



ISSUE 26 : SPRING 2024

OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

COMMITMENT

<https://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary journal of public scholarship rethinking water, place & community
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image of Asin-badakide-ziibi, the Baptism River, is courtesy of M. Baxley, Bear Witness Media.

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ISSN 2471-190X

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REFLECTIONS ON

UPRIVER: A WATERSHED FILM

By Chris O'Brien

As part of the longstanding Moos Family Speaker Series on Water Resources, Freshwater and the UMN College of Biological

Sciences presented a screening of UPRIVER: A Watershed Film, on December 5, 2023, at The Main Cinema in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The



Poster for UPRIVER: A Watershed Film. Image courtesy of Freshwaters Illustrated.

sold-out event featured a post-show panel discussion with Carrie Jennings (Research and Policy Director, Freshwater), Jacques Finlay (Professor of Ecology, Evolution and Behavior, University of Minnesota), John Whitehead (Filmmaker, Fretless Films), and Patrick Moore (Emerging Systems Consulting).

This hour-long documentary, produced by Freshwaters Illustrated and directed by Jeremy Monroe and David Herasimtschuk, is an inspiring look at the successful conservation efforts underway on Oregon's Willamette River system. Freshwaters Illustrated is a nonprofit organization based in Corvallis, Oregon, dedicated to raising awareness of freshwater biodiversity, ecosystems, and conservation.

Employing some impressive aerial and underwater footage, the filmmakers follow the Willamette from alpine tributaries, down through its agricultural floodplain, and finally to the streets of Portland. Along the way, we meet the agencies,

nonprofit organizations, farmers, and activists who are helping to restore watershed health in areas that have been impacted by forestry, agriculture and urbanization.

For example, many mountain streams had been degraded by erosion from historical logging. Public land managers even removed fallen trees, mistakenly considering them to be an impediment to fish passage when in fact the fallen timber provides essential habitat. In some Willamette River tributaries, large trees are lowered by helicopter to mimic natural processes that were previously interrupted by these public land managers. These trees create islands, gravel bars, and other instream habitat used by migrating chinook salmon and steelhead. Signs of success include reintroduction of native bull trout—a larger relative of Minnesota's brook trout—to these mountain streams.

Further downstream, farmers install grassed waterways, floodplain easements, and other targeted



Salmon migrate from the Pacific Ocean through the Willamette River and its tributaries each fall to spawn, and healthy in-stream stream habitat is critical for sustainable populations of these sensitive cold-water fish. Image courtesy of Freshwaters Illustrated.

conservation practices to prevent cropland runoff that has long polluted the Willamette. In the process, landowners are asserting a conservation ethic and sense of responsibility that gives hope to the difficult water challenges facing rural communities across the country.

Portland is the Willamette's last stop on the way to its confluence with the Columbia River. A wealth of green infrastructure and urban parkland helps to filter rainwater and protect the river in this urban setting. Recreation on the river is a big part of the city's culture, building a strong connection between the Willamette and the people of Portland.

The film was completed over a period of six years, allowing the filmmakers to track the success of various projects from inception through implementation. This is a meaningful way to tell these

stories, and it contributes to the film's positive, forward-looking message.

There are many parallels between conservation of the Willamette River system and similar efforts underway in the Mississippi, St. Croix, and Minnesota River watersheds, including the urgent need to engage private landowners. For example, the Fishers and Farmers Partnership connects landowners with educational resources and funding to improve soil health and water quality in the Upper Mississippi River basin. In the film, Joe Moll of the McKenzie River Trust explains, "Many of the fish and wildlife populations that we love depend on private lands and private habitats, and those landowners really hold the key to our conservation future."

The film acknowledges that watershed conservation takes decades, even generations, to



Much of the Willamette River floodplain is devoted to agriculture, and private landowners are key to restoring and preserving the watershed. Image courtesy of Freshwaters Illustrated.

fully realize. Consistent work and investment over time is vital to the long-term health of the ecosystem.

At Freshwater, a Minnesota-based nonprofit organization, our mission is to inspire and empower people to value and preserve water. We do this through research, education, and policy

efforts that help connect local communities with businesses, lawmakers, and governing agencies. We hope that UPRIVER inspires new thinking on watershed partnerships here in the Midwest—and how we might creatively share our conservation stories.

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Chris. 2024. "Reflections on *UPRIVER: A Watershed Film*." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 26. <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11449>.

About the Author

Chris O'Brien works on water communications and policy for Freshwater, a conservation nonprofit based in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Throughout his career, he has collaborated with a wide range of scientists and engineers to help tell the stories of their work. An avid fly fisherman, Chris serves on the board of Twin Cities Trout Unlimited where he advocates for clean, healthy streams in Minnesota and western Wisconsin.