



Vision for a Sustainable Mississippi River Watershed: Meridian Institute Interviews Findings and Recommendations

I. Introduction

The Mississippi River is an iconic American symbol. 42% of the land in the United States drains into the river. Ten states lie along the main stem of the river, which is fed by tributary waters from thirty-one states. The river is a valuable ecological and economic resource that serves millions of Americans.

Over the past two years the Army Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission has been holding a series of stakeholder and public meetings that discuss the concept of a long-term, intergenerational shared vision. Under direction from The Nature Conservancy, through the Great Rivers Partnership, and the Mississippi Valley Division of the Army Corps of Engineers, Meridian Institute was asked to assist in an assessment of the possibilities for creating such a vision for the Mississippi River watershed.

To that end, Meridian conducted a series of interviews that sought to gather input from key stakeholders that span the regional and sector diversity that is present in the basin. This report details key findings from these interviews and recommends a process for moving towards a shared vision.

Forty-three interviews were conducted in the basin. Interviewees came from as far south as Southern Louisiana and as far north as Minnesota. Representatives from industry, agriculture, non-governmental organizations, as well as federal, state, and local officials were interviewed in this project. The list of people interviewed is included in Appendix A. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. Interviewees were asked about their specific experiences in the river basin, their knowledge of collaborative projects already underway, their relationship to on-going visioning and planning processes, and their suggestions for ways to design a process that will accommodate the vast diversity that is present in the Mississippi River basin. (The interview questions are attached in Appendix B, and a list of points raised in the interviews is included in Appendix C). Interviews were conducted confidentially. No individual was or will be linked directly to what was said in their interview. Instead, the key themes and valuable insights that emerged from the interviews are used as the basis for this summary report.

II. Summary of Key Findings and Themes

The take-away message from the interviews was: **there is a need and desire for a shared vision for the Mississippi River Basin that encompasses the whole system in an integrated way; includes ecological, social, and economic factors; and lead to commonly accepted priorities (perhaps akin to the Millennium Ecosystem goals) to serve as meaningful, actionable touchstones for on-the-ground projects across the system.** Secondly, **there is a need for more effective institutional structure(s) to coordinate management of the river to turn the vision into reality.** In particular they need to be more integrated across jurisdictions, agencies and interest sectors; more facile and responsive to today's problems; and more inclusive of all stakeholder groups. It was apparent from the interviews that there is a sense of timeliness for this kind of effort, numerous building blocks already in place, and at least a core of dedicated enthusiastic individuals who will contribute time and wisdom.

Interviewees cited a number of challenges that must be confronted and dealt with to achieve a shared vision and more effective institutional coordination. The sheer size and complexity of the system and the diversity of perspectives about what is important and how to address the problems in the basin are daunting – it may be most useful to conceptualize this process as the linking together of many disparate pieces rather than creating some comprehensive structure that reaches across the whole basin. **Entrenched institutional arrangements have created what appear to many as unresponsive, unconnected silos. In the absence of a shared vision for ecosystem health and economic vitality across the whole basin, priorities are largely determined by default through the political process.** And, many of the key people who can help lead and facilitate a visioning process are already overburdened with other commitments. On the positive side, interviewees offered a wealth of ideas and suggestions for responding to these and other challenges. However overwhelming a visioning process might appear, the benefit of a shared vision and more coordinated, streamlined, effective institutional arrangements will help relieve the stresses that are apparent in today's system.

III. Applicable Lessons and Principles from other Collaborative Efforts

There are numerous examples from around the globe of large, complex, watershed or ecosystem – based collaborative initiatives and other complicated multi-stakeholder processes that offer lessons and principles with applicability to a visioning process in the Mississippi River basin. A few examples follow.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) entailed a global assessment of the impact of current and historical ecosystem trends on human well-being; options for conserving and managing ecosystems in ways that contribute to human welfare; and scenarios for changes in ecosystems and human well-being. The effort involved an international oversight Board;

an extensive engagement and outreach strategy with stakeholders; and, and meetings throughout the world. The Millennium Ecosystem goals that resulted from the process now serve as touchstones around the world for governments, NGOs and businesses.

The Puget Sound Salmon Leaders' Forum: In 1999, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings of the Chinook salmon, summer chum, and bull trout in Puget Sound brought a growing crisis to the forefront in the Pacific Northwest. Puget Sound leaders recognized the need to develop a coordinated regional approach. A group of over 150 representatives of Federal, state, tribal and local government, and salmon recovery organizations came together initially to shape the "shared strategy" for salmon recovery. The federal agencies responsible for administering the ESA agreed to support the shared strategy and have been active participants in the process from the beginning. Watershed groups across the Sound drafted recovery plans for their areas. NOAA Fisheries Service worked with Shared Strategy participants and the Puget Sound Technical Recovery Team to combine those plans into a single plan for the region. A panel of scientific experts developed the scientific framework and recovery criteria; State and Tribal co-managers cooperated in the development of comprehensive harvest management plans; a shared strategy development committee provided overall direction for the shared strategy approach, and a shared strategy work group (agency policy staff) provided outreach and support to watershed groups, linked various recovery activities and provided the policy analysis, strategy advice and logistic support necessary for the plan. In June 2005, the Shared Strategy presented its regional plan for ESA-listed Puget Sound Chinook to NOAA. The Northwest Region then prepared a supplement that clarified and expanded on ESA recovery requirements. Together the Shared Strategy plan and NOAA Fisheries Service supplement comprise a final recovery plan for Puget Sound completing for the first time ever in the history of the Endangered Species Act a recovery plan developed and endorsed by the community.

Great Lakes Restoration Plan: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on February 21, 2010 unveiled a five-year, \$475-million plan to revitalize the Great Lakes, including cleaning up polluted water and beaches, restoring wetlands and fighting invasive species such as Asian carp. Federal and state officials call the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan "historically unprecedented" in size, funding and coordination between branches of government. The plan calls itself light on study and heavy on action, seeking to heal the Great Lakes ecosystem from "150 years of abuse" and to ensure that "fish are safe to eat; the water is safe to drink; the beaches and waters are safe for swimming, surfing, boating and recreating; native species and habitats are protected and thriving; no community suffers disproportionately from the impacts of pollution; and the Great Lakes are a healthy place for people and wildlife to live." Developed by 16 federal agencies, the plan requires annual progress reports from the EPA on restoration activities and the allocation of funding, which would come from the normal congressional appropriations process. The plan sets concrete measures for progress on several key threats to the lakes and their surrounding communities. It also includes the first complete assessment of the lakes' entire 530,000-acre

coastal wetland, and a goal of restoring nearly 100,000 acres of wetlands and other habitat areas by 2014.

Everglades Adaptive Management Program: A collaborative process has been used to develop an Adaptive Management (AM) Strategy for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) as well as for project level application of the CERP AM Strategy; A process is currently underway to develop specific steps for integrating scientific information from the AM process into CERP decision-making.

The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative (JOCI): The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative has, for the past several years, brought together Commissioners from the US Commission on Ocean Policy and Pew Ocean Commission. JOCI has been a leader in stimulating national action on ocean and coastal policy reform. In addition, JOCI has helped to facilitate a number of regional, multi-state collaborative efforts including the Governors' West Coast Agreement directly involving the governors of California, Oregon and Washington in a formal agreement addressing ocean and coastal policies.

The US Climate Action Partnership (USCAP): USCAP was organized to bring together senior leaders from the corporate and NGO communities to work together to develop a common agenda calling for federal legislation to address climate change. This effort demonstrates that organizations facing a common challenge can, at the senior most levels, gain an understanding of their respective interests and craft common principles and recommendations for action. It also has shown that when an effort of this kind can reach consensus, it can have an impact on decision making.

Lessons and Principles from these and other Efforts

A detailed review of some of the most relevant initiatives could result in a long list of detailed suggestions for a Mississippi River basin visioning process, but even at a high level it is apparent that there are cross cutting principles that apply to most if not all these kinds of processes:

1. It is important to design the process to fit the realities of the situation, including geography, interest group diversity, need for scientific and informational inputs etc.
2. Try to keep the process design as simple and understandable as possible – this is important because it is key to being able to engage participants and the public at large.
3. Involve key players in the decision and formulation of the process, both to build ownership and because they will have invaluable insights regarding participants, ways of framing issues and paths to effective implementation of results.

4. Working in stages or phases can be very helpful so everyone has the opportunity to assess progress and make adjustments as needed.
5. Create opportunities early for parties to be involved in information exchange, development of assumptions to guide data collection and analysis, opportunities to gain a common understanding of the challenges being faced – before they launch into developing potential solutions/actions

IV. Recommendations

Any process to establish a shared vision and create new institutional arrangements needs to be convened/conducted in a way that creates a sense of shared ownership. It will need leadership, resources, and a clear sense of purpose. This will be a multi-year effort. The following recommendations represent a possible roadmap for getting from here to there.

Near Term Actions (March – June 2010):

1. Prepare for the Inner Coast Summit vision session (June 22-24, 2010). Specifically, develop a session agenda, identify key questions, and prepare materials to help stimulate discussion, e.g., a working draft problems statement/vision/priorities/ (building on previous and on-going work), and a background paper on lessons and principles from other initiatives.
2. Share the Interview Findings and Recommendations document with the interviewees, and request feedback on the extent to which Meridian incorporated the critical points raised in their interviews. Note – this review should be limited to whether each individual's points are included; it should not be a critique of other perspectives in the document.
3. Set up electronic mechanism(s) (e.g., Share Point and/or Word Press) for sharing information and ideas, gathering input, and stimulating further discussion about the vision process. This could be used, for example, as a discussion forum regarding this document, and to assist in preparations for the Inner Coast Summit.
4. Reach out to additional sectors, organizations, and individuals who have a stake in the Mississippi – for the purpose of engaging them in the vision dialogue, benefiting from their insights about the best process forward, and encouraging ongoing participation. Tribes are one example of a critically important sector that must be included; organizations such as the Native American Rights Fund, the Midwest division of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and National Tribal Environmental Council can help identify appropriate mechanisms to engage the many Tribes in the Mississippi River Basin. States are another essential sector needing particularly focused attention.

Mid Term: (Coming out of Inner Coast Summit)

1. Establish a steering group for purposes of: a) supporting the development of vision and priorities; b) promoting outreach within the Basin, to national leadership, and internationally; and c) developing options for legal/institutional arrangements that could lead to a new coordination entity/framework. The group needs to be comprised of individuals from different sectors with either shared or rotating leadership, provided with staff to support their work. Funding ideally from several sources (agency, corporate, foundation, etc.).
2. Begin identifying funding options to support the vision development process.
3. Clarify scope/niche relative to other related efforts and how to utilize them as building blocks for future institutional/organizational collaboration.
4. Begin exploring options for an Executive Order, CEQ directive, Congressional Caucus, Governors' Caucus, white paper, or other mandate to conduct this work.
5. Identify and support a discrete number of on-the-ground pilots/tests/examples that might serve to demonstrate/develop/test/highlight integrated solutions accommodating multiple priorities/agency coordination/stakeholder involvement, etc.
6. Begin exploring a process (perhaps similar to the Millennium Assessment) that could be used to further the next steps in the development of the 200 year vision process.

Longer Term Goals (5 years plus):

1. Obtain broad agreement and recognition of vision/priorities/principles to serve as a touchstone for management of the River Basin.
2. Institutionalize new entity/framework with real authority to help drive priorities and coordination across the Watershed.

Appendix A: Interview Participants

- Todd Ambs, Governor James Doyle's Office (WI)
- John Bickel, Trustee IAFO
- Dale Chapman, Lewis and Clark Community College
- Tom Christensen, USDA
- Trey Cooke, Delta Wildlife
- Craig Cox, Environmental Working Group
- Mark Davis, Tulane University
- Mike Demissie, Center for Watershed Science
- Tim Elder, Caterpillar Foundation
- Max Etheridge, USGS
- Peter Evans, ICWP
- Stephen Gambrell, US Army Corps of Engineers
- Teri Goodman, National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium
- Mark Gorman, Northeast Midwest Institute
- George Grugett, Mississippi Valley Flood Control Association
- James Hannon, Army Corps of Engineers
- Diane Herndon, Monsanto
- Bill Herz, Fertilizers Institute
- Curtis Hopkins, Ducks Unlimited
- Hon. R.D. James, Mississippi River Commission
- Mike Klingner, UMIMRA and Klingner & Assoc.
- Ron Kroese, McKnight Foundation
- Amy Larson, National Waterways Conference, Inc
- John Laub, Sand County Foundation
- Cornel Martin, Waterways Council, Inc
- Steve Mathies, Governor Bobby Jindal's Office (LA)
- Moira McDonald, Walton Family Foundation
- Dan Mecklenborg, Ingram Barge
- Tracy Mehan, The Cadmus Group/Horinko Groups (Water)
- King Milling, American's Energy Coast/American's Wetland
- Barb Naramore, Upper Mississippi River Basin Association
- Ron Nassar, Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee
- Pat Nunnally, University of Minnesota
- Chad Pregracke, Founding Living Lands and Waters

- Michael Reuter, The Nature Conservancy
- Paul Rohde, Watershed Council Inc.
- Hon. William Clifford Smith, Mississippi River Commission
- Greg Swanson, Moline, Illinois Department of Public Utilities
- Diana Threadgill, Mississippi River Natural and Recreational Corridor
- Rick Tolman, National Corn Growers Association
- Mike Wells, Missouri Department of Natural Resources
- Marcia Willhite, Illinois EPA
- Roger Wolf, Iowa Soybean Association

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- What is the nature of your interest/involvement/history in the river basin?
- What do you think about the need for a shared vision?
- From your perspective, what are the most urgent problems/needs for the Mississippi River?
- What are any institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, other issues that you think present opportunities or constraints to development of a common vision?
- Do you know of existing places or examples where stakeholders/interests are already effectively collaborating within the Mississippi Basin?
- Do you have suggestions for the kind of process(es) that will accommodate regional differences, integrate multiple competing interests/needs, and take into account political realities? Can you suggest examples of collaborative processes that could provide useful lessons?
- How would you suggest best integrating this effort with other on-going visioning and planning processes?
- Do you have suggestions for getting beyond “mom and apple pie”?
- What are other barriers and challenges to this kind of collaborative process for the Mississippi – and how best to overcome them?
- How might you see your involvement in a visioning process going forward?
- Who are key groups and leaders that we should be talking to?
- Anything else to help inform our thinking about the most effective process possible?

Appendix C: Points Raised in the Interviews

Opportunities

- This is a good time to think about the future of the Mississippi River. Communities which have traditionally been at odds with each other are rethinking their roles on the river
- The ACE is currently undergoing an internal evaluation that could fit right into this process
- There is a lot happening internationally with other great rivers (Mekong, etc.) that could be of relevance (Mississippi learning from them and vice versa)
- The administration is pushing collaboration and stakeholder involvement – should be supportive of this kind of initiative
- The upcoming America’s Inner Coast Summit offers a near-term opportunity to discuss, potentially help launch a visioning process

Issues and Concerns

No Shared Sense of Priorities / Hard to Get things Done

- It is extremely challenging to even think about coordinating across such a widespread and diverse system
- There has been a multiplication of problem definitions that has confused everyone
- There is a tendency to get off-track and to focus on a singular area
- A visioning process that is very high level may not translate into projects on the ground and may prove to be useless
- All projects that try to go forward on the Mississippi (especially related to flood control) are slowed or stopped in court

Lack of Connectivity/Coordination

- Silo thinking – these groups tend to talk position statements and not underlying values – it will be important to get people to hear and think with each other
- Bifurcation – upper v. lower, quality v. quantity, NGOs v. agencies v. private sector, etc.
- Flood control in the upper river basin is not nearly as complete as in the lower basin. Increased coordination is needed; currently there is a “patchwork” of local levee systems
- Difficult for people in tributary watersheds to understand their connection to downstream communities
- People are disconnected from the river and view it differently in each different region. This will make it difficult to bring in people to collaborate.

- Ultimately, improving the water quality situation will require that all states along the river work together and share common practices

Political Pressures/Interests

- All politics is local. Local representatives and Senators will block the process if they are not invited to participate
- State sovereignty – where is the line between state and federal rights related to management of the Mississippi
- Lower Mississippi is one of the poorest economic regions in the US, any long-term planning should incorporate attempts at economic and social development in this region
- There is a tremendous lack of trust between agricultural groups and environmental groups

Substantive Issues that Need to be Addressed

- The need, and challenge, to determine the geographic and temporal scope for the vision.
- Accept that it is a river, allow riparian activities such as high and low water, seasonality to reappear in the river
- Many regions are running out of water. This may affect how water is used in or moved out of the Mississippi River Basin
- Population growth, population change, and climate change will all drastically affect water quantity and quality in the river basin
- Needed infrastructure improvements in the Upper Mississippi (UMR)
- The river is very dynamic, its users need to be able to change along with it
- Erosion. Growers are willing to take responsibility for their own land and have asked Monsanto to help them identify tools to prevent runoff
- New locks are over their life limits and no action is being taken to rebuild them – the Corps and other groups are only talking
- Siltation is possibly the biggest environmental issue on the River
- There is a need to approach a satisfactory level of re-investment in river infrastructure and associated environmental restoration
- Federal Government needs to view inland water transportation as effective, efficient, and the most environmentally benign form of transit
- MO Authorized Purposes Study – a decision to hold more water in reservoirs in the headwaters of the MOR could prevent restoration efforts on the Mississippi and could prevent shipping on the section of the Mississippi below the reservoirs in Missouri
- It is important to treat the entire river basin as a holistic ecosystem

- There are some groups (e.g., agriculture) that wholly deny any involvement in creating some of these issues

Institutional / Organizational Issues

- That this effort could get half way started then abandoned when a new Division Commander comes on board
- Ecosystem Restoration is part of the Corps' main responsibility but they are not attending to it
- The Corps is a very restricted, bureaucratic organization, in order for any action to be taken, their Congressional authorization will need to be modified
- The Corps is very bureaucratic and politicized and this can impede progress
- The river is managed too much thinking about navigation and transportation, not enough thinking about long term resource management

Process Suggestions and Examples from the Interviews

Process Design

- We need to examine why long-term planning and development has not worked so far? Need to examine the political influences and institutional impediments in EPA, USDA, and the Corps that are getting in the way.
- There must be resources that are brought to this process, to make the process happen and to help achieve the goals set by this process
- Use a systems approach incorporating social, political, and economic concerns.
- A vision is necessary but not sufficient. Need a legal framework (along the lines of the Great Lakes Compact) to protect the interests/needs of Mississippi River Basin states/stakeholders.
- Design an approach in which everyone does not have to be present for every interaction in consideration of time constraints and "collaboration fatigue"
- Consider using social networking media
- The threat of federal involvement can sometimes help encourage interstate collaboration
- Be clear about what the end-product is (i.e. a high-level statement, a well-negotiated plan, a continued working group, etc.)
- Use small/working groups – by region/sector – to get to actionable details
- Design a process that is scalable. A basin-wide vision will seem too broad for those who have local or regional interests
- The process should incentivize people to compromise without feeling like they are losing ownership of the vision.

-
- There is so much going on, with multiple consortia, working groups etc., the process should be designed to get the most produced for the least input of time and resources (best bang for your buck).
 - The Corps, NOAA, EPA, and USDA have been so involved in the river, that they know many of the issues. It could be very valuable to start by sitting these groups down and letting them define many of the biggest issues facing the basin.
 - A consensus vision (as opposed to an imposed vision) will be harder to get but is more likely to address the many concerns in the basin.
 - There are many complex legal issues surrounding water rights among the different states, it will be important to get a clear understanding of the legal field that is in play.
 - It is going to be very important to get buy-in from governors and state agencies, they are major stakeholders.
 - Re-think the Corps structure. Having many divisions managing the Mississippi creates challenges. The frequent turnover of Corps leadership makes it challenging to achieve goals.
 - Federal resource management divisions have no urban divisions. How are you going to incorporate urban concerns?
 - It is going to be critical to take the time to have conversations develop and for people in the basin to begin trusting each other.
 - The cost-benefit analysis process that the Corps uses is a useful tool for determining what projects should be prioritized above others
 - Some of these new projects could generate a lot of jobs. This could be used to get Congressional resources allocated into the river basin
 - Include a public and political education component – educate people about their use of the river and that they are in fact stakeholders.
 - Have a continuously updated website where people can provide continuous feedback
 - Be sure to include the private sector and have respect for private lands and businesses.
 - The upper and lower rivers are so different that it may be better to create general principles for management only for the whole river, while developing more comprehensive visions for each the Upper and Lower Basin. Only issues that affect the entire river should require whole-river collaboration (such as sedimentation, nutrient run-off).
 - Try to not compartmentalize the issues. Focus on the interconnections between them.
 - Committing staff and resources to projects ensures that they are taken through to completion

- It is going to be incredibly important to think about the capacity of the Corps. They are interesting in the sense that they are project driven and answer to Congress. They have difficulty being mission driven
- Thinking about setting goals at a high level, but pursuing action at a local level
- Once a vision is created, there needs to be rewards for complying and consequences for failing to do so.
- Committing staff and resources to projects ensures that they are taken through to completion
- Consider sector and regional visions that feed into an overall vision
- It is great that the Army Corps is thinking beyond its projects and is oriented towards a long-term mindset. This needs to be a permanent change
- People need to step outside of their own interests and thinking about the best long-term interests of the river and the nation.
- The process needs to start with agreements of what the major problems are and what caused them.
- The vision needs to be intergenerational so that it becomes about the best uses of the river and land
- The river can be used to rebuild habitat and restore resources up and down the river
- The risks and consequences of failure are too big. There needs to be a focus on prioritizing projects and the use of resources outside the congressional earmark process
- Present recommendations at the World Water Council. Try to build a vision that could be utilized by other major river basins in the world.
- It will be very important to build trust among stakeholders in the basin before any attempts are made at compromise or consensus.
- Look to initiatives like USCAP and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment as possible models.
- Don't build a visioning process or structure that is too heavy to sustain.

Convening /Getting Started Suggestions

- Corps has the geographic extent to pull this off – but does not have the issue coverage or neutrality to be convener
- Is there a way to get Congress to take a leadership role in the Mississippi River Basin
- CEQ could be used to hold meetings and set up a task force
- A group like Meridian could help ensure that multiple groups are brought together and that this effort survives beyond Gen. Walsh
- An Executive Order would make sure that agencies and funding are directed at the problem
- Take advantage of friends and advocates in the administration

-
- Take advantage of the Inner Coast Summit as a stepping point to move forward
 - This needs to be done quickly – many of these issues needed to be addressed decades ago
 - High level commission with a representative from each of the 31 states with sub-committees that allow stakeholder involvement from the many different sectors.
 - Utilize a museum or a research organization to capture the vast amount of information available about the river in once central locale.
 - The Mississippi River Museum would like to be a convening partner and work closely with this effort.
 - Consider using the Mississippi River Commission as the convening body. Inland Waterway Trust Fund, a FACA set up by WRDA, would be another option for convener (Note: the Trust Fund may be an impediment to progress because it is close to insolvent). If neither of these work, consider establishing a FACA committee.

Participation

- Bring the private Sector to the table
- Consider engaging a couple District Office staff people from some key House or Senate offices. Engaging these folks earlier rather than later might help with reception to the final product. They might have insights on approaches/issues and next steps to be considered. Potential candidates include: on House side: Mr. Kind, Mr. Hare, Carnahan, Costello. Senate: Mr. Bond, Sen. Klobuchar MN, Sen. Durbin. These offices have taken initiative on river issues.
- Conversations need to include the municipalities that rely on the Mississippi as source water or as effluent dump.
- Farmers, as land stewards, are integrally connected to many of the main issues and will be key players in any management strategy that is adopted.

Existing Building Blocks

- The NESP processes are bringing many different stakeholders and interests together to focus on problem solving.
- Look to ORSANCO – Main committee, meets 3x/year, but there is funding and multiple sub-committees that deal with more local and technical issues
- While the diversity is huge among different parts of the river, there are some cultural bridges between the upper and lower rivers that can be used to form a broader collaboration.