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Name of Nominee (Individual, Organization or Community) National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium
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<p>Describe the history of involvement of the nominee in issues relating to the Great River Road, the Mississippi River, or a river community.</p> <p>Before the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium opened its doors in 2003, the story of America's rivers began with the Dubuque County Historical Society in 1950. In 1980, the Historical Society opened the William M. Black, a 1930's-era steam dredge boat, and in 1982 the Woodward Riverboat Museum opened to the public. The Historical Society launched the National Rivers Hall of Fame in 1985, archiving and honoring the stories of river people who made a significant impact on our waterways with annual inductees and Achievement Award winners. The dream to become a world-class interpretative center came to life through America's River Project, helping transform the Port of Dubuque into a welcoming destination for visitors from around the world. Now 75 years later, the Historical Society and the River Museum continues to have a profound impact as one of the premier conservation, education, and historical facilities in the region. The River Museum celebrated 4,000,000 guests in July 2025 and has welcomed people from all 50 states and 75 countries in 22 years.</p> <p>The National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium inspires stewardship through educational experiences where history and rivers come alive. The River Museum provides the community the space and opportunities to celebrate the Mississippi River, its watershed, and the animals and people who call it home. It bridges connections to species along the river, the impacts we have here in Dubuque all the way down to the Gulf through educational programming, conservation initiatives, and special events. In addition to more than 4,000,000 people visiting, the River Museum's extensive outreach program educates nearly 30,000 people off campus each year through programs like the mobile sting ray and shark touch tank.</p> <p>Over the past three years, the River Museum has made significant strides in expanding its reach, enhancing accessibility, and strengthening conservation efforts, all in alignment with its mission to inspire stewardship through dynamic, immersive experiences.</p> <p>A key achievement has been the successful Preserve the Wonder Capital Campaign, which raised over \$10 million to support facility improvements, exhibit expansions, and educational programming. This investment has increased the River Museum's capacity to serve over 200,000 visitors annually while maintaining dual accreditation from both the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM)—a distinction held by only 15 institutions nationwide.</p> <p>Additionally, with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the River Museum has developed and begun implementing an Interpretive Master Plan (IMP) to guide exhibit development, program design, and guest engagement strategies. By integrating accessibility, conservation, and community storytelling, the IMP is shaping visitor experiences and creating a lasting "Ripple Effect" for future generations.</p>
<p>Please state examples of enhancing the environment, agriculture, recreation, and/or transportation on or along the Great River Road.</p> <p>The River Museum features aquariums, aviaries, theaters, programs, exhibits, archives, wetlands, touch tanks, a MakerSpace, conservation lab, greenhouse, water tables, and a research library, all with significant scientific, educational, cultural, and research functions. Through the educational lens of History, Conservation, and STEM, the River Museum offers immersive informal learning experiences, educational and cultural events, and both citizen science and river excursion opportunities.</p> <p>Additionally, as an AZA accredited facility, the River Museum is a member of multiple Saving Animals From Extinction (SAFE) Programs through AZA. The River</p>

Museum led the efforts for the newly-developed Freshwater Mussel SAFE Program, has been a part of the Wyoming Toad SAFE Program since 2007, and was the first facility outside the state of Florida to sign on for the Florida Reef Tract Project (F RTP). Involvement in these initiatives has resulted in environmental successes, including releasing more than 60,000 Wyoming Toad tadpoles back to their native habitat in Albany, Wyoming through the River Museum's breeding program. The freshwater mussels program connects regional and national conservation partners such as the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service with the community through engaging field work.

A unique offering of educational programs helps the next generation of conservationists thrive. The C.A.A.R.E. (Conservation Action through Advocacy, Research, and Engagement) programs aim to address a critical challenge: the lack of hands-on, real-world conservation education and workforce development opportunities for youth in our community. Many students do not have access to meaningful experiences that connect them to conservation careers, environmental science, and sustainable resource management.

Through the River Museum's Teens Take C.A.A.R.E program, local high school students work with community partners to conduct sustainability studies, special projects, and learn from industry experts. Big River C.A.A.R.E. provides students the chance to get out on the river in canoes to gain hands on experience and a new perspective to what the river and its watersheds mean to the community and beyond. Many of these students grew up in a river community but never experienced it or had the resources to do so, and the outings provided through the River Museum's conservation programming create these life-changing opportunities.

Partnerships are central to the work at the River Museum. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge in 2024, the River Museum partnered with the Izaak Walton League of America and USFWS for a special exhibit, including artifacts on lone, and special programming, in addition to a watershed cleanup and evening reception on the night of the anniversary. The exhibit, the only one designed specifically for the milestone among similar facilities throughout the refuge, highlighted the past 100 years and what the next 100 hold. In 2023 and 2024, Nutrien Ag Solutions sponsored programming for Title 1 schools in the Tri-State area to take field trips to the River Museum to not only learn about the river but also interact with Nutrien representatives about the connection between agriculture and conservation.

As a tourism destination, the River Museum supports a \$16 million economic impact to Dubuque. The partnerships with river travel agencies, including Riverboat Twilight, American Cruise Lines and Viking River Cruises started in 2005 and expanded its offerings in 2015, welcoming more than 100,000 guests in 20 years. In the last three years, the River Museum has worked to better understand and enhance the guest experience, both through the IMP and additional certifications such as becoming the first Kulture City certified facility in Dubuque to provide support to guests, volunteers, and staffs who have sensory needs. Frontline, management and leadership staff were required to take the training, but the program yielded an overwhelming positive response, resulting in staff across nearly all departments participating. The staff's engagement was recognized by industry peers and the River Museum earned the Travel Dubuque Frontline Staff of the Year award in 2024, a testament to the dedication by the organization to maintain an excellent and unforgettable guest experience.

References

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