



Frame the Future Forum June 23, 2010

Note: See www.hhfastforward.com/ to view the show in the H.H. Bennett Studio gallery where the forum was held, Bill Pielsticker and Tracy Madison's rephotography project of 15 H.H. Bennett photos of the Wisconsin Dells area was the setting for this panel discussion on the past, present, and future of the Dells river corridor.

Steve Rodenkirch—DNR manager of the Dells State Natural Area

I started this job in 1996 (when DNR bought the WARF land in Upper and Lower Dells) and has seen quite a bit of changed. I'm surprised that it hasn't changed much in the photographs. The Dells has remained a beautiful spot.

The vegetation has changed because the dam has stopped the flooding. Before the dam there were fewer trees. Now with more constant water heights, you'll see more vegetation along the beaches.

My main concern for the future is with invasive species: plants and fish. The flying Asian carp would shut down the boating industry, They can fly out of the water and knock people out of their boats. Garlic mustard and other plants are a problem. Nature is resilient, but invasive species all have their impact.

If global warming is happening, how will that impact vegetation? There will be no hemlock or white pines. It will change if the temperature goes up 5 or 6 degrees. Seasonally snowfalls seem deeper since the 70's which has an impact on the species.

In the photographs, the scenery remains the same. I'm very impressed that the rock formations has remained the same since I've been here, with the exception of Joe's Nose.

Jay Toth—archaeologist for the Ho-Chunk Nation

The Kingsley Bend Mound Site on Hwy 16 is a unique formation in Wisconsin. The location of the mounds was originally in a bio-diverse area of the landscape coming down the Wisconsin River—an ancient freeway for the Ho-Chunk and other tribes. As they came through one of the largest horseshoe bends on the river, they would see the mounds and know that they could get supplies here. We're not talking 100 years ago, we're talking one, two, ten thousand years ago. This area used to be one of the few oak savannahs in 1845. An oak savannah has a high rate of bio diversity in its insects, plants, and animals.

Our goal here is to create a model of the way things were in 1845. When you come here,

you'll see basswood we've planted which was used for cord to tie things. We've planted a thousand tamarack trees for use as lodge poles. Those are the kinds of resources that people coming down the Wisconsin River looked for. We've also planted a hillside blueberry in an oak savannah, a rare and endangered species that grew in oak savannahs. We're going to re-introduce that. The site will be a model for the way things were in the pre-settlement period.

Also what's unique about Kingsley Bend is that we have 3 overland trails that meet right here—one goes off to Big Spring, one goes to Portage, and one goes to the Dells and Baraboo. So you've got all these people merging here. Right below here, we're hoping to work with the landowners below the railroad tracks to take down trees, because on the bend is where the tour boats turn around. We're hoping that tourists will see the mounds from the river as they did one or two thousand years ago when people would come down in canoes and would see this site and know to stop here. So that's our goal at Kingsley Mounds.

The reason boats have to turn around is because there's a natural ford there. You can actually walk across the old trail there and come back to this site. We also have one of the oldest mounds in the state on the hill here. And it has all different effigies. We realize we can't save the whole river, but we can save this place which is historic for the Ho-Chunk.

The Indian trader Kingsley maintained an Indian camp—a trading camp in the 1860s and 70s for the Ho-Chunk, because they would all come here to trade and camp. It's unique for the tribe, as well as other tribes, for the last 10,000 years. Take time to stop and visit. It's a work in progress.

Dan Gavinski—owner and general manager of Dells Boat Company (DBC)

I want to thank you for inviting us to this discussion and to thank the Stewards for the awareness you have brought to the Wisconsin River at the Dells—for those of us who have basically spent our entire lifetime working on the river. I have been fortunate enough to have had a job for the last 40 years working on the Wisconsin River—an absolutely wonderful experience that's been given to me working as a pilot and guide on the Ducks, becoming involved in management to just recently becoming the owner of the Dells Boat Company.

Going back to George Crandall, he's really the person who is responsible for what we're able to see today in his preservation efforts. The DBC received a gift from the Crandalls, who worked at preserving any properties that they saw were going to be developed, so we have what we have here today. After the DBC sold the property in the Upper Dells to the DNR, they still maintain almost a mile of riverfront in the Lower Dells that we work to maintain. And we're able to do it, because we have customers who are enjoying the scenic interest by taking Duck or boat or jet boat rides. It's allowed the Dells to stay the way it is up until it was turned over to the DNR.

I'm amazed in looking at the pictures how little they really have changed and in some cases, I think the growth of the vegetation has made it more scenic and a lot more beautiful to look at.

I think some of the concerns we have here in the Dells that I've seen is storm water run-off that affects the canyons. Right now we are going through the process of trying to restore

Cold Water Canyon, and it's an uphill battle with the amount of storm water and sediment that's going into the canyon. It's a concern and could be a concern down the road for Witches' Gulch.

The other thing that's interesting that's happening is the level of the river is dropping in the Lower Dells, and it's limiting the amount of recreational activities that can take place in the Lower Dells. For the last three or four years, we've had to limit the Lower Dells tours to certain times of the day (10-4) and some of those days we're only able to operate because we're working with the power company to release water. Twenty or thirty years from now, it's possible that there won't be big excursion boats on the Lower Dells. Right now there's only a narrow area where you can get down river below the dam, and actually—other than about a 20-foot section—you can walk across the river down there.

Mariana Weinhold—owner, with husband Frank, of Louis Bluff, which is protected from development by a conservation easement with the Natural Heritage Land Trust

The Wisconsin River is still an amazingly beautiful resource for our community and I hope will continue to be for us, our children and grandchildren. I paddle the Upper Dells whenever I can – at least 2 to 3 times weekly. This past Sunday while I negotiated the high water through the Glades, I contemplated what makes this section so special and what is needed to keep it special in the future. Frank helped me with the concept that it is “unspoiled”.

North of Louis Bluff it is still very similar to the river HH Bennett knew and loved. With the exception of a few clear cut private lawns along the river, one can paddle for miles surrounded by woods, nesting herons, calls of the cranes, king fishers, eagles, turtles and even a few snakes sunning on overhanging limbs. One occasionally sees other paddlers, campers and fishing boats, attesting to the diversity of fish and the health of the water.

The most significant change from Bennett's time was the construction of the dam. One can see from Bill's photos how much shoreline and beautiful rock formations were covered up. But the dam offered more dependable water levels and increased opportunity for fishing, camping and recreational boating.

(Another result of the dam was to create the Upper Dells flowage by drowning the islands in Bennett's photos. What is interesting is that over time the islands appear to be returning. In the last 30 years of our observations, the sand bars are migrating further south to become islands as trees take hold. The river is very powerful and has a life of its own.)

What are the challenges today?

The Lower Dells and the Narrows have endured considerable more pressure for development and river access but with enormous thanks to George Crandall and his family, much of the shoreline was protected. This is a wonderful example for all of us to follow.

This development pressure can easily turn the river corridor into a “spoiled” natural area. Identifying what spoils the river leads us to identifying possible strategies for correcting and preventing the spoilage.

Visual eyesores – such as shoreline sprawl with large, looming buildings. This could be curtailed

with shoreline protection. Properties with “clear cut” lawns expose large homes and break the natural flow of vegetation. Shore stations strung along the river bank resemble shanty towns. Large signs interfere with the view.

Water pollution – Although a great deal has been accomplished with regards to water quality, one can still see “oil” slicks from the emissions of recreational boating, especially jet skis. The river has recovered miraculously from the terrible pollution of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, thanks to the wisdom of our state leaders who passed legislation enabling the DNR to reduce pollution by 95%. This collective “call to action” is a good example of what can be done.

Sound pollution – Excessive noise from some boats – especially airboats, high powered speed boats and some jet skis – intrudes into the enjoyment of the river and compromises the wildlife habitat. Loud boom boxes and “party boats” claim the river for their own. The racket from the racetrack permeates a significant stretch of the river.

How do we meet these challenges?

Private development and public preservation of the “unspoiled” nature of the river can coexist with proper zoning and river regulations. But there has to be a collective agreement what the priorities are. We cannot rely on the DNR’s regulations, the foresight and generosity of a George Crandall or the creation of conservation easements to protect the entire corridor.

It may be unrealistic to dream about a “Dells National Park”, like that envisioned by George Crandall, or an “Upper Wisconsin River Scenic Riverway” similar to the Lower Wisconsin Riverway. But without dreams and vision, how can we frame and forge the future, rather than simply letting it overwhelm us?

The visions of Bennett, Crandall, Leopold and others to preserve, protect, restore and respect the beauty of an unspoiled natural area should be our inspiration and guide for framing the future of the river corridor.

Along with protection of the Dells, we need to seek regional and state recognition for increased protection for the ENTIRE corridor of the Wisconsin River through the Central Sands region from Petenwell to Portage. It might be called the “Raftmen’s River Road”, stretching across the ancient glacial lakebed of Juneau, Adams, Sauk and Columbia Counties.

The river corridor that presently divides counties and townships should instead become a unifying force for the regional planning for shoreline protection. To achieve this goal we need cooperation and coordination among village and township boards, county zoning administrators, regional planners and other community and state-wide leaders that share responsibility for the river throughout the 4-county region.

In addition, we can seek out alliances and partnerships with public and private agencies that have a kindred vested interest in the river corridor, such as the Ice Age National Scenic Trail and the Aldo Leopold Reserve.

Where do we go from here?

We have a window of opportunity to take advantage of the reduced pressure from development due to the unfortunate economic situation. I strongly encourage the townships and counties

surrounding the river to take the first step and form some type of regional organization that would recommend standard zoning and river usage regulations. These standards would be formulated into ordinances that should be adopted by the various communities, providing a consistent and coherent platform for the future. This would provide the protection needed today as well as lay the groundwork for the ultimate goal of a “Raftmens River Road”, stretching from Petenwell, through the Dells, to Portage.

Comments in Q&A period after the panel

- Sandbars may have changed because dams are coordinated to prevent flooding. Sometimes big floods are needed to push things around
- Pielsticker's photographs show that the water is 6 or 7 feet lower in the Lower Dells than it was in Bennett's time—speculation that because the sand is settling above the dam, the water has scoured down to bedrock and channels cannot be created because of the lack of sand.
- The average life of an undredged dam is 50 years. The dam at Wisconsin Dells is just over 100 years old.
- Concentrated effort should be made to help visitors understand the history of the people and history of Dells area.
- DBC provides educational tours if desired. Ridership has dropped drastically since it peaked in the 1970s and had leveled off now.
- Several suggestions were offered to integrate river education and awareness into state standards and curriculum, as well as trying to attract college students