

## Keeping it real

[By JILL MOON](#)

March 12, 2009 - 10:28PM

ALTON - Water watchdog Mike Bush takes preserving and protecting the Mississippi River seriously.

So seriously that the retiree became a St. Louis Confluence Riverkeeper who watches rivers full-time. Not only does Bush of Richmond Heights, Mo., cover the St. Louis confluence but also the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. Bush is the executive director of the newly formed St. Louis Confluence Riverkeeper organization, a 501(c)3 nonprofit group. Preserving and protecting the waters of the Mississippi, Illinois and Missouri rivers is the mission of the organization.

"I took on the confluence area because it is so important," Bush said.

The sections of the rivers that Bush covers are: as far south as the Meramec River where it comes into the Mississippi River to as far north as the Golden Eagle Ferry crossing on the Mississippi River in Calhoun County; the Illinois River from its mouth to about 30 miles upstream and north of Hardin; and from the mouth of the Missouri River to the city of St. Charles.

On the Mississippi River, the only other person serving as a Riverkeeper is in Baton Rouge, La., and Bush is the only one who patrols the Missouri or Illinois. Within the next few weeks, Riverkeepers will set up its office at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary in West Alton, Mo. Every time the patrol boat goes out, it will leave from the Alton confluence.

"I wish there were others to patrol this part of the confluence," said Bush, a Riverkeeper since last July 1.

A Riverkeeper's job is to patrol the water to which they have been assigned. Each Riverkeeper is a quality keeper looking for 13 quality standards. As soon as the St. Louis Confluence Riverkeepers has enough money to purchase a hydrolab, it will test the water quality for bacteria content and other issues.

Other goals of Riverkeepers are:

- to sustain high visibility on the waters it patrols.
- to look for problems along the river, such as pollution, silt buildup, development runoff, etc.
- to provide education about such issues as water quality.
- to provide strong advocacy for excellent water quality.
- to make sure rules and regulations regarding water quality are enforced.

"The Mississippi is not a disaster, but it could be better," Bush said.

The organization received its 501(c)3 status just last month and has not raised much money yet. But it is seeking donations, especially through individuals who can afford to give or are passionate about water quality and the River Bend confluence. Membership fee for St. Louis Confluence Riverkeepers is \$25 annually.

"But we also want eyes and ears on the river," Bush said. "The Missouri and Mississippi both have bacteria in them, and it's not good. We're going to get involved with that."

Riverkeepers arranged with Teklab in Collinsville to do cultures on the samples Riverkeepers collect from the rivers. Riverkeepers will test for E. coli and fecal coliform bacteria.

Circumnavigating the Great Loop of the eastern United States inspired Bush to become a river quality keeper. Bush and two friends finished the Great Loop in fall 2007. Around the same time, Bush remembered a book that one of his daughters gave him called "The Riverkeepers," by John Cronin and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., about Riverkeepers, how it formed and its fights for environmental issues concerning public waterways.

Bush reread the book and began searching for a way to make a difference, as the book's authors did.

In the 1960s, Cronin and fellow commercial fishermen no longer could fish the lower half of the Hudson River in New York because of pollution.

"It got so bad, the state said you couldn't fish there," Bush recalled.

Cronin headed a group that got the river cleaned up through negotiation, media coverage and court action spearheaded by Kennedy, who was a young lawyer at the time.

"They realized if they didn't stay on the job, it would get worse again," Bush said.

Cronin and Kennedy kept half of a court settlement they won to create Riverkeepers. Other groups followed Cronin and Kennedy's example, and 30 years later formed the Waterkeepers Alliance, which is the alliance to which all Riverkeepers organizations belong, along with shorekeepers, baykeepers or any keeper organization of a public water body.

Each Riverkeepers group, such as the St. Louis Confluence Riverkeepers, is independent with its own board of directors. In 10 years, the alliance has grown from 30 groups to 185 groups, mostly in the United States but also in China, Russia, South America, Australia and Mexico.

Kennedy is featured in a film at the Saint Louis Science Center's Omnimax Theater called "Grand Canyon Adventure: River at Risk" that sheds light on U.S. water issues, particularly those related to the Colorado River. The film runs through next fall.

The film uses the Colorado River to illustrate larger water issues facing all living creatures on Earth and reveals the interconnections of rivers, water supply and human actions.

For more information about how to become a St. Louis Confluence Riverkeeper for the River Bend, call (314) 567-3900 or e-mail Bush at [slriverkeeper@sbcglobal.net](mailto:slriverkeeper@sbcglobal.net).

Visit [www.slsc.org](http://www.slsc.org) for more information about "Grand Canyon Adventure: River at Risk."

[jill\\_moon@thetelegraph.com](mailto:jill_moon@thetelegraph.com)