Missouri Coalition for the Environment
EFFECTIVE CITIZEN ACTION SINCE 1969

Our Future? Plus 3

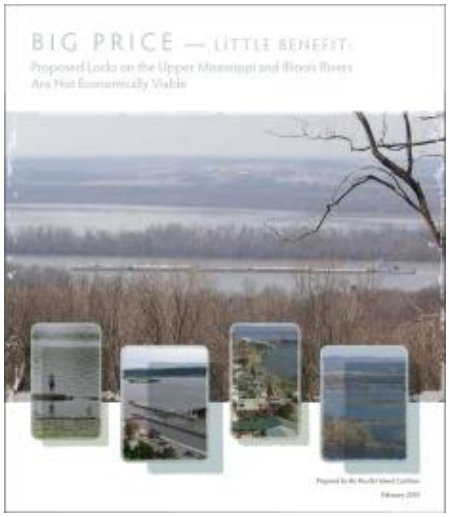
By Brad Walker, Rivers Director July 14, 2015

MCE released the *Our Future?* Report in April 2012. Three years later, we are still headed down a precarious path. The report continues to be an accurate description of what is needed to move to real sustainability. Several of the major problems identified in the report have unfortunately increased in severity, including national economic disparity, the influence of money in our politics, and climate change. On the positive side, people, governments, and even corporations have increased their calls for sustainability. We see a growing recognition that things are not quite right and that we need to do something different, even if people also seem not to know who to follow or what to do. We encourage you to read the *Our Future?* Report, as well as this article, so that you can better understand what a sustainable river and world could look like and what it will take to attain it.

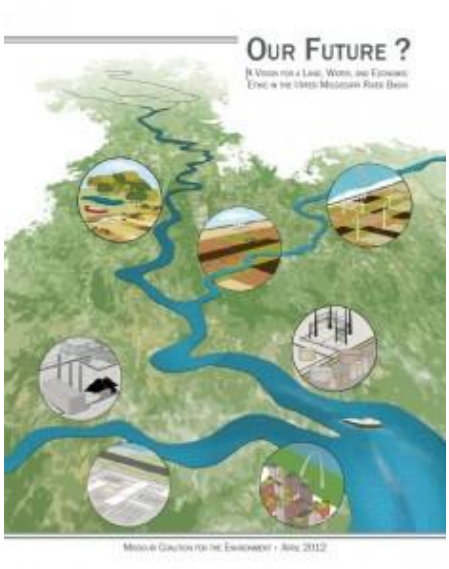
Origin of *Our Future?*

I'll be frank: before 2006 I had only seen the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) a few times, typically from my car, and I knew next to nothing about it. My primary impressions were from an engineer's perspective, admiring the construction of the numerous bridges and dams. My perspective has been flipped on its (my) head over the last 9 years while advocating for restoration of both the Upper Mississippi River and the Missouri River.

If your exposure to our major rivers has also been limited to the occasional glance out the window as you travel across them, you might be surprised to know that they're in bad shape and largely getting worse.



It is the abuse of our rivers that prompted me to work on two major reports on the Upper Mississippi River (UMR). In 2010, after the publication of the first report called *Big Price, Little Benefit* regarding a Corps project to construct new locks on the UMR and Illinois River, I started to develop a report that focused more on environmental issues related to the UMR. It was obvious that the UMR was not improving and that decision-makers at all levels were focused almost exclusively upon economic growth (and at almost any cost). The question was, how can we make the connection between a healthy restored river environment and a better economy? Ultimately, it was decided that we needed to expand our message to cover economic influences because most of our environmental problems have their origin in economically-motivated (and politically-influenced) decisions.



The *Our Future?* report is primarily about sustainability and although it is framed within the UMR, its application is not limited to the UMR geographical region. It emphasized a specific definition of sustainability called strong sustainability, which is achieved by meeting goals that are distinct, measurable, and universal.

We identified three considerations required for a sustainable vision:

A long-term sustainable vision must be holistic in its view. It must properly consider the people currently living, future generations, and the environment upon which we all depend. Thus far our country has not adequately considered any of these three items. Within a region such as the UMR Basin a long-term vision must consider all three items within the region's specific context and resource limitations. This is a difficult task and involves assessing our values and future goals in relationship to the realities of natural laws. *Our Future? Page 40*

In April 2012 the *Our Future?* report was released by MCE. This article is a review and brief update of the report.

The Report's Major Points

Although we expressly avoided outlining a plan to sustainability, we felt compelled to outline some important actions. We included specific Fundamental Principles and Policy Changes on pages 41 through 43. Two of the five Fundamental Principles are:

- Formally acknowledge as a society that we are completely dependent upon a healthy environment, adequate available natural resources, and functioning ecosystem services for our survival and prosperity.
- Utilize the Precautionary Principle in a reasonable manner in guiding our decisions and actions, especially when dealing with essential or irreplaceable ecosystem services and functions.

Two of the ten Policy Changes are:

- Large portions of the floodplains need to be reconnected to the river through removal, lowering, or moving levees away from the river or installing gates in levees to allow flood waters to naturally and benignly spread over the floodplain.
- The industrialized, monoculture agricultural system needs to be phased out, with a concerted effort to move to a modernized, diverse, sustainable, local agricultural system.

In the closing of the report we included the following caveat regarding the major obstacle:

> It would be naïve and disingenuous to end without mentioning what may be the most difficult obstacle and challenge for change in this country. As mentioned in the Introduction, the influence of corporations, lobbyists, wealth and the almost unprecedented wealth disparity in the country must be addressed. ….
>
> (W)e have seen how difficult it is to reign in the influence of money in our government; nothing has worked thus far and in the past few years the influence of money in politics seems to have worsened. ….

A Constitutional Amendment may be required to remove the influence of money and corporations in our political system.

Have the Report's Messages Held Up?

In general, the report has held up and continues to reflect a direction that is needed to move to real sustainability. If anything, several of the problems have increased in severity, including national economic disparity, the influence of money in our politics, and climate change. Since the report came out, new environmental issues have come into the public's awareness, in particular the shale oil boom, and we discuss these issues and other recent related events and trends in the Review of Specific Report Topics below.

Review of Specific Report Topics

1. Social and Environmental Indicators:

In the report's Introduction we listed several key social and environmental indicators. The first indicator mentioned that Congress had not enacted a major environmental legislation (regulation) since about 1980. That not only remains true today, but the current position of Congress is to spend inordinate time and resources attempting to undermine existing environmental legislation. The Clean Water Act (2nd), Clean Air Act (2nd), Endangered Species Act (2nd) and Federal land conservation acts are all under near constant attack. This activity is driven by organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which we discussed in this blog article.

The current condition for each of the other seven indicators we listed is either remaining poor or is worsening. Of particular concern (though I am not minimizing the impact of our numerous ongoing environmental problems) are those related to economics: "wealth disparity" and "political influence."

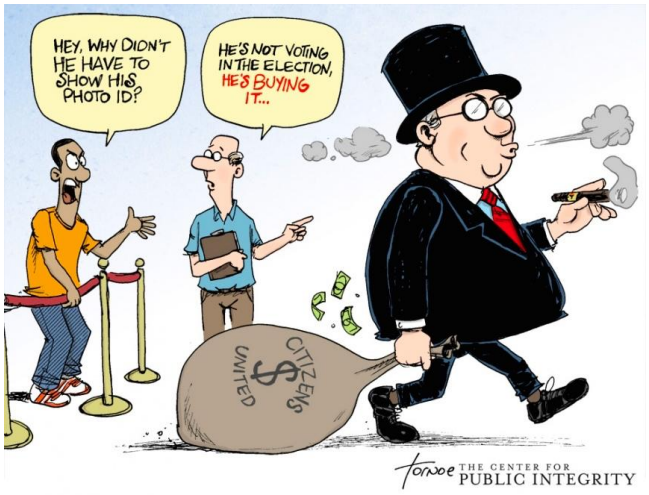


Figure 1: Political Influence

The direction of these two indicators reflects policy priorities that will make improvements in environmental problems difficult, if not impossible. Wealth disparity has likely exceeded the level reached in the 1920's. The encouraging change is that the issue is now finally mainstream, recognized and being talked about by almost everyone. The debate, however, is what the cause is. The "status quo" group is pushing the need for more of the same (more trade agreements, more tax cuts, more corporate subsidies, etc.). An opposing group has concluded that the system is broken due to deregulation and the impacts of the (more of the same) policies the status quo group continues to push. This opposition group believes that its cause is directly related to their belief that corporations and the extremely wealthy have overwhelming influence upon our political system. Several more Supreme Court cases since 2012 have ruled in favor of allowing more money in politics and the granting of more corporate rights.

2. Contemporary Myths

The four myths that we describe in chapter 3 also have held up quite well. If anything, we have continued even further down the wrong path that each myth defends.

- **Unlimited Resources (including waste sinks) Are at Our Disposal.**

  This is clearly a myth that continuous to provide us unequivocal examples of it falseness, yet our policies in highly important areas, including the extraction of natural resources, climate change, transportation, and the protection of ecosystems, remain in line with the erroneous exploitive attitude of the 19th century.

  In March 2015 the modern world experienced the first full month when the monthly global average concentration of CO2 exceeded 400 ppm driven by human emissions. Concurrently, other species across the globe are disappearing at an alarming rate 1,000 times faster than the natural occurrence, also due to human activities.

Figure 2: Bakkan Field Shale Oil Site Source: Billings Gazette

One update to our report is within the unconventional oil source section. We did not mention shale oil in this section because in 2012 the well drilling boom had not fully revealed itself to the public. The volume of shale oil did not significantly impact the economy, the environment, and the flow of oil until several months after our report was released, and yet the report's discussion of unconventional oil sources remains applicable. Now some people might point to our nation's current shale oil situation as a counter to resource limitations. They state that when one source of oil is no longer in abundance, technology will allow us to unleash a substitute. There is, however, a fallacy in this train of thought. It assumes that the substitute is equivalent. Unfortunately, shale oil is far from equivalent to conventional oil well sources. Shale oil is considered one of the unconventional oil sources discussed in *Our Future?* that include off-shore wells, tar sand heavy oil, and oil shale. All unconventional sources, when compared with conventional oil, require more resources/energy to extract. In the cases of tar sands and shale oil, there are additional environmental impacts regarding water usage/destruction and habitat destruction. Shale oil (and gas) exploration was allowed to occur with little or no regulation because the George W. Bush administration waived many of our fundamental environmental laws, with no public debate. The Energy Return on Investment (EROI) is estimated to be in the neighborhood of 5 to 1 for shale oil, significantly lower than conventional oil. Without public subsidies and the lack of accounting for the impacts to water sources and the environment, its extensive drilling would likely not have happened.

- **Unlimited Economic Growth:**

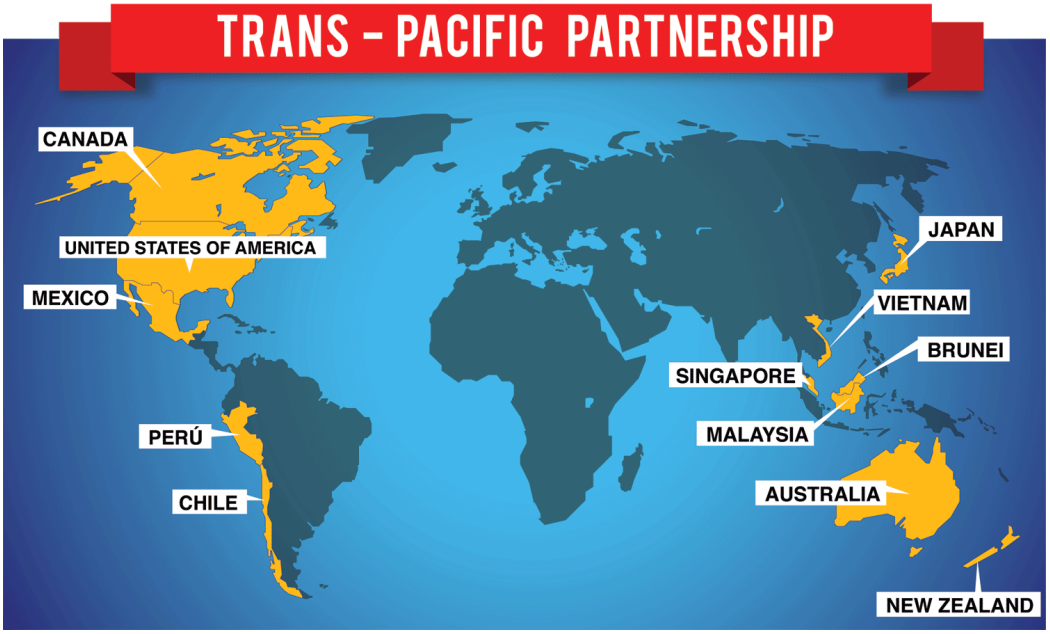


Figure 3: Trans Pacific Partnership Map Source: Communications Workers of America

A fundamental philosophy of the U.S. government and most of the world's other leaders remains the pursuit of economic growth at any cost. Largely due to the influence of money in politics, our leaders have not accepted the fact that our unsustainable policies use up natural resources too quickly and degrade our environment (which results in uneconomic growth). A recent insightful article by Fred Kirschenmann of the Leopold Center (an essayist in the Our Future? report) discusses unlimited economic growth.

Since 2012, the economies of the world and the U.S., as measured by GDP, have grown very slowly. The focus of the President and within factions of Congress (due to the excessive influence of corporations) has been to finalize two large free trade agreements, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the U.S.-EU Free Trade Agreement (TTIP), purportedly to improve the conditions for growth. But these types of trade agreements, such as the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have not provided the promised public benefits.

There is a significant and broad backlash, maligned by the media, against the enactment of these trade agreements, which is reminiscent of the opposition attitudes in the late 1990's. While the public is largely opposed to these trade agreements, both from the right and the left, and especially opposed to providing the President fast-track authority, DC politicians bow to their corporate minders and manipulate the system to enact TPP.

Figure 4: COOL Example Source: Cattle Producers of Washington

Consistent with the pursuit of TPP and TTIP, Congressional House members are currently pushing to abolish the Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) standards for meat that helps protect Americans from unsafe food because the World Trade Organization (WTO) has ruled that labeling is a barrier to trade. Corporations in Canada and Mexico believe that COOL is negatively impacting their profits.

Corporate profits over public safety and health and our environment: exactly what had been predicted by free trade opponents to be a result of these corporate-written trade agreements.

Progress does continue for the establishment of the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) as an alternative to using GDP to measure human well-being.

- **The Midwest is Feeding the World:**

  It is rather amazing that we still hear politicians and bureaucrats spouting this false slogan. The fact that the vast majority of the corn and soybeans the Midwest grows is not for humans, nor could the world's poor pay for them if they were available to them, is irrelevant when billions of dollars of taxpayer-provided subsidies are at stake. The fable must continue or political donations might dry up.

- **The Benefits of UMR Navigation:**

  The drivers of this myth continue unabated except for one small improvement and the release of some useful information that supports our position:

  1. Barge interests continue to pursue the new locks covered under the Navigation & Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP). The Corps accommodates them by sidestepping, and even strategically maneuvering to avoid, the placement of NESP on the deauthorization list despite never receiving construction funding. The latest scheme is to funnel unassigned funds into performing an update of a small portion of the economics of the navigation segment of the program. They believe this will halt the deauthorization clock. However, NESP was authorized eight years ago and its economic analysis is outdated and likely not relevant today.

2. In the 2014 Water Resources Reform and Development Act (WRRDA) Congress shifted over $500 million in industry obligations to construct the Olmsted Locks and Dams directly to the tax payer.
3. The 2014 WRRDA included a Public – Private Partnership Scheme that we talked about in recent blog article titled *River Barge Industry Vies for Subsidy Leadership with Space Travel*. As we state in the article, we fear this is simply another scheme that would either allow the construction of new UMR locks by avoiding the constraints in the original authorization of NESP, would require states to use state tax dollars to build projects increasing the taxpayer burden, or both.
4. Another new (but old and failed) effort is to reintroduce Container-on-Barges (COB) to the UMR and Illinois River. This has been almost exclusively limited to talk but we suspect that influential people are trying to acquire more public funding for this alleged private enterprise in order to get it started.
5. The only improvement was that the barge industry contribution into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund was increased by 9 cents to $.29 per gallon of fuel for the first time in about 20 years. This fund is used as an industry contribution for 50% of the cost of new barge infrastructure.
6. In the category of helpful information for the position of lock expansion opponents is a study done in 2013 that clearly shows that the barge fuel efficiency for impounded segments of the UMR and Illinois River are extremely low compared to other segments of the Inland Waterways System. The often offered proclamation that barges are more efficient, and therefore less polluting, than rail is completely inaccurate for those two segments. We have suspected this for quite some time but now have reliable research that shows that transporting by rail is more efficient than shipping by barges within the UMR region. [Source - Tolliver, Denver, Pan Lu, Douglas Benson. 2013. Comparing rail fuel efficiency with truck and waterway. Transportation Research Part D. 24:69-75.]

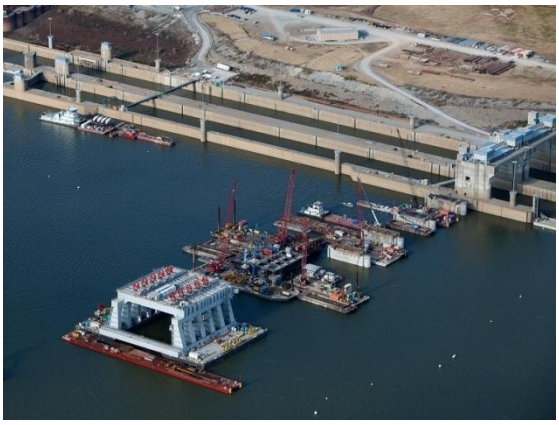
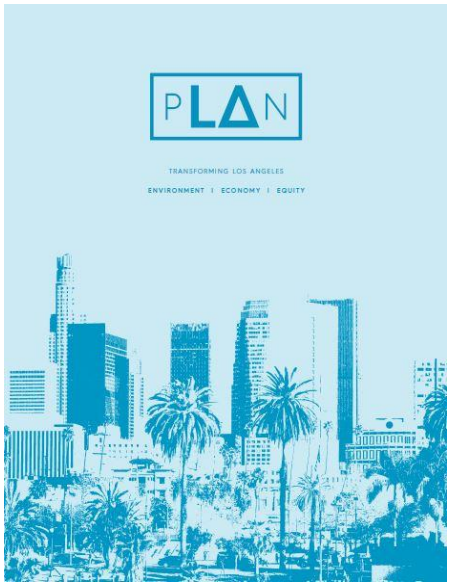


Figure 5: Olmsted Locks & Dam construction
Source: US Army Corps of Engineers

3. Framework of Sustainability

Doing sustainability is hard; talking about it is much easier. The use and definition of sustainability continues to be watered down or misused. More disturbing is that the term "sustainable growth" is still being used by some organizations and people, usually by those tied to Wall Street.

Cities across the country are creating what they call sustainability plans. We think that it is good that they are attempting this effort. The plans vary in what they cover, how they are going to attain "sustainability", and the level of commitment. Unfortunately, there is typically no definition of sustainability within the plans. The impression is that if they do everything in the plans, their city will be sustainable.



Without a definition and metrics that actually calculate the sustainable use of all important resources, there is no way to truly measure their success. For example, the City of Los Angeles' plan is striving for "50% of all journeys to be on foot, by bike or by using public transit." Is there a calculation showing that attaining 50% will create a truly sustainable transportation system in the city?

Don't get me wrong, this is an improvement and these are all steps in the right direction. Many of the actions listed are exactly what needs to be done, but the plans are more accurately called "governance and improved resources use plans." The calculation I would like to see for Los Angeles is if it is even possible for such a large and growing city, in a very resources-constrained location, to ever really be sustainable. If, so, exactly what does it require? If that cannot be established, then the city really does not know where it is heading regarding sustainability.

This also exposes the problem with sustainability plans that cover a small geographical area. It is very likely impossible for any city to be sustainable because all cities rely upon vast areas of land elsewhere for their food, energy, construction and other resources. At a minimum, we should be developing a national sustainability assessment and plan, which we are still not doing.

4. Obstacles

The major obstacle to attaining sustainability is the overwhelming influence of corporations and wealth upon our political system. As discussed above, corporations have actually become even more powerful and influential since 2012 and their impact continues to undermine "the people's" influence upon Congress.

> ". . . **corporations have no consciences, no beliefs, no feelings, no thoughts, no desires.** Corporations help structure and facilitate the activities of human beings, to be sure, and their 'personhood' often serves as a useful legal fiction. But they are not themselves members of "We the People" by whom and for whom our Constitution was established."
>
> *~Supreme Court Justice Stevens, January 2010*

There is some good news. The Senate actually voted in September 2014 on a Constitutional Amendment that would have restricted the influence of money in politics. Fifty four Democrats voted in favor of the amendment; unfortunately no Republicans voted for it. The required super majority was not reached but it was a positive action. A complete amendment that covers both the money in politics and "corporate personhood" is needed because it probably is the only means to rectify the dire situation in our dysfunctional political system.

Closing Comments

Preparing a report that covers so many topics was a challenge. In our highly specialized world we typically prefer to focus on details, but the connections between systems then get ignored. If anything, the *Our Future?* report was about making these connections and the absolute need to understand how the connections affect us. As has been said many times – "everything is

connected" – yet some continue to pursue the dubious and unsustainable goal of "decoupling" ourselves from nature at the risk of our children's future.

We are hoping to update the report and release a new version within the next year. In the meantime, check out the current version.

http://moenvironment.org/brad-blog/296-our-future-plus-3