Stories Along the Mississippi River

0:08 - 1:17
HOST: My name is Adam Acs, and I'll be your host for today's episode called Stories Along the Mississippi River. For this first episode, I interviewed Mike Coyne-Logan, the educational facilitator for Living Lands and Waters, an organization dedicated to keeping our waterways clear of waste and sewage. Mike shared his experiences with Living Lands and Waters by highlighting the organization's efforts to remove pounds of trash, its Million Trees program, and other activities, as well as the events the organization is planning.

He also emphasized the importance of educating the youth on reducing plastic use and the broader environmental issues affecting the Mississippi River, such as fertilizers and sewage waste. Finally, Mike shared his personal connection to the river, which is rooted in childhood memories and his positive experience working with students. Mike noted that the organization's success is based on the youth.

If the youth are educated, the future will be just fine. Please enjoy today's first episode. So, my first question for you, Mike, is what was your experience with Living Lands and Waters has been like?

How has it been for you?

1:19 - 2:17
MIKE COYNE-LOGAN: It's been awesome. It's been a lot of work. I think people know it's a lot of work, but they understand like it's more than just go out and do the physical labor of getting the trash.

You know, we get between 400 and 500,000 pounds per year. It's a lot of different events. It's a lot of travel and that's hard, but just all the other stuff like just setting up for events, you know, working with towboats, barges, boats, trucks, you know, just the stuff when stuff breaks down and trying to get through and trying to like, you know, keep everything running on top of doing all these events.

You know, and that's just one part of it. We have our Million Trees Program. We have our invasive species.

We have education. We do a lot, and we're a small staff, and we pride ourselves. It's results, not rhetoric.

You know, it's very tangible what we do and measurable things that we do.

2:19 - 2:24
HOST: And with those events, what kind of events do you host?

2:25 - 3:52
COYNE-LOGAN: So today we are hosting educational, free educational workshop because, you know, picking up trash is one thing that's reactive to a problem that shouldn't be there. We can all pretty much agree there shouldn't be trash in our waterways, where people get their drinking water, and it's an important ecosystem. But educating the youth on what they could do to be proactive to reduce the things and problems we see facing the river, in particular, in our case, like plastic pollution.

Understanding, like today we're doing watershed models, talking about reduce, reuse, recycle, but more importantly, reduce specifically plastics. You know, there's this myth of recycling is good, but the reality is if we could use different alternative materials besides plastics, it would be a lot better to just reduce and get away from those things. And that's one of the things we try to convey and talk to students.

You know, there's two things. They don't have to go down and do a river cleanup. That's not, you know, necessarily feasible for everybody to do, and they don't have the boats or equipment, but everybody can reduce their plastics on a day-to-day basis and clean up their neighborhoods.

You know, convey to kids that 80% of the stuff starts out just in neighborhoods, and those are two simple things we can do that young people can do just to help keep our rivers clean. And so we're doing that, and we also have, we're part of this river, so then we have tours going on our barges as well.

3:53 - 4:05
HOST: So it's a lot, a lot, a lot. And what else is specifically about the Mississippi River? What other issues are happening environmentally with the river?

4:06 - 4:58
COYNE-LOGAN: And what do you do? Like once again, the concept of a watershed and protect that waterways, you know, everything that's on land, from fertilizers to pesticides to combined sewage overflow. And, you know, understanding those things and recognizing those problems and then understanding that we are all a part of that problem, you know, and even, you know, from driving cars and leaking oil to creating, you know, carbon emissions that create acid rain and all this stuff.

It's like understanding the problems and then, like, what steps do we need to take to rectify that and try to make it better? You know, maybe not do everything at once, but first is understanding the problem and then, you know, making changes to improve, you know, what we all need, water, an essential resource that we take for granted so often.

5:00 - 5:07
HOST: And other than water obviously being a source of life, what significance does the Mississippi have to you personally?

5:09 - 6:03
COYNE-LOGAN: I mean, just, you know, the earliest memories is going fishing with my dad as a kid and, you know, that connection. And you think about the things that shape and form you, you know, your mom being very environmentally conscious, and that's something that she was concerned about as well. My uncle, as a kid, would take me on things called litter patrols.

We just walk the neighborhood and pick up trash and all these different things that kind of shape you and make you who you are as you look back on your life, and just that connection. And that's important. I think that's the thing about what we do, is like people protect what they know and love, and connecting people to this really beautiful, awesome resource that's a source of life, right?

6:05 - 6:14
HOST: That's beautiful. That's very well said. I know that you're also an educational facilitator.

How has that experience been?

6:14 - 7:38
COYNE-LOGAN: It's awesome. It's great. It's like, you know, like we had a group yesterday. It's this Zoo Academy in Cincinnati, and I was just like, their high school kids, they were just so bright.

They were like, they have classes at the zoo. And I was just like, what's cool is yesterday was an experience like, I think I'm learning more from these students than they are learning from me. I think there's two things we underestimate the intelligence of, and that is kids or students and animals.

You know, I think the biggest message is I think for me is the sooner we can all realize we're connected to the environment and connected to each other, start from that place. And, you know, you got to connect with students before you can give them all the information. You know, you can be the smartest guy in the world, but if you don't have like a personal connection or make that connection initially, or kind of have this like thing, you know, or they think you're just a complete asshole, who cares?

They're not going to, they're going to diss. So I think that's a thing that I've learned, and that what I enjoy is just like meeting new people and especially young people and sharing my passion that I have for the river and trying to hope that they can get a little piece of that or, you know, inspire their passion for protecting it as well.

7:39 - 7:54
HOST: And have you ever found yourself struggling to connect with people like politicians, legislators, business owners, in terms of like keeping the river clean, keeping people environmentally aware? Has that ever been an issue for you guys?

7:54 - 9:06
COYNE-LOGAN: For us, I mean, the people we interact with from our sponsors, I mean, they're already kind of sold on or they wouldn't be behind what we're doing. Our mission on the legislative political end? I mean, we don't get involved with that. We're just more of a like, get out, let's do something, do some hard work.

And what's the beautiful thing is everybody respects hard work, right? It doesn't matter to the political party. And that's a great way to connect.

You know, this is a simple goal. We're here trying to get this trash that shouldn't be in our waterways and get it out. And people respect that.

And that's a great stepping stone to have other conversations and build that connection to the river and make people want to protect it. So we're lucky in that sense that the people that we work for, the most part, are already pretty on board with our mission. And we see a lot of the beautiful, you know, we probably lose, I mean, there's a lot more good people than bad people.

If we just get out and connect with each other to talk to each other, you know, people will see that.

9:07 - 9:19
HOST: That's very beautiful. That's very well said. Would you say that there's something like special about the river, something about it that just connects us all, something about it that is just a common denominator between all of us?

9:20 - 10:05
COYNE-LOGAN: Water's life. The human body consists of mostly water. It's like, that's the connection, you know, without water, we're not here.

And it's as simple as that. You know, water is life. You know, when you say the river is in my blood, that's not a lie.

If you live in a river community, you're drinking water from the river. It literally is.

It's real, not like BS, you know, that's just the reality. We need water, and water is consistent. Your body is consistent with mostly water, and it's our source of light, right?

Simple as that.

10:05 - 10:14
HOST: Simple as that. And my final question for you, Mike, is there anything else that I feel like, or you feel like I haven't said yet? Any final thoughts, anything else on your mind?

10:15 - 11:20
COYNE-LOGAN: No, I just think we take pride in just what we do. You know, we've just simple things about us. We've worked on 31 different rivers with over 136,000 volunteers, you know, and we're moved with their help.

We just passed over 14 million pounds of trash. We also have our Million Trees program, where we distributed or planted 2 million trees. It's like, it's what I love about what we do.

It's easy to point out problems, but to be a part of action, you know, and getting people engaged and connected, and it's tangible. It feels good. You can point to what you've done, and it's a small part.

I mean, as big as those numbers are, it's really a small part of the bigger picture. And I think we just retired, I think there's been 30,000 students on our floating classroom, you know, which is a unique experience. And hopefully that's, you know, we like to think we made an impact, but there's still a lot to do, and we're just going to keep chugging along, keep doing what we do.

Start of Episode 2

11:24 - 12:18
HOST: Welcome back. Up next, I interviewed Frank Bures, an American writer who wrote a book called "Pushing the River: An Epic Battle, a Lost History, a Near Death, and Other True Canoeing Stories." In this book, Bures discusses his experience along the Mississippi River, which was inspired by his experiences Genuine and living near the river in Baton Rouge, Minnesota.

The book includes a detailed history of the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, a 450-mile race from Bemidji to Minneapolis, along with other stories along the way. Burrs emphasizes that the river has an underappreciated beauty and recreational potential to it, and that any aspiring writers should be open to experiencing their subjects firsthand before writing about them, because sometimes something as beautiful as the Mississippi River is just right in your backyard. Tell me a bit more about your book.

What made you want to write a story about the Mississippi River?

12:19 - 13:21
FRANK BURES: Well, I grew up on the Mississippi River in Winona, Minnesota, and live on it now also, and I ended up writing quite a few stories about commuting on the Mississippi, and

basically for that book, I kind of wanted to collect a bunch of those stories all in the place, just to have it as, you know, kind of a fun collection for people to read while they're at their cabin or, you know, on a trip or something like that. Because there's like, there's a lot of books about canoeing, but there's not that many well-written books about canoeing, because a lot of them are written by people who just go on a trip and then decide they want to write about it, and so they don't really know writing that well.

And so I thought there's probably room in the market for like a more well-written, you know, book about canoeing, basically.

13:21 - 13:31
HOST: And tell me a bit more about those canoeing stories. I know you talk about the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, and you also talk about all of the different groups and people that you along the way. Can you give me some more detail about that?

13:32 - 15:58
BURES: Yeah, so a big chunk of the book is made up of the history of the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, which was a race in the 1940s and 50s on the Mississippi from Bemidji to Minneapolis. It was a 450-mile race, and a lot of people in Minnesota had heard of it and knew about it, but nobody knew that much about it, and so I thought it'd be, I kind of felt like I needed a historical piece in the book to kind of tie things together in a way. And so that race was a good focal point, because there was not that much known about it, and it's also interesting, it's also like inherently good, fun to read about racing and stuff.

And so I had read, there's a book called "Boys in a Boat," I don't know if you've read that or seen that, but it's a really amazing book about rowing in the 1938 Olympics, I think, or 36 or 38 Olympics. And that book kind of made me want to write something like that, that was like fairly fast-paced and readable, and it was a little bit different beast, because there's not, it's writing about multiple races over 20 years, but I tried to kind of do a little bit same thing and make it mini, to capture the feeling of the race in the individual chapters. So that's one half of the book, but it simply is all that stuff about the Canoe Derby.

And then the other half is pieces I had done elsewhere for different publications, Minnesota Conservation Volunteer, Outside Magazine. I had written a lot of those stories already, and they kind of fall into a couple categories, like the third Christian stories about other people, first-person kind of journeys about stuff that I'd done personally, or read done as a family, and then kind of a section at the back about getting this world record attempts on the Mississippi River, which I was part of as a support crew.

15:59 - 16:12
HOST: And what about the Mississippi River specifically draws you in? I know you mentioned that you grew up in Winona, and I recently went on a boat tour, actually, in Winona, and I mean, I must say, it's a beautiful place. So what about the river draws you in?

16:13 - 17:02
BURES: I mean, the river is, well, it's just right here. It's in our backyards. It's this wilderness area, and it's a national park, and it's this huge place where you can go and have adventures.

It's just literally in your backyard. And so that's kind of part of it, and it's kind of an underappreciated resource for recreation and outdoor stuff and adventure. And so I kind of, part of what I wanted to do is kind of draw attention to that, and also just like celebrate it and let people know there's this thing you can do that's right here.

17:03 - 17:21
HOST: And how do you hope that people celebrate the Mississippi? What parts do you think go unnoticed, specifically? I mean, again, mentioning back to your book, I had no idea that a canoe journey existed on the Mississippi.

I mean, there's all these just hidden little like natural beauties. Would you agree?

17:24 - 18:05
BURES: Yeah, I would agree. I mean, I would hope that people would celebrate it just by getting out on it, and getting in, going and doing stuff, or at least going and enjoying it, you know, sitting next to it.

Because, you know, I'm down there a lot, and there's not usually that many people, you know, and maybe I don't really want that many people to be down there. But, more people could appreciate it and could, you know, participate in it, basically. So yeah, I just want people to know that we have this amazing thing here.

And it's just, it's free, you know, you just go paddle on it.

18:06 - 18:14
HOST: And what future plans do you have for writing? Do you plan to write about the Mississippi River again sometime, or any other natural beauties in Minnesota?

18:17 - 18:58
BURES: Well, currently, we're getting out a story about the Old Growth Forest Network, which is, has, is a non-profit that registers old growth forests that you can go see. So, and I have a piece that will be out soon about campfires, and how, like, the role campfire played in human evolution, possibly, as like a nest that encouraged social, us as a social species. So those are both kind of outdoors, Minnesota-based stories.

18:59 - 19:05
HOST: And what would you say to any aspiring writers who want to write about the Mississippi? What tips and tricks would you say to them?

19:06 - 20:36

BURES: Well, I would just say go experience it, you know, because if you're gonna write, it depends what you want to write. You know, if you want to write reporting, that's one thing, you know, you can, you can kind of do that by talking to people and interviewing people. If you want to write first-person narrative stuff, then you have to go do something worth writing about, you know, like that's, that's gonna be interesting enough to, to, to, for people to read about.

And so, and it's a little bit like travel writing, you know, you can't, nobody's gonna pay you to go, go somewhere, write about it unless they, you know, it's much easier, especially when you're starting out, to travel first and then write about it than to try to be a travel writer. And so I would advise people to just go and do the thing you want to do, and then try to figure out how to write about it. No, I mean, I hope people get out there and enjoy the Mississippi River, you know.

Yeah, I would say just rivers are such a great, um, rivers are kind of a sacred thing. They're everywhere, they're historically neglected, and pretty much everybody has a river and a lot of times a big river near them. And so I would say wherever you are, um, get out and get on your river and explore it, because you never know what you're gonna find out there.

20:41 - 21:03
[ADVERTISEMENT] MELANIE KURE-O'REILLY: Hi, I'm Melanie, the Copy Chief for Urban Plains. If the home-to-work cycle feels familiar, you're not alone. But there's a place between the two we often forget, the quiet corners that let us simply exist.

I'm exploring Midwest bookstores and how they've become that home away from home, ready for you to wander in and stay a while. The full story will be out on Urban Plains soon.

Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

Start of Episode 3

21:05 - 22:11
HOST: Welcome back for our final episode. In this final episode, I interviewed Aaron Repinski, a master boat captain and owner of the Winona Tour Boat Company.

Aaron has been a tour boat captain for some 20-odd years now, and enjoys educating people about the Mississippi River, specifically how to navigate it, its history, and its wildlife. He has a deep connection to this river through his upbringing in Winona, Minnesota, and attributes much of his knowledge and experience to his father. Aaron emphasized the importance of respecting the river's currents, respecting its history, that there's always something new, and that the job would never get boring for him, because there's always something new to learn, new to explore, and new to enjoy about the Mississippi River.

Please enjoy this final episode. All right, the first question I have for you, Aaron, is what is it like being a Mississippi tour boat captain?

22:11 - 22:25
AARON REPINSKI: Oh, it's fantastic. I get the opportunity to teach people about how wonderful the Mississippi River is, its uses, how people can enjoy it, and the reasons why it's here, and I get to share my enjoyment of it with others, and hopefully they get to enjoy it also.

22:26 - 22:30
HOST: And why the Mississippi River specifically? What about it draws you?

22:30 - 22:49
REPINSKI: I'm born and raised from the Winona, Minnesota area, so I grew up on the water, and actually my son's name is River. We jokingly say on the boat sometimes we're going to name him Mississippi, but my wife couldn't spell it, so my son's name is River.

He's also a boat captain, just obtained his captain's credentials through the Coast Guard, so he helps run the tour boat now.

22:50 - 22:57
HOST: And what about being a captain? Why did you want to become a captain? I know that it's part of, correct me if I'm wrong, USCG, correct?

22:58 - 23:17
REPINSKI: Yeah, United States Coast Guard captain. yeah, I wanted to be a captain essentially to own a boat and run the show, and having my own small business like this gives me the opportunity, without being a certified master captain, so I can take more than six individuals for a paying trip. i couldn't do that, so that's why I became a master captain.

23:18 - 23:28
HOST: And another question I have is, does it ever get boring going up and down the same river every single day, doing the same tours, etc.? Is there just something about it that just pulls you in?

23:28 - 24:12
REPINSKI: That's a great question. Does it ever get boring? You know, we're fortunate.

We got a lot of beautiful things in our area, a lot of the wildlife, the eagles are different every single day. A lot of times, you see them catching fish, we see them, you know, swimming sometimes, so it doesn't ever necessarily really get boring or tedious. I'm fortunate I have one of those jobs that I get to do something I really, truly love, and they always say if you do something you love, you're not really working.

So I don't say it gets boring. Now, there are some times when the crowd I have on the boat, the tourists aren't very outgoing or very talkative, you know, that can make the tour a little bit more

difficult to kind of operate. Today's tour was fantastic, really fun group, but that's about the extent of if I would say it would ever got boring.

It's because the people on the boat might not be as lively as I wish they would.

24:12 - 24:14
HOST: The river always has something to offer, right?

24:14 - 24:24
REPINSKI: The river absolutely always has something to offer. There's always something different, and the moment you think you know everything about the river, that's the moment it becomes dangerous. You really need to respect it.

24:25 - 24:29
HOST: And how does the river become dangerous? I know you mentioned floods and barges and stuff like that earlier on the tour.

24:30 - 24:54
REPINSKI: Well, I'll tell you, the river, has a constant current to it, so you're always being drawn downriver, so to speak. But if you're swimming in the river, you need to be aware of that current. Days like today, that's a little bit windy, or it's kind of wavy and stuff like that.

So you need to keep reporting and know where you're going and how you're going to operate it. So the river has a lot of variables. You just really need to understand it and appreciate it, and really have an understanding of how to react to those variables.

24:55 - 25:07
HOST: And how do you know so much about the river? I know that you mentioned again, like the floods, the historical floods. You mentioned the way that the dams operate.

You mentioned all the wildlife, the snapping turtles, the eagles, all of the beautiful stuff.

25:07 - 26:26
REPINSKI: How do you know so much? Well, I really attribute most of my knowledge to my dad, Roger Repinski. He's no longer with us, but I grew up on the water.

And he kind of taught me a lot of different things growing up. But when you do something you really, truly love, you start to appreciate those instances, and you respect it, and you learn more and more and more about it. So when I talk about on the tours, it's truly a lifelong learning that I've achieved over my entire life of all the information.

And then you start to study some of the numbers about how much, oh, how many tons fit in a towboat or, you know, that kind of information I talked about on our tours. But you learn to regurgitate that information. That's all book study stuff.

But when you really, truly enjoy it and appreciate it, it's easy to remember those things. And what do you hope for people to get out of these tours? Well, I always start my tour off by saying, I hope I get a chance to entertain you a little bit, but I want to educate you about the Mississippi River, the navigation system, the lock and dams, the buoys.

And I hope to give people just a real general knowledge, some real basic things about the river that they may not know, and maybe throw a few jokes in there and a few dad jokes and some corny jokes, and maybe get them to laugh a little bit. I just want people to understand the Mississippi should always be respected, but we're so fortunate here in the Midwest to have the Mississippi River.

26:31 - 26:39
HOST: We hope that you enjoyed today's episodes for the Urban Plains podcast series. You can find more podcasts on our website. This is Adam Acs, signing off.