

New Island Names Proposed At National Great Rivers Museum Ceremony

May 19 2023 10:54 AM



ALTON - Four new islands names were proposed at an official ceremony during an outdoor recreation-themed festival this past weekend at the National Great Rivers Museum. Nearly 1,500 visitors attended the festival to partake in activities like archery, rock climbing, fishing, and more. The ceremony was held at noon, sandwiched between two live animal shows, at the Museum's sheltered pavilion and was attended by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers staff, students from surrounding school districts and their

families, local stakeholders, and various media outlets. Proposing names for the islands, which were created through the Upper Mississippi River Restoration Program (UMRR), was one of the last steps in what has been a project over two decades in the making.

“The UMRR program was authorized through the Water Resources Development Act of 1986 and was the first environmental restoration and monitoring program undertaken on a large river system in the United States,” explains Ryan Swearingin, Project Manager with the UMRR. “To date, the program has completed 63 habitat enhancement projects that have improved valuable fish and wildlife habitat across approximately 121,000 acres.”

The mission of the UMRR Program is to work in partnership among several federal, state, and other organizations to construct high-performing habitat restoration and rehabilitation projects as a means to lessen the impacts of the 29 locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi River, which are in place to ensure the river can sustain year-round commercial traffic that in turn supports both the national and global economy.

This particular UMRR project is called the Piasa and Eagle’s Nest Islands Habitat and Rehabilitation and Enhancement Project (HREP). The project is focused on enhancing historic backwater, side channel and island habitats. The new islands are a recreation of an island mosaic that was once present prior to the creation of Locks and Dam 26, which raised water levels causing some of them to disappear 70 years ago. The islands are being created by placing dredged sediments from the side channel and backwater enhancement to fill constructed rock rings surrounding Piasa Island. With the islands nearing completion, the UMRR collaborated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s Outreach Team for assistance in involving the community in the Piasa and Eagle’s Nest HREP, specifically in the naming of the islands.

“Our team was thrilled to be a part of the project and to help derive a unique way on naming these new islands,” said Allison Rhanor, Director of the National Great Rivers Museum and Team Lead for the Interpretive Services and Outreach Program along this stretch of the Mississippi. “We really wanted to engage the youth that lived along this portion of the river, so we contacted teachers, principals, and administrations within both the Alton and Jersey Public School Districts and worked with them to enroll every student 5th grade through middle school in an Island Naming Contest. It was a massive collaboration.”

Students were first sent a short video to watch in class that familiarized them with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and its mission. Allison and another Park Ranger, Corrinne O’Brien, then visited each class to give an hour-long presentation about the UMRR Program and the Piasa and Eagle’s Nest HREP. Students were given the homework of coming up with a name suggestion and writing a short essay explaining why their name

should be picked. Those names were then compiled and sent to the HREP's name selection committee, which was comprised of representatives from stakeholder organizations, including the project sponsor the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as well as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Waterfowl Hunters, Illinois Federation for Outdoor Resources (IFOR), Great Rivers Land Trust and the Alton Motor Boat Club. The Piasa Palisades Sierra Club, Audubon, Great Rivers and Routes as well as the communities of Alton, Godfrey and Grafton provided crucial support for the project during planning and design.

The selection committee picked three names from the pool of student submissions. The first announced at Saturday's ceremony was Canvasback Island, suggested by 6th grader Erin Federle from Jersey Community Middle School. The next was Moonlight Island, suggested by 5th grader Cece Johnson from North Elementary. The last student name announced was Steamboat Island, suggested by Sophia Princivalli, also a 5th grader from North Elementary. The fourth island which was decided on by the selection committee directly rather than from student suggestion, was Powrie Island, named for the Powrie family who once lived on Piasa Island and operated the navigation lights on the river.

The winning students were present for Saturday's ceremony and received Certificates of Recognition signed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Deputy Commander for the St. Louis District. All four names will now be submitted to the United States Geological Survey, the federal authority for maintaining uniform geographic name usage. If approved, the new islands will officially be designated with their new names, which will appear on maps for years to come.

"I am so proud of the hard work that our team put into this contest, most notably Ranger O'Brien for all the thought and time she put into the school programming. And I am especially proud of all the students who took this unique opportunity to engage in the program and submit their suggestions. We received so many amazing, well thought-out names," said Rhanor. "I'd also like to thank the Jersey and Alton School Districts for being so cooperative throughout the process. With their teachers and administrations' support, we were able to river education to approximately 2,500 students across our region. It was quite the undertaking, and not a single person's effort has gone unappreciated by our team for helping to make this happen."

Construction efforts to complete the islands are currently underway, and the USGS approval process will begin soon.