

Recreation an Invaluable Resource

There are eight authorized purposes under the 1944 Flood Control Act. Reservoir and project lands acquired in North Dakota are operated and managed by the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) using its *Master Manual*. One often overlooked purpose is recreation. The economic values associated with recreation are comprised of many elements. The federal nexus of reservoir management along with the jurisdictional oversight on the free-flowing river is as important to understand as is knowing that recreation is not simply hunting and fishing but also includes camping, picnic areas, athletic events, boating, hiking, birding, and others. In addition, recreational economic returns go far beyond the activity and include items required to recreate like trucks, boats, trailers, campers, fuel, equipment, lodging, restaurants, groceries, and other commodities. Given this economic activity, it can lead you to wonder, “What would we have without our Missouri River and its reservoirs?”

USACE Reservoir and River Management

USACE manages Lake Sakakawea ^[1] and Lake Oahe properties through its ownership, leases, and a shoreline management plan. This plan establishes the policy and guidelines to protect and preserve the shoreline and associated federal lands. This is like community zoning which, to change, requires special consideration and review. Changes in land use may require other federal lands to be converted to other uses to offset impacts and achieve a balance in the project purposes and values.

Shoreline management has been contentious as it relates to access (individual and public) to the water. Some

locations are restricted due to archeological sites, critical wildlife habitat or policy.

The USACE has a process for outside groups to secure direct access to the lakes, but it remain the controlling entity as lands around the water are federal property ^[1]. These include Class 1 boat ramps the USACE maintains, state parks on the lakeshore and multiple leased parcels. Most access locations are leased to local political subdivisions (i.e. county park districts) or through third-party leases to private businesses or organizations. Then there are public (federal) lands, leased to and managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, which remain accessible for wildlife purposes. These wildlife management areas have rules that govern access and use.

In 2016, tribal lands around Lake Sakakawea were transferred from the USACE to the U.S. Department of the Interior to be managed for the benefit of the Three Affiliated Tribes. The land uses and project purposes have not changed, only the managing entity. Similar lands on Lake Oahe on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation have not been transferred.



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Lake Sakakawea
State Park. (ND State
Parks and Recreation
District photo)

Roads to Recreation

While there is one source available to provide monies to construct/reconstruct roadways to recreation areas, these funds are inadequate compared to the needs. These North Dakota Department of Transportation Special Road Funds are distributed through a state grant program. However, many counties and townships already struggle to maintain their existing roadways and are hesitant to invest in roads for recreational purposes. Subsequently, other state or federal funding is necessary to complete needed projects. These improvements will provide an economic benefit to recreational users, local communities and the state.

River Recreation

River recreation is different than on reservoirs. While the USACE has federal regulatory jurisdiction for uses in and on the river, the land below the ordinary high-water mark (including the bed of the river and islands within it) are sovereign land owned by the state of North Dakota. These duplicative regulatory authorities can be an impediment to recreational uses and development, but they are not insurmountable. Most of the access along the river is governed by riparian landowners.

Aquatic Nuisance (Invasive) Species (ANS)

The catastrophic impact of ANS on water bodies across the country is well-documented. Some perceive that an infestation is inevitable, so why bother? That mindset is unacceptable if we are to protect our greatest natural resource.

Once a water body is infested, it is impractical to reverse the process and likely impossible. The decimation of a nationally recognized fishery like the Missouri River would be a tragedy of epic proportions. Subsequently, it is critical that early and definitive action be taken, as waiting is not an option. We are behind other states in prevention activity. Though we are gaining momentum in our efforts, much more is necessary. Addressing ANS must be a cooperative effort at the federal, state and local levels.

If zebra mussels get into our lakes and rivers, the shorelines will become unwalkable. The entire ecosystem will be devastated and damages to municipal and rural water intakes will total in the millions of dollars annually. Our fisheries would be devastated.



Zebra mussels on a pontoon prior to launching at Lake Audubon. (USACE photo)

Deferred Maintenance – A Lost Opportunity

While the USACE is authorized to operate and maintain recreational facilities around our reservoirs, annual funding has been severely lacking. The current operations and maintenance deficit on Lake Sakakawea is more than \$15 million and growing. The USACE has discussed deferred maintenance, claiming in part, that the level of use does not justify the expense. If sites are poorly maintained, what are the expectations for use?

Concessionaires and Stakeholders

A concessionaire is a person or business given the right to sell something on USACE property. These small businesses are the foundation of our state's recreational sites. They provide services from food, camping, bait, supplies, and other needs for recreational users. Without these businesses, recreational experience would be greatly diminished.

Stakeholder groups supporting and passionate about Missouri River recreation include the following:

Friends of Lake Sakakawea
<https://lakesakakawea.com>

Voices For Lake Oahe
<http://www.facebook.com/Voices-For-Lake-Oahe>
-105508125318990/

North Dakota Sportfishing Congress
<https://www.ndsportfishingcongress.org>

Conclusion

Again, what would we have without our Missouri River and its reservoirs? We must educate our people and leadership to better understand and quantify recreational values and our ability to enhance their economic return. While there is evidence of a return on investment, it remains undetermined. The annual recreational value of the reservoirs exceeds \$118 million, according to the USACE [2]. Those using the existing facilities understand they are underfunded, overbooked and lack maintenance that adversely affects their use. If you are interested in supporting recreational opportunities on the Missouri River, please contact the stakeholder organizations, local legislators or our congressional delegation.

[1] USACE Lake Sakakawea Shoreline Management Plan
<https://cdm16021.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16021coll7/id/2347>

[2] <https://usace.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16021coll2/id/8598>