



# A River Through Time

In July 2016, a village of volunteers gathered along the banks of the Des Moines River in southeast Iowa to travel through the history of the river and experience its rich cultural heritage. This annual gathering is part of a river cleanup called Project AWARE (A Watershed Awareness River Expedition), which brings volunteers to a different Iowa river each year for a week-long event sponsored by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Volunteers paddled 52 miles of the Des Moines River through Wapello, Davis, Van Buren and Lee counties, removing 40 tons of trash from the river. When not on

the water, volunteers participated in educational programs which highlighted the rich cultural and natural history of the area, including geology, botany and biology; Native American and Mormon history of the area; historic communities and landmarks; and tourism opportunities.

The Des Moines River is Iowa's longest interior river, traversing 406 miles across the state and draining 23 percent of the state's land, including 39 Iowa counties. It is also the largest river Project AWARE has tackled in its 14-year history. The expanse of the river valley allowed volunteers to imagine the bustling activity that once occurred on and along this river.



PHOTO BY REBECCA KAUTEN

**HISTORIC PLACES** - This year's Project AWARE route traveled through communities along the Des Moines River, including Bentonsport, Bonaparte, Eldon, Farmington and Keosauqua, all home to numerous National Register of Historic Places properties and four National Historic Districts. Participants were able to tour one of these properties, the Bonaparte Pottery, one of the only standing pottery manufacturing sites remaining in Iowa. The pottery serves as a reminder of a pottery industry that flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at numerous locations along the Des Moines River in central and southeast Iowa. Other historic places included a tour of the Lockkeeper's House by members of the Eldon Historical Society and a visit to the famous American Gothic house.

**AMERICAN GOTHIC** - The lower Des Moines River watershed is home to the American Gothic house in Eldon, also known as the Dibble House, which served as the backdrop of Iowa folk artist Grant Wood's most famous painting – *American Gothic*, which was painted in 1930. The house, with its distinctive upper window, has become one of the most parodied paintings of all time. With cameras in hand, volunteers created their own parodies in front of this famous house.



**HUMAN HISTORY** - Project AWARE volunteers camped along the banks of the Des Moines River could hear the echoes of the past as this same area was occupied by Native American populations for thousands of years. In historic times, there was a significant occupation by the Ioway, or Báxoje, who had a major village at Iowaville, located near the town of Selma. Iowaville was one of the main villages of the Ioway from 1765 to 1820. Hundreds lived in the village and used the Des Moines River for subsistence. Less than 100 years later (1846-1847), 14,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints traveled through Van Buren County on one of several routes westward to Utah. The Office of the State Archaeologist at the University of Iowa helped volunteers understand the significant cultural history of the area with multiple presentations throughout the week.

**WARM SOUTHEAST IOWA HOSPITALITY** - The Villages of Van Buren County greeted volunteers with water and cookies at river accesses. Their friendly faces welcomed the wet and muddy volunteers as they delivered care baskets filled with essential toiletry items. Bentonsport store owners and residents graciously opened their stores and businesses to Project AWARE volunteers one morning, allowing volunteers a glimpse into the history of the village. In looking back, volunteers will remember the warm southern

Iowa hospitality from a county with no stop lights (Van Buren) and many will undoubtedly make a second trip back.

**LACEY-KEOSAUQUA STATE PARK** - Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, Iowa's second oldest state park, was host to Project AWARE volunteers for two nights. The park is located along a great horseshoe bend, a 13-mile long meander in the Des Moines River. Large mature trees offered plenty of shade during the hot July weather and reminded volunteers of the bottomland forests that dominated this landscape when European settlers first arrived. Volunteers were immersed in the history of the park during their stay, including the historic stone buildings, stone bridge, and beach bathhouse constructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

#### **IOWA'S STATE ROCK**

- While volunteers removed 40 tons of trash during Project AWARE, one item volunteers were pleasantly surprised to encounter was the geode, Iowa's state rock. Geodes are found



from many localities around the world. However, one of the most productive and well-known collecting areas is within a 35-mile radius of Keokuk in Lee County. Most geodes are spherical and often lumpy or cauliflower-like in appearance. Geodes can be found where streams or rivers erode the bedrock containing them, scattering them along the banks and bottom of streams. When cracked open, geodes expose a variety of minerals, primarily quartz. While finding token treasures among the trash removed, the geode was one of the most treasured items from the week.

**DES MOINES RIVER WATER TRAIL** - The Des Moines River in Van Buren County was designated a state water trail by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources River Programs in 2007. Rivers are transformed into water trails when amenities are organized along the river (e.g., accesses,





REBECCA KAUTEN



## 14TH ANNUAL PROJECT AWARE JULY 10-15, 2016 LOWER DES MOINES RIVER

River Miles: 52
Participants: 329
Average Participants Each Day: 183
Total Sponsors: 86

SOLID WASTE	
Total Materials Collected	40 tons
Trash (23% of total materials)	9.3 tons
<b>Recyclables</b> (77% of total materials)	30.7 tons
• Misc. recycling (appliances, household hazardous materials, cardboard, plastic, redeemable cans/bottles).....	4.3 tons
• Tires (329).....	5.8 tons
• Scrap metal.....	20.2 tons

WATER QUALITY*	
Sites Monitored	20
Transparency	15 centimeters
Water Temp	81° F
pH	8
Dissolved Oxygen	8 mg/L
Nitrate-Nitrogen	2 mg/L
Nitrite-Nitrogen	0 mg/L
Phosphate	0 mg/L
Chloride	less than 31 mg/L

\* Represents average values

parking) to support paddling opportunities. The start of Project AWARE 2016 included a Water Trail dedication, which recognized inclusion of a new 4.7 mile stretch of the Des Moines River between Eldon and Shidepoke in Wapello, Davis and Van Buren counties. Volunteers took advantage of the accesses and parking during the week-long Project AWARE. When not on the Des Moines River Water Trail, vacationers can enjoy the scenery of the area while traveling the Historic Hills Scenic Byway.

**MORE FAMILIES & KIDS** –Project AWARE provides a safe, supportive, and fun environment to learn and experience outdoor activities. From the novice new to paddling and camping, to the veteran, with years of outdoor experience, Project AWARE offers something for everyone. Campground educational programs are designed to appeal to participants of all ages. The family friendly focus has resulted in an increasing number of families and kids participating and returning to Project AWARE each year.

While Project AWARE brought family and friends from all across Iowa and beyond together for a cleanup event, it also allowed them to experience the rich history of the Des Moines River valley and the communities that line its banks. This experience gave them a sampling of what the region has to offer, with an open invitation to return and further explore and enjoy the area in the future.

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- Iowa DNR - IOWATER, Rivers Programs
- Iowa Flood Center
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- Villages of Van Buren
- Zanafel Laboratories, Inc.

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- White Pine Group, Iowa Sierra Club
- William & Joan Kauten

## LIFE JACKET SPONSORS:

- Andrew & Maureen Johnson
- Mike Schmeiser

"It's a great opportunity to build relationships, educate yourself and others while respecting the environment and improving the community. Best of all, it's a bunch of fun!"

**JODI, 1-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"Great way to unplug from the hustle and bustle of the world, get back to nature, relax, and help the environment in the process."

**STEVE, 10-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"The days are long and hard but it's all worth it when you know the community and sponsors support your work."

**RHONDA, 3-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"This is an amazing event that not only gets people out on the river and seeing what a wonderful experience it is to paddle our Iowa rivers, but it also provides important education that inspires everyone to be better stewards of the land and water."

**AMANDA, 12-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

"Thank you so much to the sponsors for making this amazing opportunity and experience a reality."

**NIKKI, 1-YEAR VOLUNTEER**

