



Resilience & Improvisation

By Reggie McLeod

On the east side of the Mississippi, they're talking floods, and on the west side they're talking drought. Up north, the woods are burning.

We're going to be hearing the word "resilience" a lot more in the future, because a campaign is underway to get funding to make the Mississippi River more resilient, which basically means making changes so that extreme weather events — especially floods — don't cause as much damage.

I'm wearing a mask again, despite getting vaccinated back in February. I guess I'm mainly doing it to show the flag, but I'd hate to get the virus without symptoms and unknowingly spread it around. I was just starting to get used to running around without a mask, so it's a drag. I'd been making plans to travel this fall, but now I'm not too sure.

I'll bet many of us are getting tired of trying to be resilient.

To be resilient, you need to have the resources and the mindset that enable you to change with a changing situation.

Over millions of years, nature has developed very sophisticated ways to accommodate change. There is a countless variety of plants and animals that make up the web of life in any given place. Often when conditions harm one species, another benefits. Before the lock-and-dam system was built, dry summers would trap and kill tons of fish in the backwaters, which provided eagles, buzzards and many

other animals with tons of easy food. When the rabbits have a good year, the coyotes and bobcats eat very well.

The fact that human behavior has driven increasingly extreme climate changes shows how we, being part of nature, have neglected our role in maintaining the resiliency that the entire ecosystem depends on for survival.

Studies have shown that even the most resilient systems — including rivers — can be stressed to a tipping point where they break down and lose nearly all their resilience. Some climate scientists worry that we may be approaching a point of no return where major reductions of methane and carbon dioxide will not stop the climate from becoming more unstable for a very long time.

When human communities on the Mississippi River talk about resilience, do they mean bigger storm sewers, higher levees and bigger pumps? Do they mean restoring floodplains by moving neighborhoods and abandoning cropland? Do they mean fighting climate change more aggressively?

Nature has created mechanisms for resilience. Though we are a part of nature, we humans have learned to depend on improvisation, because we don't want to abandon ourselves to the natural order and become carrion or suffer huge die-offs.

Do we have the resources and mindset to respond to problems without causing other problems just as bad, or worse? 🌊

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phone: 507-454-5949

email: editors@BigRiverMagazine.com

website: www.BigRiverMagazine.com

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