

Protect Threatened Mussel Populations, Volunteer Today

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EAST ALTON – For over a decade, volunteers with the Illinois RiverWatch program, part of the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRRECsm), has been monitoring mussel populations in the Upper Sangamon River.

Last year, in collaboration with the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy, the Missouri Botanical Gardens and the St. Louis Zoo, the Illinois RiverWatch program started a new 10-year project with funding from the Living Earth Collaborative.

“This summer, volunteers are needed to help collect and identify mussel species,” said Danelle Haake, Illinois RiverWatch Director and Stream Ecologist. “For this project to be successful, 20 to 50 volunteers are needed to help collect mussels during each of the sampling dates.”

Each mussel collected will be identified, weighed, measured, photographed and released. Genetic sampling will also be done on two focal species in the river basin, the pistolgrip and round pig-toe mussel. The genetic testing will show general genetic variability and the current rate of gene flow taking place in these two species between different zones of the river.

The dates and locations are:

- Saturday, Aug. 6, at Heron View Forest Preserve, Champaign County, 25 volunteers
- Saturday, Aug. 13, at Sangamon River Forest Preserve, Campaign County, 75 volunteers
- Sunday, Aug. 14, at Shady Rest Park, Piatt County, 25 volunteers
- Saturday, Aug. 20, at Lodge Park, Piatt County, 50 volunteers

Volunteers should arrive at 9 a.m. The day generally ends between 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

“This long-term study is important to establish a baseline and determine the health of native mussel populations because overall freshwater mussels are relatively rare and are considered one of the more threatened groups,” said Haake.

Currently native mussel populations are in decline due to degraded stream habitat, poor water quality and competition with invasive species. Zebra mussels, one such invasive species, are able to outcompete native mussels for food and are known to attach to native mussels, inhibiting their ability to move.

“Native mussels provide many important ecological services,” said Hannah Griffis, RiverWatch technician and volunteer coordinator. “Mussels are filter feeders and are able to increase water clarity in stream and rivers. In addition, they are an important component of the food web and are used by researchers as an indicator of excellent water quality.”

Learn more about the mussel monitoring program at <http://www.ngrrec.org/riverwatch/mussel-monitoring/>.

For questions or to volunteer contact Griffis at hgriffis@lc.edu or (618) 468-2781.

National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC?)

Founded in 2002 as a collaborative partnership between the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Lewis and Clark Community College, NGRREC is dedicated to the study of great river systems and the communities that use them. The center aspires to be a leader in scholarly research, education, and outreach related to the interconnectedness of large rivers, their floodplains, watersheds, and their associated communities. To learn more about NGRREC, visit www.ngrrec.org.