



MUSCATINE COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD

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GREAT RIVER ROAD NETWORK OF MUSEUMS AND INTERPRETIVE CENTERS – APPLICATION

I would like to nominate Muscatine County Conservation's *Environmental Learning Center* at Discovery Park to become an official I-Center along the Great River Road in Iowa. The Environmental Learning Center (ELC) is located at 3300 Cedar Street, Muscatine, Iowa 52761, in Muscatine County.

- 1. What story does your institution tell about the Mississippi River as part of its regular daily visitor experience? How does it relate to the themes for interpretation, which are attached? Why do you feel that this significant aspect or relationship to the river is presented at a high level of quality? Describe the quality of the visit your guests receive.**

The Muscatine County Conservation Board was created after a popular vote of the residents of Muscatine County in 1964. Operations began a year later, on January 1, 1965. A five-person Conservation Board, appointed by the County Board of Supervisors, sets policy and provides overall direction for staff. All 99 counties in Iowa have a County Conservation Board. Iowa's County Conservation System is one of the things that make Iowa unique.

There are ten eastern Iowa counties that border the Mississippi River. The Iowa Governor appoints one commissioner from each of the 10 counties for representation on the Mississippi River Parkway Commission. I am not only the current Director for the Muscatine County Conservation Board, but also a Mississippi River Parkway Commissioner, representing Louisa County. The Environmental Learning Center is an amazing facility and the staff does a fantastic job of promoting the Mississippi River and teaching about it in a variety of direct and indirect ways throughout environmental education programming.



The mission of Muscatine County Conservation is to preserve and enhance natural areas and resources in Muscatine County for the use and benefit of the community, to preserve sufficient

natural habitats in Muscatine County, to ensure the survival of native plants and animals, to acquire, develop, and manage land for public hunting, fishing, camping, and recreation, and to promote public appreciation and responsibility for the environment through education. With a full-time staff of eight, we manage 11 parks and wildlife areas; provide campgrounds, boat landings, playgrounds, shelters, and trails; and teach environmental education. In 2023, our staff presented 845 programs to 17,472 people ranging in age from toddlers to senior citizens.

Just over a quarter of the education programs (29%) took place at the Environmental Learning Center (ELC) in Discovery Park. The ELC is a 10,500 square foot, interpretive center, located within the 100-acre Discovery Park. It is a beautiful park and building that also houses our offices, exhibits, and provides meeting and classroom space. The overall theme is natural history and features the Mississippi River along with Iowa's changing habitats and wildlife.



Discovery Park is a busy location with many people hiking or biking the 2-miles of paved trails, fishing the ponds, viewing wildflowers in the prairie, playing on the nature-themed playground, renting one of three shelters, enjoying the Muscatine Arboretum, or learning about the Old Historic Barn.

The Mississippi River is incorporated into nearly all of the displays, because it is a focal point of the County and the County Seat, Muscatine, which is located directly along the Mississippi River.

There is a large bald eagle display that greets visitors immediately upon entering the ELC (photo right). Our Naturalists do quite a few programs on Bald Eagles including education programs on the Mississippi Riverfront. A Lock and Dam is located just upstream from the riverfront, allowing excellent eagle viewing throughout the winter months.



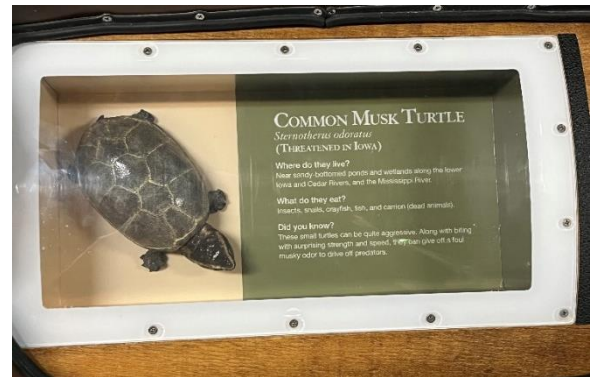
Our center includes several live animal displays including raptors, snakes and turtles, plus a toad, frog, and salamander. These ambassador animals are used for hundreds of education

programs throughout the year. There are over 100 mounted animals featuring all sorts of mammals, birds, and fish. There is a hands-on kids exploration area and Mr. Bakke's Book Nook stocked with environmentally themed books to enjoy. Interpretive signage throughout the ELC mentions the Mississippi River and the connection to the various plants, animals, or habitats.

Displays include two 1,200-gallon aquariums featuring native fish. The "river aquarium" contains fish species that would typically be found in the Mississippi River including a long and short-nosed gar; and the pond aquarium features fish more often found in ponds. Visitors sit and watch the fish for long periods of time as they swim around interacting with each other. It helps that we have a silly bullhead who tends to sleep or hide in the most awkward positions.

I have had the opportunity to visit several of the I-Centers along the Great River Road in Iowa. They all have a slightly different educational message and niche that they fill for visitors. We believe that our ELC will be a great addition for guests. Our Center is a hub of information. We already encourage people to visit the other sites of conservation, historic, art, and culture in the area. We work closely with the National Mississippi Pearl Button Museum, and a new museum being planned for the former Fairport Fish Hatchery. No matter where you go, there is a unique learning experience along the Mississippi River, and east coast of Iowa.

We fit best into Theme 1: *The Mississippi River is a ribbon of life sustaining plants and animals.* The Mississippi River is incorporated into many of our displays. The visitor's Mississippi River experience comes from viewing countless animals and their habitats that depend on the Mississippi River for survival. Following are a couple examples of how the Mississippi River is included in interpretive messages.



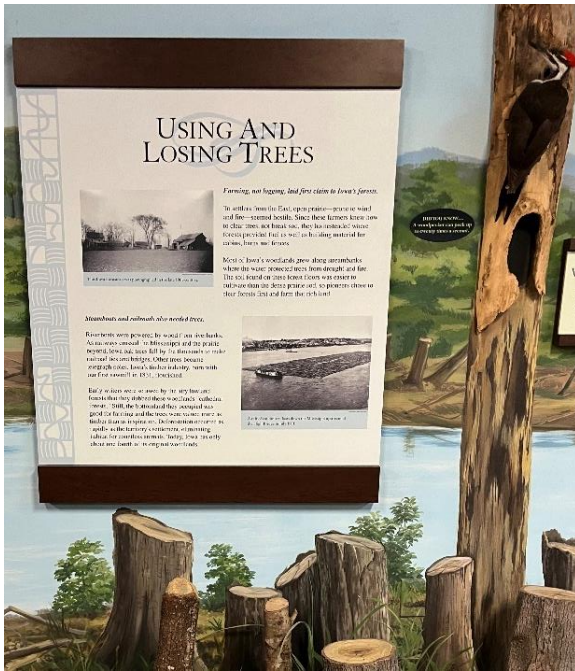
Muscatine County is part of the Amphibians and Reptiles Conservation Area (ARCA). A very special area and biodiversity hotspot for reptiles and amphibians. Muscatine County has approximately 54 species found in the county including frogs, toads, salamanders, lizards, turtles, and snakes. Above is a replica of a common musk turtle that is rare in other places of Iowa, but found here. Although the words are difficult to read in the photo, it denotes them as living near the Mississippi River.



Another display features mussels of the Mississippi River. Guest can view several of the mussels that are found in our area and learn their interesting names, including the threeridge, wartyback, pigtoe, pink heelsplitter, pocketbook, and more.

We also have a “trapping cabin” area that talks about the history of trapping, hunting, and fishing along the Mississippi River. Still very popular hobbies for many people here. There are several old duck decoys, an old wooden fishing trap, boat, animal furs and more. The Mississippi River has been home to people for thousands of years. It has always been a great place to live because the river and the natural resources continue to provide an abundance of food and fresh water.





Other displays talk about the change in Iowa from prairie and woodlands to a primarily agricultural state. Displays discuss how the trees along the Mississippi River were harvested and used to power riverboats and railways along the Mississippi River. There is a photo from 1901 showing how the Mississippi River was used to move timber downstream. (See photo left.)

We encourage visitors to drive downtown to visit the National Pearl Button Museum (an official MRPC I-Center) that interprets the Pearl Button Industry and the history of Muscatine. Due to Muscatine's location along the river, with the big bend, mussels were plentiful and have played a key role in the story of the City of Muscatine.



2. What is the length of stay for the typical visitor experience at your institution? Please provide what you consider an average time, what you consider a short stay and what you consider a long stay for regular attendance. One hour = average, 30 minutes – Short stay, two hours – long stay.

The majority of our guests choose to engage in a long stay, one to two hours, or longer.

The Environmental Learning Center has a diverse group of visitors. In 2023, there were a total of 3,751 people who attended educational programs, with our naturalists. This was a combination of school field trips, public programs, nature camps, church, youth, or civic programs. Another 5,734 visitors enjoyed the ELC on their own. This includes some regulars who come every week along with guests that just stop by to check it out.

2024 is our second year of partnering with riverboats on the Mississippi. We have 10 dates this year where the American Cruise Lines Riverboat will dock and bring people to visit our center. For each of these programs we talk about the Mississippi River, and let the guests meet some of our ambassador animals including a raptor and snake. A contract has already been signed for next year. We are expecting 15 riverboat cruise tours to stop in Muscatine and visit our site in 2025.



Length of stay varies greatly; on average I would say most stays are considered long by your standards. School field trips often spend 4.5-5 hours, rotating through hands-on educational sessions throughout the day. Nature campers spend anywhere from a couple hours exploring the center, to longer days. Most drop-in visitors spend between 30 minutes to an hour.

Younger kids enjoy the hands-on kids zone playing with puppets, puzzles, and games or reading nature themed books in Mr. Bakke's Book Nook. Most people sit and watch the fish for several minutes, and spend time watching all the other live animals as well.

Another popular area is the animal track exhibit. Nine animals are represented. For each one, there is a mounted animal so you can see how bit it is and look at it up-close. The display includes information about each animal, and an embossing stamper with their footprint. Kids get bookmarks from the front desk and can stamp

them with 4 different animal tracks. This is a fantastic inclusive activity because even our blind and low vision visitors can enjoy the raised track bookmarks.

3. What educational or interpretive programs beyond exhibits do you conduct that interpret the Mississippi River or some significant aspect or relationship to the river?

Outside of the Environmental Learning Center exhibits, we do an incredible amount of interpretation that includes the Mississippi River. We have a few copies of the “Our Mississippi” activity guide and use ideas from it in our school field trip and classroom curriculum. We teach about water quality, pollution, invasive species, all the basic animal groups, plants and trees, habitats, energy, environmental issues, and more.

Each winter, we hold a Bald Eagle program on the Mississippi Riverfront and talk about Eagles and other raptors and the importance of the Mississippi. We do an incredible amount of live animal programs, using our snakes, turtles, frog, toad, salamander, hawk, and owls to teach people about various types of wildlife, where they live, and their overall ecology.



One of our areas, Deep Lakes Park, is an old gravel quarry, located just a short distance from the Mississippi River. The entire area is 435-acres, with 120-acres of water. Many of the lakes are up to 39-feet deep (as deep as they were allowed to mine). It is a very popular area for fishing, paddling, swimming at the beach, and we also have 4 reservable cabins on the property. We do quite a bit of educational programming there.



Everyone is in awe of the clean, clear, deep water. The water level on the Mississippi River affects the water level of Deep Lakes Park. It is groundwater and comes up with the pressure and water from the Mississippi River. The drinking water for the City of Muscatine all comes from an aquifer below this area, providing ample opportunities for discussing water quality and how the Mississippi River and places like Deep Lakes Park can impact habitat and water quality.

We have also held conferences for other County Conservation Directors and Board members where we took our guests out on the Mississippi River

and taught them about the Locks & Dams, commercial fishing, the history of the river, fish, wildlife and more.

4. What are your published and regular hours? Please describe hours for various seasons.

Discovery Park’s outside amenities are open year-round, 365 days a year to the public, from 6:00 am – 10:30 pm daily. Hours do not change based on the season.

The Environmental Learning Center is open:

Monday-Friday from 8:00 am – 4:30 pm

Saturdays-Sundays from noon - 4:00 pm
Closed most holidays

5. What is the annual attendance for regular museum hours at your site, exclusive of special events? What is the admission fee?

There is no charge to get into the Environmental Learning Center. A donation box is present near the front office, if a guest desires to toss some money in, but it is not required. A limited number of programs have an associated fee, but most of our public programs are free and open to the public. We do our best accommodate visitors who have special needs.

In calendar year 2023 we had just shy of 10,000 visitors in total to the Environmental Learning Center. A total of 3,751 attended specific programs, given by our Naturalists. Another 5,734 visitors came to the ELC on their own, and guided their own visit. We also rent the classroom out to various other conservation groups and are not always here to count the number of participants they have. We estimate another 200-300 visitors who attended meetings, trainings, or programs held by other groups when we were not here and open for normal business.

These numbers are consistent with other years. We do get visitors following the Great River Road who just happen upon our signage as they pass or are recommended by other I-Centers to stop and check us out. We are excited about the possibility to be listed as an official I-Center. Because we are so active in our local community and school system, we tend to be a go-to hub for information and field a lot of questions about the area and natural resources. We believe we would be great promoters of the Great River Road, now and into the future.





6. What is your proximity to the Great River Road?

The Environmental Learning Center is located at 3300 Cedar Street, on the western border of the City of Muscatine. Designated with a black star filled with yellow in the map (right). The officially designated Great River Road in Muscatine is HWY 22, through downtown on Mississippi River Drive, to Stewart Road (orangish line). Some people also drive Highway 61 when traveling the Great River Road (maroon line).

No matter which route you take, it is easy to get to the Environmental Learning Center. From the intersection of Highway 61 and Cedar Street, it is less than 1-mile to the front door of the ELC. From

Mississippi River Drive/HWY 22, it is a direct path, straight up Cedar Street. The ELC is just shy of 3-miles from the Great River Road and the Mississippi River.



Application Point of Contact:

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Hello, my name is Katie Hammond. I am currently the Director for Muscatine County Conservation and I am the author of this application. The Environmental Learning Center, which I am submitting to be an official I-Center along the Great River Road, is the location of my office and this amazing Environmental Learning Center.

As I alluded to earlier, I am also a Mississippi River Parkway Commissioner for Iowa, representing Louisa County (the next County down river), where I continue to live. I worked as Louisa County Conservation Director (& Naturalist) for 24-years before accepting the Muscatine County Conservation Director position last October, 2023. I am so honored and thankful to have “inherited” this amazing center. It truly is a gem, and a great fit for an I-Center on the Great River Road. Due to my commitment to the MRPC, we are already promoting the GRR to our visitors, but would love the opportunity to make it official.

Attachments:

- Mississippi River Parkway Commissioner Letter of Endorsement
- Letters of support