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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of a Healing Place Collaborative network diagram. Members are listed around the outside of the circle and each line between them indicates a collaboration or work done between those two members. Image courtesy of Mona Smith.

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FEATURE

MISSISSIPPI RIVER NETWORK: HEADWATERS TO GULF

By Kelly McGinnis

How can dozens or even hundreds of organizations working on the Mississippi River be harnessed into a powerful body that has demonstrable influence in our nation's capital, in capitals of states along the river, and in other places where

the health of the river is decided? To answer this question, we can look at The Mississippi River Network: Headwaters to Gulf (MRN), a coalition of 53 organizations dedicated to protecting the Mississippi River for the well-being of the land,



Mississippi River Network members on a field trip walking across the newly opened Harahan Bridge in Memphis crossing the Mississippi River.

Photo credit: Rebeca Bell. Courtesy Bluestem Communications.

water, wildlife, and people of America's largest watershed. By coordinating efforts and having a shared agenda and a common goal—a healthy Mississippi River—MRN has been able to affect policies that have an impact on the river.

MRN's overall goal is a healthy Mississippi River for land, water, wildlife and people. The Network seeks to influence not only policies that affect the river, but people's perceptions of the river, as well, and to deepen people's connection to the river. By unifying our messages throughout the ten-state region, the Network motivates citizens and also advocates to educate decision makers for river protection. MRN's policy campaign works in tandem with the public campaign to urge decision makers to create federal and state policies that reduce agricultural nutrient pollution, as one example. MRN educates both its member organizations and the public on how river-friendly policies can promote a healthier Mississippi River and it provides the opportunities to reach decision makers and advocate for these policies. MRN supports agricultural conservation programs that help reduce nitrogen and phosphorous runoff into the river and its tributaries and other measures to improve water quality and prevent

harmful algae blooms. We promote working with nature by using green infrastructure solutions to water resource projects that reduce upfront and long-term costs, while improving water quality, increasing public recreation access, and enhancing wildlife habitat.

For years, many organizations have worked to restore the long-damaged Mississippi River, but the problems facing the river are too big and too interconnected for any one organization to solve on its own. Recognizing the need for a region-wide effort to achieve large-scale, high-impact success, the McKnight Foundation founded the Mississippi River Network in 2005 as a collaborative effort to protect and restore the entire river. MRN plays a unique role in convening groups and getting them to work together on advocacy initiatives and education and outreach activities. The Mississippi is truly America's River—a critical source of water for 18 million people, a diverse and critical habitat for wildlife, the backbone of our economy, and a rich part of our heritage. We want to make the Mississippi River a national priority for restoration and protection.

Member Organizations

MRN's member organizations are varied. The Network has members in all ten river states, as well as national organizations that are based in Washington, D.C. Members are nonprofit organizations like the [National Wildlife Federation](#), [Friends of the Mississippi River](#), and [Missouri Coalition for the Environment](#); they are institutions such as the [National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium](#) that share the common goal of a healthy river and want to work toward that together. The varied membership is one of the Network's greatest strengths—having organizations with varied areas of focus broadens the Network's perspective as a whole. We have

members who focus on policy issues, who work on public advocacy issues, who are on the ground leading river clean-ups and canoe adventures, members who work on the science of wetland form and function and water quality issues, who focus on public outreach and campaigns and more. Members bring their personal and organizational area of expertise to the Network and contribute in the way that best serves both.

With 53 members and growing, a framework is required to clearly state how the Network is governed. To join MRN, an interested nonprofit organization or institution fills out a simple

one-page application. Once the application is approved by the Steering Committee (more on that below) the new member signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that states expectations of membership and then is part of the Network. There is no cost to being in the Network. Organizations can engage as much as they are able or is appropriate for them.

Members can serve on three different committees. The steering committee guides the Network overall and helps with big picture thinking, yearly goals, and advising on grant writing and the direction of the Network. The steering committee is managed by the MRN program manager. The policy committee sets the Network's policy priorities that are approved by the entire Network on a yearly basis and works on each policy priority at the federal or state level. The policy committee is managed by the MRN policy manager. The

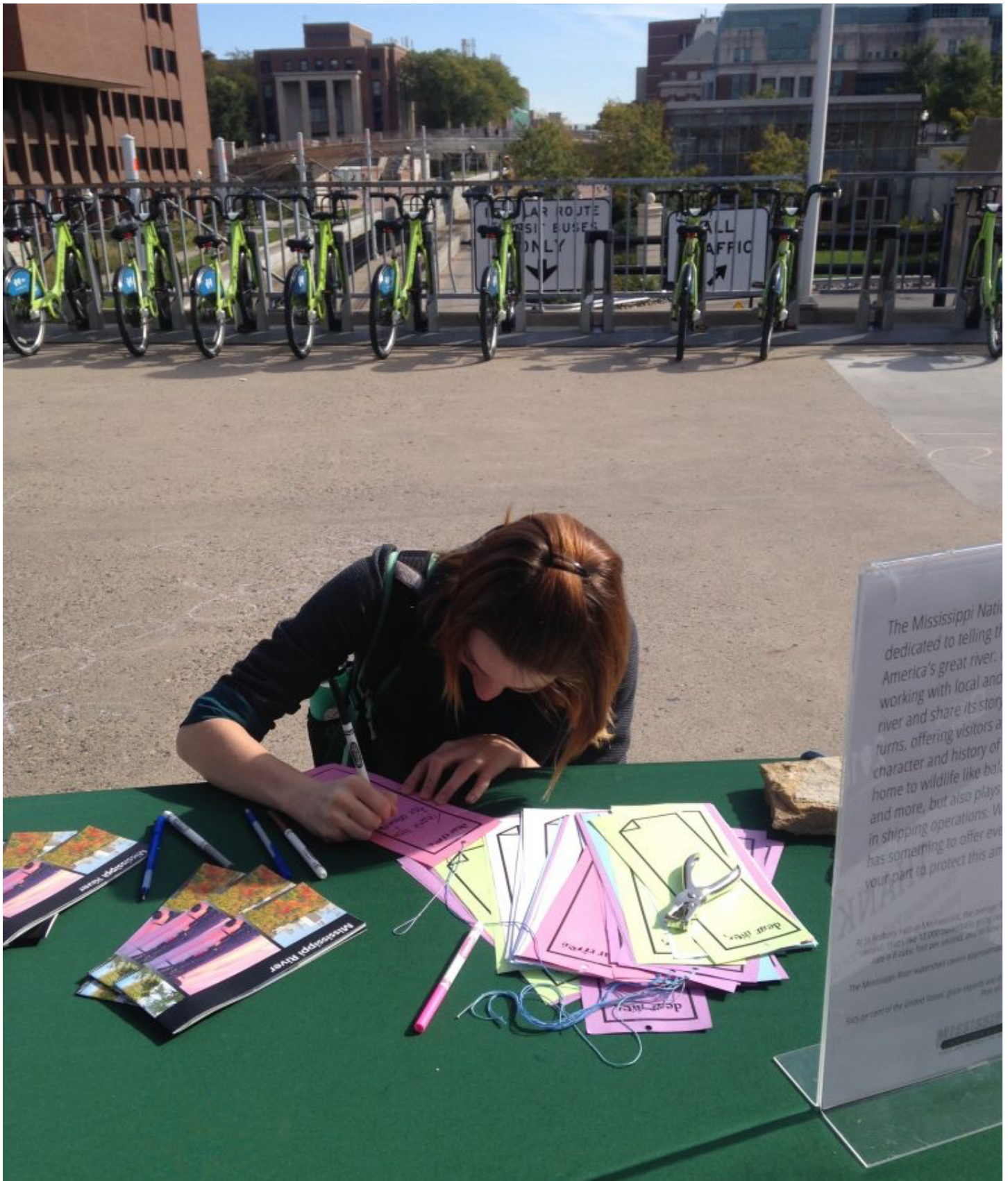
campaign committee oversees the *1 Mississippi* Campaign and is managed by the MRN campaign coordinator.

One way that MRN is able to be inclusive and effective is that we do not let differences divide that which we have in common. One way we approach our work cohesively is by working together through committees. Each year the 12-member policy committee, which is open to any member, sets the Network's policy priorities through consensus. The policy committee shares the recommendations with the steering committee to approve, then the entire Network has the chance to voice their thoughts and concerns about the policy priorities at MRN's Annual Meeting, where the priorities are formally approved. Those policy priorities guide the work we focus on for the year, allowing space for emerging issues to arise and be tackled if needed.

1 Mississippi

An essential component of MRN is the public communications campaign titled "*1 Mississippi: Can the River Count on YOU?*" The campaign was created using public opinion research gathered in 2007, then sampled again in 2015, so that the messages used could connect with the values of people living near the Mississippi River. The campaign raises awareness about the river, educates people about its current health, and motivates people to take one of ten specific actions to protect the river. Central to the campaign are its River Citizens, people who have taken a pledge to speak up for the river and care for it in simple ways that make a big difference. In the first seven years of the campaign, a cohesive group of close to 20,000 River Citizens residing throughout the basin, as well as nationwide, has been recruited. But MRN doesn't just recruit River Citizens, the Network regularly engages with this group of

people through newsletters, social media, and in-person engagement events to continue to educate them about issues affecting the river and ways they can help. Members are able to engage with the campaign in a variety of ways. They are encouraged to share advocacy actions like contacting elected officials about specific issues facing the river if appropriate for their organization and sharing the messaging created about the river. MRN member organizations can host events to recruit or engage River Citizens. A few members host a *1 Mississippi* outreach assistant, whose job is to recruit and engage River Citizens by attending events, hosting presentations, and writing blogs.



Dear River, a River Citizen recruitment event at the University of Minnesota in which participants were invited to write a letter to the Mississippi River. Image courtesy of Maria Lee.



Dear River, a River Citizen recruitment event at the University of Minnesota in which participants were invited to write a letter to the Mississippi River.

Image courtesy of Maria Lee.

Collective Impact

One way to view the Network and how it functions is through the lens of collective impact, the concept that a group of organizations work together on a common agenda through collaboration. It hinges on the idea that, in order to form lasting solutions to issues, people need to work together toward a common goal. The Network seeks to be an umbrella group and identify the common goals that unite us and focus on that instead of the issues that we differ on. The common agenda is the first tenet critical to collective impact. All participating organizations have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem. A Network policy priority illustrates this. The Network focused on the implementation of the Clean Water Act, a federal piece of legislation that covers the discharge of pollutants into our water bodies. Together, MRN supported the clarification of this act and wanted to see it implemented by Congress. We held weekly calls to strategize, created a tool kit of materials to educate the general public and decision makers on the importance of this rule and how the Mississippi River would benefit, and created action alerts for our River Citizens to let Congress know they also supported the implementation of the Clean Water Rule. We saw wild success in people taking advocacy actions because people care about clean drinking water, which the Clean Water Act protects. And we saw measurable success by seeing Congress not block the implementation of this rule, instead allowing the objections to play out in court.

The next tenet to collective impact is to have a shared measurement system for success and how it will be reported. Being funded by foundations, we have a built-in measurement system that comes in the form of grant reporting. Additionally, the MRN steering committee

tackled this by agreeing on ways to measure internal Network success by looking at member engagement across key areas: participation in a committee, participation in meetings, participation in policy actions, and participation in the *1 Mississippi* campaign.

The third tenet for collective impact is mutually reinforcing activities, which means having coordinated engagement through various activities to support the common agenda. Again, we can look to the Clean Water Act policy priority to see how this works in practice. As mentioned above, various member organizations worked together on this priority and created a myriad of tools—letters to the editor, fact sheets, action alerts, blog postings—for any interested organization, MRN member or not, to use to encourage Congress to implement the Clean Water Rule.

Another tenet essential to collective impact is the existence of a backbone organization with an independent staff dedicated to the coalition. The staff plays six roles to move the initiative forward: guide vision and strategy, support aligned activity, establish shared measurement practices, build public will, advance policy, and mobilize funding. This support helps build out success instead of expecting volunteers to make time to manage all the aspects of a large network. The staff writes the grants and reports, manages all aspects of the campaign and the policy work, and makes sure that the work of the campaign and policy priorities are aligned and moving on parallel tracks to achieve the same result. Staff also manages the grant budgets, manages the measurement tracking and success sharing, guides the building of public and political will, and is always looking for and applying for new funding opportunities. Staff is also responsible for communicating with the Network and providing avenues for MRN

member organizations to more easily connect and communicate with each other. This satisfies the last tenet of collective impact—continuous communication. Within the organization, this includes monthly committee calls, weekly emails, and use of an online communication tool. Communication with River Citizens comes in the form of a monthly e-newsletter, blog posting,

social media postings on Facebook and Twitter, posting of volunteer and education and engagement opportunities through our events calendar, or direct contact with campaign staff and emailed action alerts when there is an important petition to sign or a decision maker to reach out to about an issue facing the river.

The Principle of Give-Get

Fundamental to MRN is a basic principle by which we operate, the sense of give-get. What does that mean and how does that work? Give-get is the idea that members not only get benefits from being in the Network, but also give of their time, capacity, and strengths to engage in the Network. It is a two-way street of engagement that overall makes the fibers of the Network stronger. When members are actively engaged and also benefiting from their engagement, the result is a stronger, healthy, functioning coalition.

Working together with 53 organizations to achieve health of the Mississippi River is not always easy—both because of the vast membership and the magnitude of the river—but we continue to see how very worthwhile it is. When we have success on a major issue like the Clean Water Act implementation, it reinforces that this work is important and worthwhile. It gives us the energy to keep pushing forward with the vision of a healthy Mississippi River for all.

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About the Author

Kelly McGinnis, Mississippi River Program Manager, joined the Network in September 2014. She works directly with network members in the ten-state Mississippi River region, building the coalition with the goal to protect and restore the river. Kelly comes from a diverse professional background, starting her career as a fisheries biologist and freshwater ecologist in Washington state before moving back to the Chicago area where her focus shifted to sustainability in the built environment and coalition building.