

Nature Adventures Module: Why is the Missouri River so important?

(Highlighted words are found in the Glossary List)

Terri: One of my favorite places in South Dakota is the Missouri River.

Todd: Mine too! I enjoy the many parks and activities that the river creates. I enjoy exploring to see how many different types of creatures I can find on each visit.

Terri: The Missouri River is ever changed but one thing that hasn't changed is that it creates a vital habitat for a wide range of creatures.

Todd: The Missouri River of the past was characterized by six associated habitat types, all extremely important for wildlife. The sand dune **habitat** is important for big-game animals, **terrestrial** birds, reptiles, and amphibians. The cattail marshes provided another habitat for aquatic furbearers, waterfowl and other water and marsh birds. The cottonwood-willow habitat was used by big-game animals and upland game birds and the cottonwood-dogwood habitat was seasonally important to big game and terrestrial birds. The most mature habitat, the elms and oak trees was also important to a variety of large and small animals and a host of various resident and migratory birds. And of course the river itself formed a sixth habitat type, which is home to a large variety of fish and other aquatic life.

Terri: The combination of these habitat types formed a complex that provided feeding, resting and breeding areas for nearly 160 species of wildlife and over 150 species of fish at one time. While all six habitat types can still be found on portions of the Missouri River and its reservoirs in South Dakota, the quantity of each has been greatly reduced.

Todd: Most of the extremely fertile, Missouri River bottomland habitats have been flooded and replaced with a more lake-like environment. Wildlife and fish species that were dependent on the turbid free-flowing Missouri River and its associated habitats have been reduced in numbers and replaced by species that are adapted more to a clear lake-like environment.

Terri: Fish species in particular have undergone a dramatic change. Thirty-three of the 156 native fish species in the Missouri River basin are now considered rare, threatened, or endangered. Big river fish species such as sturgeon and paddlefish, once common in the Missouri River, have been greatly reduced in numbers, due to the loss of river habitats.

Todd: However, species like walleye, white bass, and smallmouth bass, which do well in clearer lake habitats, have flourished in the present reservoir environment. Additionally, in large deep reservoirs such as Lake Oahe; a habitat has now been formed that can sustain cold water fish species such as rainbow smelt and chinook salmon.

Terri: The Missouri River and the habitats are very unique and special, and a great place to explore!