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University of Minnesota, Morris students working to spread awareness of river issues

Summary: CURE interns aim to get community members out experiencing the river this summer.

(July 8, 2011)-Two University of Minnesota, Morris students are working through the Students in Service program with the Montevideo based Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) to raise awareness of issues affecting the water quality of the Minnesota River and its tributaries. Juniors Mike Sorensen, Detroit Lakes, and Heidi Eger, Woodbury, are trying to get people out on the rivers. Eger says they want people to “connect on an emotional level with the river, so that they care about it.” The two hope people will come to recognize rivers as not only natural resources, but also recreation destinations.

This summer, Sorensen and Eger have been facilitating events to get people out on the river. These events, mostly free canoe and/or kayak trips, give people a chance to experience the river. CURE provides the equipment and even offers guided programs for those who want them, so the events really are accessible to everyone. Recently, Eger and Sorensen went out with a group of 20 high school exchange students on the river for an afternoon.

Their next project is the Morris Community Boat Float. This is a two-hour canoe ride down a beautiful, calm stretch of the Pomme de Terre River. It’s scheduled for Saturday July 23, 2011, at 1 p.m. While this event is completely free, space is limited and reserved for only those age 12 and older. For more information or to register for the boat float, contact [Heidi Eger](#).

Eger and Sorensen say that there’s tension between agricultural and environmental groups about the current state of the river. The two are working to facilitate healthy, positive conversations between these groups and the communities in the Minnesota River watershed.

Sorensen, an environmental science major with geology and biology minors, says that his past jobs have mainly dealt with data and applied science. He thought that this internship would be a good experience for delving into the communications side of his major, so he can be more effective when dealing with the public. Eger, also an environmental science major, saw the internship as an opportunity to learn more about community engagement, something she says “can’t be learned from a textbook.”

Both appreciate the opportunity that working for CURE has afforded. When asked what the best part of their job is, both agree that it is the people, both those they work with at CURE and those they network with because of CURE. Sorensen says it’s amazing to see so many different kinds of people all united for a common goal: “People can bring their separate skills and separate interests and contribute to the common good.” He adds that learning about how CURE was created by a few passionate people is inspiring.

Eger has learned a lot from this experience as well. She says that this job has taught her a lot about bringing people together for dialogue, and she hope to build a network of local foods leaders throughout the country.

CURE is nonprofit organization based in Montevideo, founded in 1992 and funded by individual and business contributions and foundation grants. CURE's mission is to focus public awareness on the Upper Minnesota River Watershed and to take action to restore and protect its water quality, biological integrity, and natural beauty for all generations. This mission is achieved through education and engagement with the river environment and through meetings with watershed stakeholders that lead to public policy changes at the local, regional, and federal level.

Students In Service is an AmeriCorps program that encourages college students to enroll as part-time AmeriCorps members. Coordinated by Minnesota Campus Compact, an organization that promotes civic engagement on college campuses in Minnesota, the program allows interested college students to work in a variety of positions to help better their communities. Qualifying activities include academic and co-curricular service learning, internships with nonprofit organizations, certain kinds of practicum hours, federal- or state-funded community service work study, and most kinds of volunteer work. Students commit to 300 hours of service throughout the year.

The Center for Small Towns (CST) is a community outreach program housed at the University of Minnesota, Morris and serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University. Small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the CST's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. Their mission is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

This project is partially funded through the University of Minnesota West Central Partnership. The West Central Partnership is a legislatively funded initiative led by citizen leaders committed to leverage University resources to sustain Minnesota's natural resource based economy and empower citizen participation and leadership. West Central Partnership has partnered with the Center for Small Towns sponsoring "Connecting Students and Communities" program that provides financial support to hire UMM students for community identified projects.

Photo: CURE interns

From left: Mike Sorensen, University of Minnesota, Morris Kate Eggers, Gustavus Adolphus Amelia Bergquist, University of Minnesota, Duluth Heidi Eger, University of Minnesota, Morris

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