

Interview with Scott Kudelka

Voices of the River - Oral History Project

by [Anne Queenan](#)

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Q: The first question I want to ask you is your family, your ethnic heritage, and how you came to Minnesota.

A. My name is Scott Kudelka. I am the Minneopa Area Naturalist. That means I do programs at Minneopa, Flandreau and Fort Ridgley State Parks, the Minnesota River and the Sakata Hills Singing Trails, as part of my responsibilities. My responsibilities are to do programming to get people connected to the outdoors.

I was born and raised in Southeastern North Dakota. I come from two farming families, so I spent a lot of time in the outdoors. One of my families lived on the Great Plains, so we grew up among the slews and the lakes, where we were always getting into trouble. And my other family lived on the Cheyenne River. And my connection was that we spent a lot of time outdoors, exploring and building forts and helping out on the farm and hiking and walking and paddling and everything that you could do, we did it. And I got here to Minnesota after living in North Dakota, working for the North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department until 1999. And I followed my partner, Angie Becker-Kadulka, who is much smarter and more talented than I am and we went to Iowa for a year-and-a-half and then came to Minnesota where I have been fortunate enough to, since that time, actually work on Minnesota River issues in a number of different places.

Q. So we're doing this oral history project. It's on the history of the Modern Movement to clean up the Minnesota River, which we say began in the late 1980's surrounding the Minnesota River Assessment Project and the Citizens Advisory Committee that was convened by Lynn Kolze to review the findings of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's assessment of the river and to come up with recommendations. Do you agree that that's when the movement began, and if not, tell us when you think the movement began?

A. I think that is the focal point. I think everybody has to have that time and place to go back to. And I think as a movement, it gave us something concrete to work on. But I think other people had been working on Minnesota River issues for a long time, but I think it was never what you would call movement. It was an individual working here, it was an organization working here, but as a movement, something that you would say from the bottom or one end of the Minnesota River Basin to the other,

that is, I think you're right, I think that is the date that we looked at, that Citizen Advisory report, that Minnesota River Assessment Report that Governor Arne Carlson, those are the kind of the key things that have led us to where we are now.

Q. So tell us when you first started thinking about Minnesota River, your earliest experience.

A. My earliest experience actually was in 2002, when I took a job out in Lac qui Parle County for a clean water partnership. And I worked out there for a year-and-a-half assessing the Lac qui Parle Yellow Bank Watershed. It was a basic assessment, where we tried to figure out what are the water quality issues, what should be done to try to improve water quality, educating the citizens about water quality.

And that really was my first step into doing this work.

A. In July of 2002, I took a job with Lac qui Parle Yellow Bank Clean Water Partnership, and that job was to assess rivers in that watershed to find out what the water quality issue is and how it's tied to the Minnesota River Basin.

Q. Tell me what lies at the heart of the issue for you when it comes to the effort for restoring the Minnesota River.

A. For me it's people, getting people to recognize what a great resource that we have here. And I think that so many years, people have looked on the Minnesota River as dirty, full of pollutants, something that you would never want to go to. Among prairie flat landscape, there's much cooler areas to go to in Northern Minnesota.

But I don't think people recognize the beauty that the Minnesota River Basin has. We were standing here at Minneopa Creek, that flows, it's only another couple miles and this creek flows into the Minnesota River. And where are you going to find a waterfall like this anywhere? And I think that is really the heart of the issue, is getting people, like now we see four people here fishing in Minneopa Creek. Their connection to that river,

and we can do that everywhere. And I think once we have that, I think the movement will go much smoother and it'll go much faster. But I think that is the key, is getting people connected to love the river, just like this boy who just walked by. I think what they're doing reminds me of when I grew up and my connection to the outdoors and having that ability and that freedom to do that. Our family still has the farm on the Cheyenne River and we gather there all the time, and it's going for hikes and it's paddling the river, and it's going cross country skiing and snowmobiling. All those things that I grew up as a kid and fell in love with, and I think if we get that, we will clean up the Minnesota River.

Q. As far as you can remember, can you recall how the Minnesota River Movement emerged and how it grew and what your role has been in it?

A. I guess the fact that I've been around since 2002, which seems like it's a long time. It's over ten years in fact.

Really I think what got this movement really moving, besides the Citizen Advisory Boards and the Watershed Assessment, and Governor Arne Carlson is really these citizens. These citizen groups like Clean Up the River Environment in Montevideo, which is what I was first exposed to in the Valley and then the Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River and the Friends of Minnesota Valley, they really, it's got to be the citizens, it's got to be the people. If we don't have that behind us, we can spend as much money as we want and we can work on these issues for a long time, but until the citizens see the value of the Minnesota River and what it means to the state, that's what we need. And I see it happening every day. And the thing is, these major three groups around the watershed, now there's more. Now we have the Green Quarter Group, which kind of runs in Renville, Redwood County, and they're buying up land along the Minnesota River and they're looking at trails. And we have the Mankato Paddling Outing Club down here, who are paddling the rivers. And now we have a new friends group tied to the refuge down in Henderson that are doing this Henderson Hummingbird Hurrah.

I mean it's just like this explosion of little niches. The Friends of Minneopa State Park, who are looking out for the state park. And my part has been helping connect people to that river. First working for the individual clean

water partnerships and doing education to the citizens, and then getting hired at the Water Resource Center to be the communication coordinator and working with the Minnesota Watershed Alliance. And now, my current job is again, connecting people to the beautiful resource and getting them to see the value and having memories like this to look back on and cherish like I do.

A. And it's having people taking home memories that will last a lifetime, and that they will cherish, like him reeling in his fish, and the excitement from the whole entire family.

Q. Tell us about the various agencies and the organizations involved in this work and your relationship with them.

A. Really, my relationship probably stems from the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance. That has this whole kind of thing going out in every different direction. So you have the Minnesota Pollution Control, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Board of Water and Soil Resources, those main state agencies who have spent a lot of time. And then you have these nonprofit groups and you have the Friends of Minnesota Valley, Clean Up the River Environment, the Coalition for Clean Minnesota River, the Green Corridor Project, Mankato Paddling and Outing Club. And then you have all these local government units. There is this huge amount of people working on Minnesota River issues and this whole Watershed Alliance, that was the whole idea, was that they felt like if we brought everybody together, it gave us more power to get our word out. And I think the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance, the best thing about it is, we call ourselves a non-non organization. We have no staff, we have no money, but we have a lot of dedication and we have a lot of energy,

and we've done a lot of things by taking all these groups and what they offer and being able to do it as one large, single force.

Q. Tell us about the project that you've been involved in and whether you want to talk about your current project or...

A. I'll go back actually to when I worked for the Water Resources Center because I've only been on this job for a month-and-a-half. I really haven't jumped into things as I did there. And I think some of the more proud things that I am about working there was we did a lot of events and the events were geared at getting people connected to the river. And one of them was mussel heights. We worked with Bernard Seedman and Mike Davis from the Minnesota DNR and what we would do is we would take a stretch of the river. We've done it on the Cottonwood River, the LeSueur River, the Chippewa River. And we invite the public down and we walk the river looking for mussels. And then we collect those mussels and Bernard and Mike would help us identify them and then they would take that data and help them also see, help their data set. And the cool thing was when we did it on the Chippewa River, they were so impressed by the number of mussels, that they now have a state monitoring site there. They established that just because we held that hike and were able to find this whole diversity of mussels. And the mussels' diversity is much better in the upper watershed. And so those type events, we had Carrie Jennings come down and talk about the geology of the Minnesota River from Montevideo. On a cold January night there was 120 some people showed up to hear Carrie talk.

And then also, I was involved with writing the Minnesota Trends Report. And that looked at for the first time beyond water quality; what are the trends in fish, what are the trends in mussels, what are the trends in natural vertebrae. And so we wrote up this report with help. I worked with a team, Tim Musser and Rick Mohr and we were able to give people a better understanding of what is happening in the basin.

And then finally is this Ask an Expert Project, where we're looking at the health of the Minnesota River, told through video and interviews. Chris Domeier of Minnesota DNR, Carrie Jennings, the Fernholz sisters, it's this whole wide range of people working on issues that involve the Minnesota River.

A. This Ask an Expert Project, which is interviewing people that are working on Minnesota River issues, talk about what the health is. So we interviewed people like Chris Domeier who is a fisheries expert with the Minnesota DNR, Carrie Jennings who worked for the Minnesota Geology

Survey and now works for the Minnesota DNR on geology. She's one of the foremost geology experts on the Minnesota River.

Now the Fernholz sisters, who are doing a community-supported agriculture (CSA) up in Lac Qui Parle County. There's this wide range of people, both citizens and scientists that are working on the Minnesota River and their view of the health, what is the health of the Minnesota River?

Q. When you think back about your work on restoring the Minnesota River, what are you most proud of?

A: Again I think it is helping make that connection with people. And it's not a matter of connecting a hundred people.

It's just connecting one person at a time. And I think when we did these mussel hikes and you'd see these young kids get so excited at being able to find a live mussel and being able to pick it up. And it's like Mike and Bernard always said, we're creating the next generation to do the research that we started. I'm a historian by trade, I guess. I mean I have a fairly good knowledge of the natural world, but I'm not an expert. I'm not an expert that can pick out every bird or every berry plant. But I think what I have is the ability to make deltas, make the river exciting for people. And I think I have the passion to get other people excited to do that. And I think maybe that's most proud of it is that I don't feel like I've become cynical in what I do and that I can talk to anybody about what the value of the Minnesota River is. In fact, I was just featured in a wetlands, in a blog by two 20-year-olds who just got out of college and went to visit 68 of the Minnesota State parks. I did a presentation of wetlands and they showed up for it. And they wrote this whole blog about how I did the presentation. And again, I am not an expert, but I think that I have enough knowledge to get people excited about what this valley has to offer, why it's such an important place, really in the State of Minnesota and in our country.

Q: What has been your biggest frustration?

A: It's probably a lot of little frustrations I think that comes with anything. I don't know if there would be one thing that I would say like what my biggest frustration is. I don't even know what that would be because

people talk about how much the landscape has changed and they talk about how much money either isn't being spent or being spent on cleaning up the Minnesota River. And I think that's all reality. We live in a time where budgets are tight and we live in a watershed really dominated by agriculture. And we're not going to go back to the time of the bison, that's just not going to happen. And you could say we need to do more conservation practices, or we need to engage more people in the river, and I'll agree with you there, but I don't think it frustrates it, because I think it'll come, it'll come. We have come a long ways. Maybe the biggest frustration that I would have is the science. Like we probably don't spend the resources and the time understanding the science. We want quick answers, but in order to do science really well, it takes time. You can't monitor a river two years and figure out what's wrong with it. I mean you're talking ten years. And I think for people, they want instant results. And you listen to Tom Kalahar from Renville SWCD and he'll say, "It took us 150 years to get here, we're not going to do it overnight, we're not going to do it in ten years like Arne Carlson wanted to do." And I think maybe that's the biggest frustration is that people need to understand that it's going to be small steps, but we're getting somewhere.

And never give up; we will get there. It won't be for us, it'll be for the next generation.

Q: What did you think when Arne Carlson, the Governor of Minnesota, announced that the Minnesota River should be cleaned up in February? In 1992, what did you think of that pronouncement? Were you around, did you hear it?

A: That was well before my time. I was still working in North Dakota as a young park ranger. Everybody looks at that as the moment really when the Minnesota River Watershed or Minnesota River Basin probably got attention. I mean the Citizen Advisory Board and the Assessment Report granted gave us that, those legs to move on, but if it wasn't for the governor

of Minnesota saying we need to clean up the Minnesota River, I don't think we would have been anywhere near where we are today. He said in ten years, but I don't think anybody believed, including him, that it would be ten years, but it got us the attention that we needed. I don't think he could have said in 20 years or 30 years. He needed to say ten years and I applaud him for doing that. And I applaud him that he is still in the thick of it and he still understands why the Minnesota River is important. I think it took a lot of courage for him to do that. I applaud him for doing that.

Q: What did you think of the Upstream Downstream Friendship Tour process that recently was embarked on?

A: What a great way to connect individuals. Again, I think that's what we forget sometimes. We get into these large things, I'm from this organization or I'm from this agency or I'm from this group of people, and it's this individual connection that are going to make the world of difference because if people up here who are farming don't know the people who are seeing what's happening downstream, how will they know, what will give them that, and I don't want to say passion, but what would give them that belief that they can do things different in order to make sure there aren't consequences downstream? It's a great idea; I wish we could do it all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

A: I think the Friendship Tour was a great way to connect people, individuals from both areas. It's kind of like one of those ideas that you think, man, we should have had this ten, twenty years ago and didn't anybody ever think about this. And Patrick Moore and the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance and all these individuals that took part in it, really believed in it and I think that's what really made it a successful project and I hope they continue it. I think we need more of it. I wish that we could connect people all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. I think that would be the next step.

Q: Are you familiar with the Minnesota River TMDL process, Total Maximum Daily Load, and the water quality standards developed by the Pollution Control Agency? What do you think about them? What do you know about them? What are your attitudes and beliefs about them?

A: I've been working with Tim DeAllis, Total Maximum Daily Load really since I started here and of course there's one big one on the Minnesota River now. They're trying to encompass all these other major watersheds along with it. It is a process that is hard for the public to understand because of course, anytime we're in this field, we use acronyms. TMDL, CRP, DNR, and for the general public who don't deal with it, it just goes right over their head. It's a government-mandated program from the Clean Water Act of 1972, and anytime you deal with those type of government programs, I think the public feels frustrated and they almost feel put upon. Like they are being forced to do something that they may not want to do. We need to have it, it has to be there, we need some sort of measuring of how far we're coming and where we need to go. And I think it's becoming much more public friendly. I think that they have realized, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency have realized that in order to do these right, they need to have groups, nonprofit organizations be a part of the mix, helping almost lead that effort. And I think it's just something that has to be part of what we're doing here. I don't know how we would do without those TMDLs.

Q: Where do you see things going from here? What do you think the next 25 or 30 years holds for the Minnesota River?

A: I think what we're going to see is that we're going to see ways and sediment and total phosphorous and I think even nitrates, even though they are on the rise, bacteria, that's always a hard one, but I think those four major pollutants, I can see that we're going to continually see a decrease. I don't think it's going to be as fast as we would want, but I think we're getting to the heart of the issue, the heart of the problem and what it needs in order to fix it. The thing that probably scares me is what we call, and I don't know if we can call it emerging contaminants because

they've been coming along for a while here, but it's these other chemicals that we're putting into the river, that we really don't have a very good understanding because we haven't studied them long enough. It's using the bacteria on our hands, or the perfumes or pesticides, those things that, it's a very expensive one to monitor, to sample, and we're dealing with smaller amounts that still have effect on the river. And especially the organisms that live in the river. And we're already seeing that with fish,

where we're seeing that male fish are having female characteristics. That's what probably we are going to have to concentrate on much more. We've done great stuff with waste water treatment plants, eliminating phosphorous, and we've done a great job of utilizing buffer strips and wetlands to reduce sediment, but we really don't have a handle on these emergent contaminants, and they are going to be a big issue down the road, if they're not already an issue now. That's what keeps me up at night.

Q: Can you tell me anything about the floods of '65, '97 or 2002 and what do you think about the changing hydrology of the Minnesota River?

A: Yeah, the Minnesota River is a relatively young river. It's been around for thousands of years so most people would never say that was young, but in geology time it's young. It's still establishing itself in its basin. The thing with the Minnesota River, it's what we call an underfed river and so it has this huge flood plain that was made from glacier river water. And so it has a lot of places to move. And really, that's what rivers should do. But what do we do as humans? We build on the flood plain and the fact that some of the most scenic areas in the Minnesota River Valley is on that flood plain. You know, we built Mankato at the junction of the Brewer and the Minnesota Rivers because of transportation issues and issues of, it seemed like a great place to build a town, but the problem is when you have two major rivers coming together, and that's what happened in '65, there just wasn't enough places for that water to go. And that happened in 2001 and 2007 and 2010. When we have a convergence of a lot of water, the rivers were made to allow them to flood out, but of course we built. We built our cities on them, we built our roads, we built our bridges, we farmed those areas, and as a consequence, they're going to be flooded. We saw in September of 2010, when it rained for three days in a row and the amount of water that suddenly appeared on the landscape 'cause it just didn't have any place to go. The change in our hydrology is an issue. We pump more water faster into our systems than we ever have in the past and so our rivers now balance more. They go up faster and they go down faster, and we no longer have these upland areas that would let the water slowly move through our tributaries into the Minnesota River. And I don't know how we ever change that because, of course, in order to be modern, the modern world we live in, we put things under concrete, we tile our farm

fields and we just push more water faster into the system. I don't know what the answer is there except for trying to hold that water back in some form or fashion, that we don't have these bounces up and down the river that we do. And it's not just that we drain more, it's that we are seeing heavier storms and we see more precipitation. As the climate has changed over the last 20 years, that's just a consequence of that. And again, our rivers are young, they're still forming.

Q: Anything else you want to say in relationship to Minnesota River or history?

A: I would say that I'm a very lucky person. And the reason I say that is I have met incredibly, fantastic, amazing people in my job. And I would never put myself on the same level. I could name a hundred people, up and down this river, that just totally blow me away. And Del Wehrspann, we interviewed him three, four years ago, and he is just this incredible guy in the Montevideo area that moved up here in the 60's, loved the Minnesota River and has spent his life defending it and trying to save it and trying to improve it. And I remember sitting at the table with him and trying to convince him of why we should interview him. He just kept saying over and over, "I don't understand why you're here." And I can go down the river and I could say Mary Miller, who her husband, Mike, have restored all these prairie and wetlands in Sibley County and probably have seen a lot of neighbors just shake their heads and call them crazy, but have a passion. These people have such a passion, and it's so cool that I get to hang out with them. And I've gotten to hang out with them and I consider them my friends. And like Art Staub down in Henderson who are these two seventy-year-old people who swim in the river, who go out and teach children about nature. And I was talking to somebody about them and I said, "You know the thing about the Straubs is they're

70 some years old. They don't act like they're 70 and they don't act like they're old." And when you talk to them, it's never about them and it's always about you. And they will say things to me like, "We are so proud of you."

And I'm just like no, no, no, I'm so proud of you. So I think that or the last five-and-a-half years, I've worked with Kim Musser at Water Resource

Center, and I see a person that has this view of the world that a lot of people don't have. And I think those people, Patrick Moore, Scott Sparlin, I could just name all these people that I've been so fortunate to have worked with and still continue to work with. And I see a whole new generation, Jane ??? and Meghan Ulrich and all coming up and doing great things that are going to totally blow us out of the water. And I'm very fortunate, very fortunate.

Q: When you think about the passion that you just described in all those generations, and it continues in the next generation, even people who aren't even out of school yet, younger kids, can you just tell me what is it that draws them to this incredible energy and drive? What are we talking about?

A: I think that you could say a lot of different things that maybe what draws people and gives them this passion, but I think it ultimately goes back to connection. Somehow they formed the connection. Patrick always talks about how he was born in Fort Snelling, he married his wife from Mankato, and he moved to Montevideo. And there's just this connection to that river that he has. I think the Straubs are the same way. They have formed this connection of skinny dipping in the Minnesota River. And it gives them something exciting and happiness.

James Frecht is probably catching fish. I mean I don't know what that connection would be, but I think when you see this passion from people, I think it's some form of connection to that river. And we heard a lot in our

Ask an Expert what was the coolest creature you saw, and it was always, they just wouldn't say it's a great blue heron, but it was a story of that great blue heron in the Minnesota River. And again, I think it's that, somehow that there is some sort of connection that they've formed at some point in their life that got them excited about the Minnesota River (inaudible).

