

Illinois Speaks: Do river cultures survive flooding?

by Louise Jett

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GODFREY – Can people who lose everything in floods preserve their culture for themselves and their children? Should federal funding be used to relocate communities? Can culture be preserved away from the river?

Jill Lane, Lewis and Clark Community College Dean of Transfer Programs, will moderate a discussion about the impacts of the Mississippi River system on the lives of people who live alongside it from 6:30-8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 29, at the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, which is located at 1210 North Main Street, in Edwardsville, Illinois.

“Even as humans have impacted the river system by intensifying the agricultural system along the river and tributaries, increasing development and floodplain conversion to human uses, and decreasing the floodplain forest cover and wetland species diversity, so has the river framed the culture of people living near the river,” Lane said.

Grafton mayor Tom Thompson and Alton Mayor Brant Walker will also be present for the discussion. Both of these river towns have been repeatedly flooded over time and changed as a result.

With climate change leading to increasing flood events for the people living in the floodplain, people are confronted with the prospect of moving which can come at a high price both in terms of the expense of moving and the loss of culture.

Natural disasters exacerbated by climate change can look like coastal erosion, flooding, thinning ice or massive forest fires. In some instances, whole communities try to relocate together to maintain the continuity of their cultures such as the Alaskan native villages threatened with thinning ice, while others wait for disaster and then run to safety like many living in the Mississippi River flood plain.

“There is no single agency handling these dire circumstances and scientists project an increase in these life- and community-changing events,” Lane said. “How do people whose roots are in river life, maintain those cultures in the face of flood events?”

This discussion is free and open to the public and sponsored by the Illinois Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Those with questions can contact Lane at jlane@lc.edu.

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