

"Mississippi Meanderings" Event to Highlight Man Who Paddled Entire Mississippi River

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - The Mississippi River Water Trail Association (MRWTA) will host their annual "Mississippi Meanderings" event with a focus on source-to-sea paddling.

On Jan. 20, 2024, the organization will highlight Dale Sanders, the oldest person to paddle the entire Mississippi River at age 87. Attendees can listen to a history of long-distance paddling on the Mississippi, enjoy a Q & A session with Sanders, and watch ["The Grey Beard Adventurer"](#) documentary that was made about Sanders's trip. The event starts at noon at the National Great Rivers Museum in Alton.

“I really think this is just kind of an excuse for those of us who really love the river and are in the paddling community to get together in the middle of winter when it’s a lot harder to get outside and enjoy the river directly,” Dean Klinkenberg said. “We get to hang out with each other, share some companionship and some stories. And this year, it’s a good chance for us to celebrate Dale’s remarkable accomplishment, but also just to sort of go deeper into the experience of being a long-distance paddler on the Mississippi and appreciating that.”

The Mississippi River Water Trail refers to a 121-mile stretch of the Mississippi River near St. Louis. The association coordinates events along this stretch to bring together paddlers and people who enjoy the river’s recreational activities. They also provide activities and training for first-time paddlers, and they offer a few educational programs throughout the year.

Klinkenberg and Craig Heaton, members of MRWTA, are longtime paddlers. They have a lot of experience on the Mississippi River and working with people who want to try paddling on the Mississippi for the first time. Both encourage people not to fear the river, but to respect it.

“With the Mississippi, there’s a skill,” Heaton said. “You need to know what kind of gear to wear, you need to know how to interact with the commercial traffic, with the barge traffic and the recreational boats and that kind of thing. So it’s not something that someone should just jump in a kayak and take off. They really should get that training. We provide that training...It’s a little intimidating. And I appreciate the fact that new folks that come and talk to us are intimidated too, because I certainly was.”

In recent years, technology has made aspects of this journey easier for first-time paddlers. It’s possible to track barges so paddlers know whether or not they will encounter commercial traffic, and they can even use radios to communicate with barges or dams.

This is one element of long-distance paddling that MRWTA will address at the Mississippi Meanderings event. Sanders will also talk about his 87-day, 2,000-mile trek down the Mississippi and chat with attendees about his experiences on the river. MRWTA will sponsor more events soon as spring approaches, including several training days to teach paddlers how to safely navigate the Mississippi.

“I think for us, one of the things we try to do is walk that line between helping people respect the river but not being afraid of it,” Klinkenberg added. “There are so many stories about how dangerous the river is. Almost all of them are overstated. So we want to make sure to get past those initial fears but let people respect the river and know they need to know certain skills to be able to paddle safely.”

The event is limited to 90 attendees, so [buy tickets now](#) to ensure you will have a spot at the Jan. 20, 2024, event. For more information, visit the [Mississippi Meanderings page](#) at the [official MWRTA website](#).