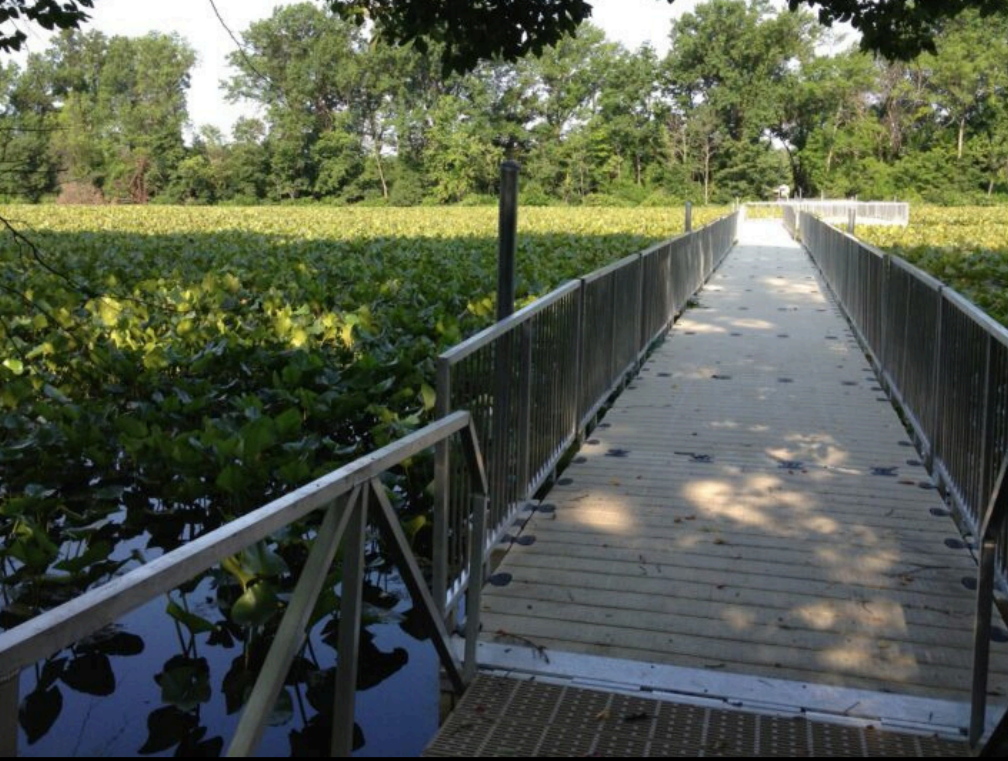


“...changing our individual habits is kind of a drop in the bucket. But working on things at the municipal or regional scale, you do start to have larger effects that benefit the region.”



try to focus our efforts on those things.”

The lack of federal policy change has not, overall, affected Heartlands too deeply. “I think it just means we can't depend on maybe a big federal response,” stated O'Donnell, “working as local as possible is sometimes the best.” Due to Heartland's nature as a local organization, federal issues do not matter as much as they do to national organizations, “there's a lot of stuff that can be done on the regional scale that doesn't necessarily have to wait for Federal funding. Obviously, the individual scale is nice. But that's not really gonna change things, you know, changing our individual habits is kind of a drop in the bucket. But working on things at the municipal or regional scale, you do start to have larger effects that benefit the region.” As a regional organization, Heartlands Conservancy can



Arlington Wetlands / Terrain

Issues that are local and intimate. These initiatives can take different forms, such as increasing street trees that can provide a canopy for pedestrians. Their local efforts are direct and not inherently affected by the ebbs and flows of the federal government. This insight reveals how local organizations are the most politically sustainable avenue for fighting against climate change.

FUTURE SHAPE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN MADISON COUNTY

O'Donnell sees Heartlands as instrumental in shaping a sustainable future for Madison County by focusing on environmental and community resilience. By designing green spaces that also serve as stormwater management sites, Heartlands offers an innovative model for local environmentalism. He emphasized, "Our work looks at the future impact of urban heat, increasing floods, and the need for resilient infrastructure." As they address current needs, Heartlands aims to build a sustainable environment that supports public health.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

For students interested in environmentalism, O'Donnell suggests building transferable skills, such as GIS, grant writing, and data analysis, as these can be applied across fields and help organizations like Heartlands. "Mapping, technical analysis, and communication skills are key. They allow students to make an impact wherever they end up," he noted. Heartlands also offers volunteer opportunities, from land management to planting trees and removing invasive species, with strong participation from retirees. However, they are eager to expand their younger volunteer base, as O'Donnell highlighted, "More younger volunteers could help with the physically demanding tasks and bring fresh perspectives to conservation work."

COLLABORATION WITH THE C.O.D.E.S. PROGRAM

The 2028 cohort of the Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars program has been working with Heartlands Conservancy over the past semester. John O'Donnell cited them as being central to their goal of outreaching with college aged youth and engaging them: I think that's been really cool to kind of see these younger people and their interest in their different interests in the environment or their different interests in general. and add them to our work. We're really happy with them, you know. They seem very motivated, and you know it's surprising to see. I, you know, thinking back to myself as a freshman. I don't think I was as kind of outgoing and and motivated and stuff like that. So it's kind of cool to see these young people really kind of already, you know, in their early days, of their freshman semester."

MY HISTORY WITH HEARTLANDS

As a senior in high school, a friend and I organized a community event with Heartlands in Fairmont City to plant trees in the Wetlands there, along with the 1st grade from Fairmont Elementary School. We assisted Heartlands with educating children, and adults, in the importance of trees in maintaining soil density and preventing mosquitos by providing habitats for bats, their predator. Education and action are two things I associated with Heartlands in my small stint working with them.

For more information about Heartlands Conservancy, visit them at their website <https://heartlandsconservancy.org/>

The Nature Institute



Talahi Lodge / The Nature Institute



John M. Olin Nature Preserve / The Nature Institute

A BRIEF HISTORY

In 1969 John M. Olin deeded 293 acres of land to the State of Illinois, with the idea that “[t]he property is ideally suited for development as a nature study area.” The land for several decades was granted to Southern Illinois University Edwardsville for maintenance, until TNI was granted 501(c)(3) status (nonprofit) and begun volunteer stewardship of the tract of land in in 1980. The land was ceded to TNI in 1994, to which it belongs today as a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve.

Since 1980, The Nature TNI has worked to foster an awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education, restoration, and preservation, with the Olin Nature Preserve and Talahi Lodge acting as their base of operations. Their location in the small community of Godfrey, IL, several miles north on the Great

River Road of Alton, gives them a small community base of people to contribute to their operations. TNI started, according to outreach coordinator Ramona Pollard, “as a group of people who were environmentally conscious and liked the natural landscape of Illinois, and so they wanted to have a place to make sure that it stays in its native place.”

THE PEOPLE AT THE NATURE INSTITUTE

I spoke with Ramona Pollard, who had a traditional track to arriving at TNI:

“I have a degree in biology from McKendree University. Straight out of McKendree, I did multiple internships in environmental education... it’s really hard to get a full-time job in environmental education because once someone is in that role, they never leave. It’s a lot of fun, and it’s one of those jobs you do for the love of nature and the passion, not necessarily for the money, right? So, I did multiple internships, moved around the country, lived in several places, and got really, really lucky when an opening came up here at the Nature Institute. I grew up about a half-hour north of here and really anticipated that I would have to move away from home to to find a job, but instead, I got to live at home and work here at the same time! I’ve been here since 2015—so nine



years now—which has been so much fun. I started out as the environmental educator, then moved into the Education Director position, and now I've transitioned over to outreach.”

As the Outreach Director, Ramona is responsible for overseeing the advertising of all the organization's programs and activities. She manages fundraising efforts, including both year-end and ongoing fundraisers. Additionally, she represents the organization at community booth events and educational outreach initiatives. Ramona also assists with the education programs hosted at the site. She mentioned that her role involves a variety of tasks, saying, "I do a little bit of everything," and added that this flexibility is something shared by everyone in the organization. The executive director of TNI, Angela Moan, sat in on our meeting as well to provide extra information.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND IMPORTANCE OF THE NATURE INSTITUTE

The existence of TNI is important for multiple reasons. On the environmental side, Ramona Pollard stated, “Being situated on the bluff edge, the way we maintain our property significantly impacts the water quality of the surrounding area. Simply by preserving this place, we contribute to protecting the watershed quality and addressing issues like erosion and other related environmental concerns.” On the human side,

Pollard states, “Our education programs are vital because they encourage kids to get outside. Numerous studies highlight the benefits of nature for everyone—it's about unplugging, taking a walk, and experiencing the outdoors. Having a quiet, peaceful place to go is invaluable. How often do we hear someone coming off the trail excitedly say, ‘I saw a deer!’ or ‘I saw a turkey!’ For us, that's a daily occurrence.”

TNI offers a variety of programs for children with activities like Knee High Naturalists (ages 2.5-5), Tiny Trekkers (ages 3-5), Forest Playdate (18 months-6 years), and Baby Birds Nature Playgroup (3-12 months); as well as for students through offerings such as ECO Homeschool Adventures (1st-12th grade), Kids Night Out (ages 6-10), Outdoor EDventure Days (ages 6-12), and the Children's Outdoor Escape Room (ages 9+). The Nature Institute also offers a variety of activities for adults, such as midnight walks, access to their paved trail, and telescope events.³

The impact of these programs on kids and students is something Angela Moan highlighted in our interview: “We have kids who went to our camp in the eighties when it first started, and now they're doing environmental jobs. We have one guy who actually went to camp and then he worked here and now he's on our board. We have people who love nature because of this place and have had it mold their careers.” By engaging young children and students into nature, it can create an impact in their personal lives, influencing them to go into environmentalism. The same land that inspired Christine Favilla of the Sierra Club to become an environmentalist continues to inspire people to this day.

The Nature Institute / Great Rivers and Routes Tourism





“the goal is so much bigger than just one organization, [so] we wouldn't be able to do it alone. We'd just kind of be spinning our wheels all the time if we tried.”

COLLABORATION WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Both Pollard and Moan highlighted the collaborative approach TNI takes in both educational programming and land conservation. With their education-focused programs, TNI has collaborated with the Treehouse Wildlife Center and World Bird Sanctuary on animal education programs. In the Mississippi Earthtones Festival, they collaborate with a variety of organizations, like NGRREC and the Sierra Club, in order to focus on the environmental awareness of the community.

Conservation efforts are similarly interconnected, with key collaborators like: Missouri Botanical Garden assisting on initiatives like the "Honeysuckle Sweep," a biannual invasive species removal program, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers partnering on conservation and water management projects. These alliances enable broader regional impact, ensuring that land conservation extends beyond isolated efforts. On these shared efforts, Pollard stated that “the goal is so much bigger than just one organization, [so] we wouldn't be able to do it alone. We'd just kind of be spinning our wheels all the time if we tried.” For organizations like TNI, cross-organizational event planning and collaboration are crucial in spreading environmental awareness.

STRUCTURE AND RESISTANCE

The Nature Institute may be quite resistant to the hostile federal political infrastructure that the future Trump administration might impose. Angela Moan commented on the structure of TNI: “We are t a privately owned organization. The organization owns all the

land and operates entirely independently. We do not receive any state or federal funding; all our money comes from donors or grants. We are an Illinois-dedicated state nature preserve, but we do not receive any money or support from Illinois. None. A lot of our funds come from donations, memberships, and small fees for our programs.” Like Heartlands Conservancy, TNI is not dependent on state and federal governments to function. They were fortunate to receive grants from Phillips 66, Amren, an anonymous donor, and the Illinois Ornithological Society. When I asked Pollard directly about the threat the Trump administration might pose, she stated that “all it means is that we might just have to, personally, work a little bit harder, and try our best to combat misinformation.” This response comes in the context of a president who has referred to climate change as a “hoax,” and a future Energy Department secretary that states: “Although increased GHG emissions are generally associated with warmer temperatures, there remains significant scientific uncertainty around feedback effects [to climate change].”⁴

STUDENT OPPORTUNITES

The Nature Institute offers jobs for people aged 16 and up to act as camp counselors for their summer programs, an they also host a variety of workdays throughout the years. “We'd love to have you and your friends out here,” stated Angela Moan at the end of our interview. “There's always something to do!”



JERRY F. COSTELLO FIELD STATION / NGRREC

Exploring the Heart of River Science: The National Great Rivers Research and Education Center

Nestled on the banks of the mighty Mississippi River in Alton, Illinois, the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC) stands as a beacon for environmental research, education, and conservation. With the towering river as its backdrop, NGRREC is a hub where science, education, community outreach, the environment intersect, offering visitors and researchers alike a deeper understanding of one of the North America's largest water systems.

Founded through a collaboration between the University of Illinois and Lewis and Clark Community College The center's mission is to promote the sustainable management of river ecosystems and to educate the public about the critical environmental challenges facing these vast and vital waterways. aspect of life in the U.S. Midwest. NGRREC as an organization has three main pillars which the organization commits to: research, education, and outreach (REO).

NGRREC's research spans several fields, from aquatic biology and river hydrodynamics to environmental policy and water quality management. Scientists at NGRREC monitor water conditions, track wildlife populations, and study microplastics in our water ecosystems. The results of this research not only inform local

conservation efforts but also influence stakeholders to implement effective control strategies.

As part of its broader commitment to environmental stewardship, NGRREC is also deeply involved in applied conservation efforts throughout the Mississippi River watershed. The center works with state and federal agencies, local communities, and conservation organizations to restore habitats, improve water quality, and protect endangered species.

One of NGRREC's major initiatives involves the restoration of wetlands and floodplain habitats, which serve as critical buffers against flooding, improve water filtration, and provide vital habitat for wildlife. The center's work in this area has helped lead efforts to improve the resilience of the river system in the face of increasingly frequent and intense floods.

Another key focus is on addressing the growing threat of invasive species. From the Asian carp to the zebra mussel, invasive species pose a significant risk to native biodiversity and the overall health of river ecosystems. NGRREC researchers are at the forefront of efforts to track, manage, and mitigate the impact of these invasive species, working with local communities and having strike teams that can focus on taking down invasive plants such as the

Honeysuckle, which NGRREC had previously worked to eliminate from The Nature Institute.

Education

Besides the research NGRREC does, their educational programs engage students and the community in river science and conservation through various initiatives. A significant event I participated in in my summer interning with NGRREC was their Swarovski Water School. This program engaged students from local communities to educate them on water science and the environment. Through this program, students in programs such as TRIO Upward Bound, which focuses on preparing disadvantaged students for college, can experience the environment firsthand.

This latter sentiment is something I spoke about with Hannah Griffith, a second-generation environmentalist working with NGRREC as the Volunteer Coordinator for the Riverwatch program. "A lot of the time, we're working with students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they'll come here, and it's the first like positive interaction they've ever had with water," Griffith stated, "a lot of them are afraid of the river and have been taught like it's something to fear." As someone who came from a disadvantaged background myself, I never experienced the environment outside of parks in my community. This sentiment was something that rang true for me, as before I started working with NGRREC, I had never been in a natural body of water. Griffith further detailed the importance of these programs on environmental consciousness: "I think our outreach programs help show people that our water is something to be valued, and that it's interesting and fun, and not necessarily a scary or dirty place."

Outreach

NGRREC has a wide variety of outreach events, but the one I want to focus on specifically here is Riverwatch, a community science program which Griffith works on. The Riverwatch program has members of local communities across Illinois trained to become volunteer scientists collecting data about the health of local streams by analyzing the types of macroinvertebrates - "basically just water bugs," as Griffith put it - apparent in the river silt. Riverwatch also has two other programs monitoring mussels and river chloride levels, the

latter which is conducted in the winters when road salt is put out and drains into water systems.

Community Science is an interesting field of outreach, as it involves members of local communities into the science field, which commonly has been restricted to a large number of people. By engaging communities with science, people are educated about the importance of river health and have a direct stake in their local ecosystems.

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water

For more information about NGRREC, visit
<https://www.ngrrec.org/>



**The National Great Rivers
Research & Education Center**



Native Birds in Winter / The Sierra Club

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Interviewing these individuals allowed me to see how environmentalists engage with their local communities in an interesting way and how different organizations are reacting to movements at the national level.

The Sierra Club engages with city council boards, educating people on the correct ways of dealing with invasive species, and holding community events where people can talk about the environment. Since Favilla at the Sierra Club is involved with policy, her work is intimately tied to federal policy changes.

Heartlands provides many opportunities for volunteers to get involved with clean up and planting events. O'Donnell's work with local communities to deal with flooding, wastewater, and green development shows how environmental organizations can help their local communities to improve. Since this organization focuses more on community level action, they are less affected by national shifts, as their work remains the same, and they are resilient.

The Nature Institute is likewise focused on local, community action with the preminent goal of conserving the Olin Nature Reserve. Their work with educational programs engages the youth and introduces them to the life of an environmentalist. Since the organization is funded through private donations and grants, it will likewise be resistant for the time to come.

And lastly, my short interview with Griffith from NGRREC taught me about the importance of engaging to individuals of disadvantaged backgrounds in the environment. Whilst specific parts of NGRREC, such as their grant funding and conservation work might be harmed with the next administration, their

commitment to community outreach and education will remain the same.

Importantly, despite their general resilience, all three organizations emphasized the need for younger people serve as volunteers. From their recounting of stories, volunteers tend to be older, retired individuals. Making sure that there are opportunities for young people to get involved is something that schools and organizations should work towards.

In sum, these interviews with Christina Favilla, John O'Donnell, Ramona Pollard and Angela Moan, and Hannah Griffith give insight into environmental organizations in Illinois, their work, and how they are reacting to federal shifts in environmental policy. Their stories reveal the depth of commitment necessary to drive local initiatives, highlighting that impactful environmental work extends beyond scientific expertise; it requires community collaboration, policy engagement, and long-term vision.

For more information about our project please go to <https://ngrrec.codes121.xyz/team>

Citations:

Author's interview with Christine Favilla, Zoom, 15 October 2024.

Author's interview with Christine Favilla, Zoom, 25 October 2024.

Author's interview with Christine Favilla, Zoom, 20 November 2024.

Author's interview with Hannah Griffith, Zoom, 2 December 2024.



“In Loving Memory of...”
By Nicholas Muppidi-Fowler

When I am past this world
and not even dust of my bones remain,
I wish to be remembered as a simple park bench,
where beneath “In Loving Memory of,”
my name is engraved.

I wish to be the place where young children rest,
tired after a morning full of play.
Though life grants them invaluable freedom,
they spend it as they may.

I wish to be the place where young minds can graze.
Seeing the stranger’s name on laminated plastic,
inquisitive kids pause to imagine who I was.
Their minds design stories of an adventurer, doctor, or astronaut,
and those stories are good enough as truth—
only they’d be left to say.
I live on in their stories, even as young memories fade.

I wish to be the place where, at midday,
young couples sit and sing sweet nothings into each other’s ears.
New romance riots before eventually dispersing,
yet life is free, people are plenty, and mistakes are always made.
Walking by me, days or years later, one old lover could look
and chuckle as they hold their new partner’s hand.

I wish to be the place where an exhausted mother stops in the
afternoon.
She thinks it’s nice to get out once in a while with her baby.
Upon the aging bench, she almost relaxes with the little one on
her thigh.
The copper colored sunlight illuminates her wrinkles;
“Work again tomorrow,
schedule a doctor’s appointment,
pay five hundred or so dollars for the car tune up,
not to mention running out of diapers,
and the rent is due soon.”
All these lines pass through her head as her child laughs
ambivalently.
I carry both their weights.

I want to be the place where, at sunset, all these people could
return to me as gray,
They’d remember the emotions they felt whilst sitting atop my
fading name,
feeling a connection with me—part recollection, part empathy.
After years of frolicking and questioning, freedom and anxiety
their bodies at last find pleasure in simple comfort.

In the darkness, everyone slips away.
Childhoods, thoughts, loves, and worries
all dissolve into the past,
joining me. My name now is blurred,
yet some evocation of me still tenderly loved.
In those new and fleeting memories,
I can live and have some meaning.

Indigenous Knowledge, Land, and Capitalism

What aspect(s) of “land as pedagogy” do you see reflected in your work in CODES/in your life?

For native peoples, land was the pedagogy which taught them life, taught them how to live their lives in a way symbiotic with it. As a person descended from both colonized peoples and the colonizers, I sometimes think of how I could try and choose which ancestors I prefer to model myself after. My Indigenous roots make me sad sometimes, as colonization removed these roots from me – colonization by the Europeans, and the furthered colonization by the systems of capitalism, hierarchy, and American culture. Sometimes I find myself trying my hardest to reclaim a culture that I was not brought up authentically in, that is so far removed from me that I wish I could once again capture. I relate with Simpson: “My experience of education was one of continually being measured against a set of principles that required surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda in order to fulfill those principles.” Education in a sense serves to create a monoculture – whether that was the assimilation schools or schools today that work to remove words like “ain’t,” and “tryna” from student’s vocabularies. The same way that indigenous wisdom was ignored with Kweezen’s and her syrup. Education depends on “one way” of doing things, ignoring that life was never such a way for thousands of years. Land, for Simpson, is the primary source of knowledge, and indigenous ideas should be explored in

connection with it. I agree with Simpson’s theory that indigenous knowledge should exist outside of colonial frameworks such as the institution, however, I would say that Capitalist superstructures, which are focused on growing, will eventually steal away this resurgence of indigenous knowledge and repackage it for consumer consumption. Working with NGRREC through CODES, and listening to a spiritualist that they brought for an event helps me understand how a relationship with land gives you a special understanding and the desire to protect it. A social worker I interviewed, Ruth Meyers, talked about how she and a group do water ceremonies to remember the enslaved peoples who died in Alton trying to cross the icy Mississippi to emancipate themselves. Land, the water, and the people are all connected, and understanding land as a place for learning instead of a place for developing and utilization can lead to a spiritual understanding that is absent under modern capitalism. Spiritualism and education are things which should not essentially be separate, and native peoples reclaiming their knowledge and developing their own systems of learning and disseminating knowledge can work to challenge these systems of capital, and not just exist outside of them.

Land of the Nishnabeg / ReNew Canada





The National Weather Service / The National Weather Service

FLOOD OF '93

History of Environmental Tragedy in Madison County

ALTON, IL - The Great Flood of 1993 was one of the most catastrophic floods in U.S. history, heavily impacting Alton, Illinois, along the Mississippi River. Persistent heavy rainfall and saturated ground in the Midwest caused the river to swell to unprecedented levels. By late July, floodwaters breached levees near Alton, inundating the downtown and riverfront areas. The Clark Bridge, a critical crossing, became a symbol of resilience as community members worked tirelessly to protect it and other infrastructure. The river crested on August 1, 1993, at 42.72 feet, far exceeding previous records and leaving much of the city underwater.

The flood caused extensive damage to homes, businesses, and farmland, displacing residents and crippling the local economy. Recovery efforts were slow, with floodwaters lingering for weeks, but the community rallied through sandbagging, rescue missions, and rebuilding efforts. The disaster brought attention to floodplain management and levee infrastructure, influencing future planning and preparedness. Despite the devastation, the flood demonstrated the strength and unity of the Alton community in the face of adversity.

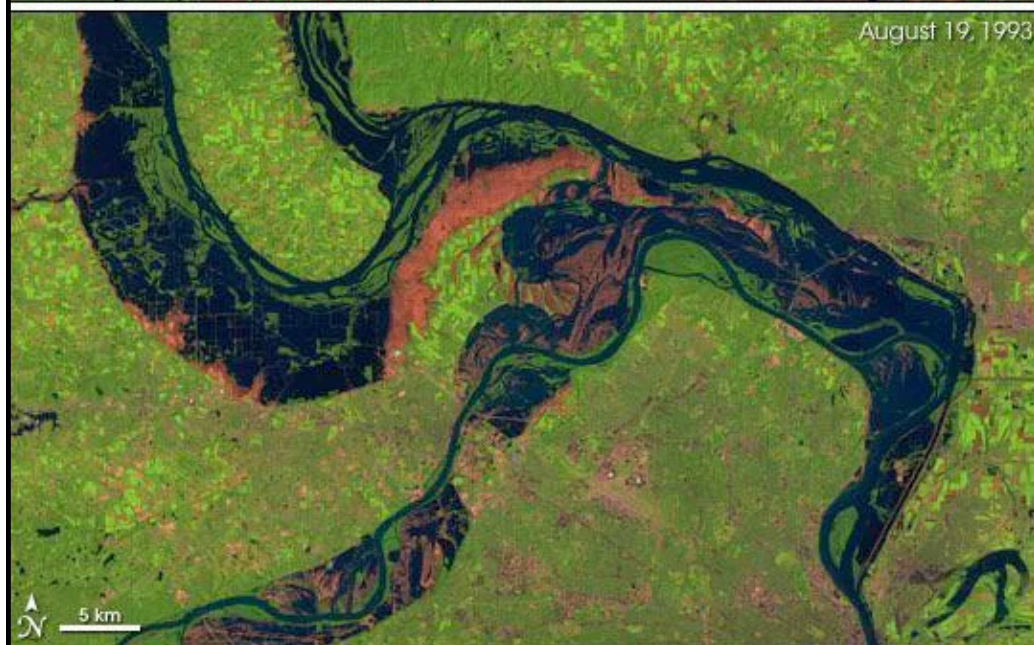


By Nicholas Muppidi-Fowler

During the Great Flood of 1993, islands along the Mississippi such as Chouteau Island, a former part of the greater Granite City township, were left completely devoid of private housing. The land of the Island was incorporated into Madison, IL and donated to the Army Corp of Engineers and Heartlands Conservancy to care for.

The Great Flood also saw great feat of human resilience, such as the great flood relief effort by members of the Madison County community, FEMA, and Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis, which donated thousands of cans of filtered water to distribute to communities whose water filtration systems were compromised.

Record level events like the Great Flood are liable to happen again. "We've been moving towards wetter conditions across Illinois and the Midwest over the last century, so maybe we will see more events like these as we move forward," said State Climatologist Dr. Jim Angel. According to Dr. Angel, the state is not prepared to deal with large climate catastrophes in the scale of the 1993 flood, which will only increase with continuing climate change. (Daisy Contreras. "Interview: 25 Years After The Great Flood of '93." NPR Illinois: 2018.)



Aerial image of the Mississippi on a normal summer (above) contrasted with the summer of 1993 (below) / Image from NASA and Wikipedia Commons

Aerial image of Alton's riverside during summer 1993 / The Alton Telegraph





Chain of Rocks Bridge - Heartlands Conservancy

HISTORY of Chouteau Island, Madison, IL

By Nicholas Fowler

Chouteau Island (show-toe), originally called Big Island, is a Mississippi River Island of Illinois, located in Madison County and incorporated into the town of Madison, IL.

Comprising about 3,200 acres, the modern island is both natural and artificial. Prior to the construction of the Chain of Rocks Canal, Chouteau Island was originally a single landmass separate from Gaberet Island (see Figure 1). With the construction of the Chain of Rocks Canal in 1953, a part of mainland Illinois was cut through to create a straight line to the old shore of Gaberet Island. Presently, Chouteau is fused with Gaberet and the separate part of the mainland, forming one continuous landmass (see figure 2). Chouteau is only separated from Gaberet Island by the Gaberet Slough, which only fills with water at high tide.

The riverside of Chouteau Island is the only natural stretch of the Mississippi from St. Paul to New Orleans that does not host barge traffic. Up until the construction of that canal in 1953, this stretch was one

of the most dangerous parts of the Mississippi for transit due to the “Chain of Rocks,” a 17-mile artificial strip of rapids interrupting the calm flow of the Mississippi. The rapids are now a shadow of what they used to be due to a low water dam.

Mississippi River Lock and Dam #27, notable for being the last dam on the Mississippi, is located at the southern part of the island. From that point on, one could theoretically sail straight from Chouteau to the Gulf of Mexico.

Chain of Rocks Bridge

Connecting Chouteau Island to Missouri is the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge. Finished in 1929, the bridge was formerly a stop on the Historic Route 66 before being retired in 1968 after the construction of the New Chain of Rocks Bridge the previous year. The bridge was closed to the public and in a state of disrepair until it was opened as a bike trail in 1999. The Chain of Rocks Bridge became listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. The bridge is notable for being built with a 30-degree midway across the Mississippi at the request of riverboat captains. Today the bridge is managed by Great Rivers Greenway and connects Illinois trails to the Missouri trail network.

Visible from the shore of Chouteau Island are two water intake towers for St. Louis. They were built in Victorian style, and stand tall in the middle of the Mississippi.

History

Chouteau Island was home to the first European Settlement in Madison County, with French colonizers settling as early as 1750. Details of this event seem to be

lost to history, with the only evidence of a French settlement being a large apple orchard and pear trees which, by the time they were identified by American colonists in 1802, had to have been growing for about 50 years. However, this orchard, along with a graveyard that held the early French settlers, was washed away by floods sometime before the 1880's. The French settlers used the Island as a place to breed horses, which they would then ship down the Mississippi to New Orleans.

Chouteau Island is named after Pierre Chouteau, a merchant, fur trader, slave owner, and early settler of St. Louis.

In the past, Chouteau was covered in a bountiful growth of timber such as: walnut, oak, ash, hickory, elm, and cottonwood. A large percentage of the modern Chouteau is still wooded, but much has been replaced with human infrastructure and has been deforested.

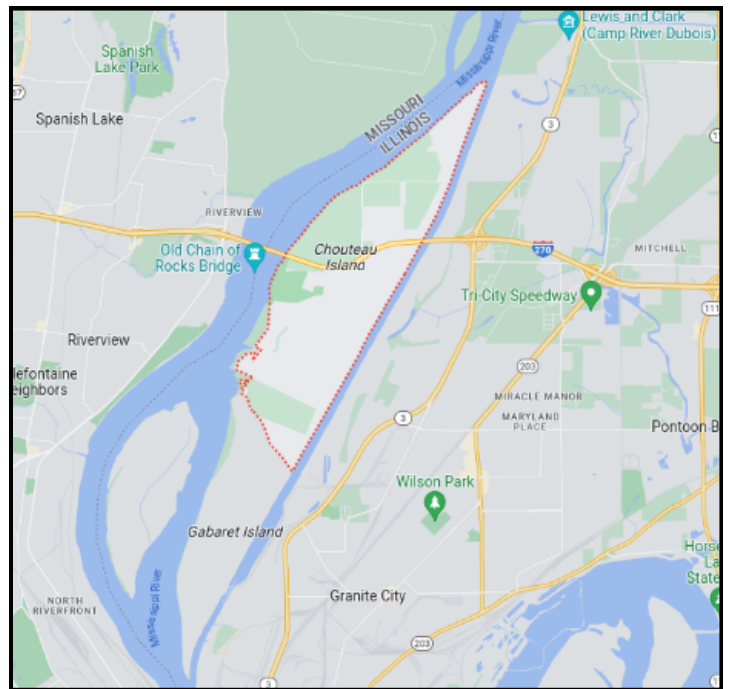
Chouteau was hit hard by the 1993 Flood which ravaged the Metro East. Before the 1993 flood, 35 to 50 families lived on Chouteau Island. With the flood damaging most of the land, the island was left mostly abandoned. Most of Chouteau was purchased by the City of Madison, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and The Illinois Department of Natural Resource. Remnants of buildings destroyed in the flood still remain on Chouteau.

Chouteau Island Today

Currently, Chouteau is a recreational park area home to several trails, fishing, and wildlife areas. Unfortunately, much of the island is covered in debris and litter resulting from poor sanitation



Chouteau before Levee Construction / Historic Map Works



Chouteau after Levee Construction / Google Maps

services on the island. Despite this, the city of Madison has made large strides in trying to develop the island. This includes, as of 2023, increased police patrolling of the island, development of trails, and maintenance of the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge. Many organizations are involved with conservation on Chouteau. The island hosts natural wetlands, which Heartland Conservancy acquired 22 acres of for preservation in 2021.

Chouteau is a valuable part of the modern Madison County community. People from all over come to visit its historic bridge, fish, collect rocks along the riverside, and enjoy the wonderful trails it has to offer.

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CODES Students / IRIS Center Facebook

Perspectives from a CODE Scholar

My time in the CODES program at SIUE introduced me to many local actors who work within their communities to better them. I started my work with the National Great River's Research and Education Center (NGRREC) in the Fall of 2022, where I was introduced to a variety of environmentalists, researchers, policy analyst, and community outreach coordinators.

My favorite experience during the initial semester of CODES was my interaction with Ruth Meyers, a retired social worker who had worked in the Alton area since the 1980s and related to me the importance of community and remembering the past. With the interview I did of her, I created a 12 minute video which I learned to edit by myself.

My next highlight of CODES was the internship I had with the NGRREC the summer of 2023. I was introduced to community science through the Riverwatch program which tests local streams for their health. I worked at several environmental events, with local TRIO Upward Bound students on water education, and learned the innerworkings of an environmental organization. My junior year had me interviewing members of different environmental organizations across Madison County and taught me the variety of different ways communities can be engaged with the environment.

For the rest of my time at SIUE, I plan to continue my work with the environmental organizations I have met. As a future educator, my perspectives on community engagement with the environment will help me engage students in the future. The lessons about community, environmentalism, and engagement are ones I will carry the rest of my life.

By Nicholas Fowler



Me during Riverwatch training, Summer '23 Internship

CODES
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE

Ruth Meyer

A Heart to Service

Nicholas Fowler & Kaz Isibue



Learn about the life of
someone dedicated to
serving her community

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9kppe7Dvcs>

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT SCHOLARS

