



The Archaeology of Disaster: Floods in the Confluence Region Past and Present

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ALTON — Fire, flood, famine, war, plague, earthquake: all major disasters leave distinctive signatures in the archaeological record. Illinois has seen its share of each. On Thursday, November 17 at 7pm, Jacoby Arts Center hosts geoarchaeologist Gregory Vogel who will invite the audience to explore the prehistory and history of human interactions with rivers and water, even the Piasa Bird, the legendary water monster that could traverse three different worlds. The Archaeology of Disaster is offered in conjunction with the exhibit Running Water: Riverwork Project and Watershed Cairns on display through November 19. Admission is free. Doors open at 6:30pm.

Our rivers are constantly adapting to a shifting climate and to man made diversions. What lessons do the archaeological and geological records hold for us today? We are adapting to the ongoing ramifications of events that have a history long beyond living memory, from the New Madrid quakes of 1811-1812 that changed the very course of the Mississippi River to the great flood of 1993.

“One to five miles wide, deeply overflowed in every freshet, filled with bayous, ponds, and swamps, and infested with wild beasts” is how Captain Howard Stansbury described the Illinois River in 1838. “Aside from the occasional wild beast, the river itself is a very different creature these days. Drained, dammed, dredged, cleared and lined with levees, a visitor from 100 years ago would have a hard time recognizing the landscape today,” explains Gregory Vogel, a Ph.D. in Environmental Dynamics.

“About half of the 400,000 acres of bottomland along the Illinois River are now behind levees, and much of the other half is drained and tilled. The wetlands are dry, backwater lakes are empty, and most of the floodplain simply doesn't flood anymore – at least on a regular basis. Whether these changes are progress in the name of civilization or regress in the name of the environment depends on your point of view, but there is no doubt that they are dramatic, large-scale, and for current purposes irreversible modifications to an entire landscape.”

Recent flooding in the confluence region adds a sense of urgency to flood control measures, and once again leads to questions about the wisdom of the current levee system. “Levees are inherently selfish constructions, flooding Peter to pay Paul as water backs up and raises river levels somewhere else,” says Vogel. “The natural state of nature is dynamic, unlike the levees built to tame it.”

The Audubon Center at Riverlands, National Great Rivers Museum and Jacoby Arts Center partner in this Nature + Art series to heighten awareness of our intrinsic assets. Running Water: Riverwork Project and Watershed Cairns offers a new way of seeing water, our most critical resource.