

# think WATER



Smithsonian

## EXPLORING THE CENTRALITY OF WATER IN OUR LIVES

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) is pleased to share with you this newsletter.

Think Water is a Smithsonian initiative bringing together exhibitions, educational resources and public programs to foster important national and global conversations, and develop innovative civic engagement and citizen science projects for community and student interaction with water.

Central to this initiative is a multi-year traveling exhibition, *Water / Ways*, part of SITES' Museum on Main Street program. The exhibition will travel to small towns in partnership with state humanities councils.

The goal for Think Water is to provide a platform through which communities can share and learn from each other's experiences. The project also aims to share information about Smithsonian research, collections, and exhibitions that focus on water and the resources available to the public through its federal partners. We invite you to take part in national conversations surrounding water. We hope the project will engage communities as they reconnect to water and explore ways in which these relationships can be restored. We'd love to hear from you about how water has impacted your life.

Sincerely,  
Myriam Springuel, Director  
Smithsonian Institution Traveling  
Exhibition Service

## Why Water Matters

Katrina D. Lashley

It's a difficult thing, voicing our relationship to water. It makes one pause. How does one speak to the immensity of such a strange thing? How can one substance be so many things, an inherent contradiction?

On one hand, water is soft, yielding... a nurturer and a source of life, but there is a darker aspect of this ancient relationship. There is a conventional wisdom, water, like fire, takes everything. This soft, yielding, nurturing substance is unstoppable, one of the most powerful forces on earth that indiscriminately takes, erasing what once seemed so permanent and central to our lives. An equally complex aspect of our relationship with water is, how, due to its integral role in our lives, it has become part of the quotidian, fading into the background. Water is so important to us it is no longer a part of our consciousness. We no longer think about it.

Why does water matter? Water is at the core of who we are, who we think we are, where we live, how we live, and our concepts of faith.

For centuries, societies' decisions on where to settle have been driven by

access to, or preferably ownership of, water. From the largest urban centers to the smallest settlements, water has been a determining factor. This desire to have access to, or ownership of, water has often clashed with the



Courtesy of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

aspirations of others. What results is either a tense state of co-existence or outright conflict, with the victor claiming rights to a source which lays the foundations for agriculture and thriving economies. It allows societies to establish their relationships to the outside world in a multitude of ways, markedly through trade.

## Why Water Matters (continued from page 1)

Waterways have served as veins, stretched across the bodies of societies carrying goods, people, and ideas... depositing them along the various stops of the landscape.

Over time this continuing flow of wares, bodies, and knowledge leads to the creation and re-creation of specific world views and ways of being—ways of explaining our origins, ways of understanding distance and time, ways of loving, ways of mourning, ways of eating, ways of singing, ways of dancing, ways of depicting the world. Water shapes our expression of our place in and our understanding of the world.

One of the most powerful aspects of our understanding of the world is our relationship to what we conceive as the Divine. For some, as a part of Nature, water is a manifestation of a higher power. Whether personified or in its natural state, water is something sacred, respected as a source of life or feared and pacified as an avenging entity. In some faiths, water serves as a reminder of the brevity of the material world. Water can be the receptacle of our sins, either in the physical sense, as in the casting of bread into a flowing body of water at the start of a new year, or as a means of purification, a washing away of the material world to make participants worthy of contact with a higher power. For other worshippers, water is the doorway into a new life, necessary for the act of resurrection, the start of a new life, free from the burdens of the past.



River baptism at Moon Lake, Coahoma County, MS, 1989. ©Ken Light

Culture, heritage, faith, politics... civilization. We find ourselves encountering yet another contradiction of water. This substance which is integral to how we define ourselves and our place in the larger world is only one percent of the world's fresh water supply.

Where does that leave us? What does it mean that water is considered one of the major challenges of the 21st century? That the lack of water will lead to increased disease, undermine economic growth, limit food production, and impact peace and security? What does it mean that communities are feeling the effects of climate change and poor land and water management? How do societies (re)engage members in their historical, cultural, and ecological heritage and ensure all voices and experiences are part of conversations pertaining to water issues? What roles should cultural institutions play in convening and taking part in conversations which will allow those voices who have traditionally been absent to add their narratives to global discussions taking place?

In addressing such issues communities will be able to take meaningful, significant steps to protect this substance which plays an integral role not only in defining who we are, but also our survival.

*Katrina D. Lashley has served as Project Coordinator of UrbanWaterways at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum for the past four and a half years. Additionally, she works with Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street (MoMS) program to document water-based initiatives and programming at the Smithsonian and highlight the efforts of communities in the MoMS network to engage their residents in issues pertaining to their local waterways.*



Ellis Island Immigrants disembarking.  
Courtesy Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-30546



Hand washing. Courtesy of California Department of Water Resources. Photograph by John Chacon

# Water/Ways launches

From above, Earth appears as a water planet with more than 71 percent of its surface covered with this vital resource for life. Water impacts climate, agriculture, transportation, industry and more. It inspires art and music. The newest traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street (MoMS) program, *Water/Ways*, examines water as an environmental necessity and an important cultural element.

A partnership of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and state humanities councils, MoMS is traveling five copies of *Water/Ways* on simultaneous yearlong tours of Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota and Wyoming.

*Water/Ways* will travel to more than 180 small towns across 30 states throughout the next six years. The full tour itinerary can be viewed online at [MuseumOnMainStreet.org](http://MuseumOnMainStreet.org).

All of the water currently on the planet is all that there will ever be. Through the water cycle it is in endless motion on Earth's surface, below ground and in the atmosphere. *Water/Ways* explores this cycle, water's effect on landscape, settlement and migration, and its impact on culture and spirituality. It looks at how political and economic planning have long been affected by access to water and control of water resources. Human creativity and resourcefulness provide new ways of protecting water resources and renewing respect for the natural environment.



*Water/Ways* in Idaho Falls, ID. Courtesy SITES



Americans and Mexicans join hands across the Rio Grande, 2014. Courtesy of Lorne Matalon

## See *Water/Ways* now in these locations:

St. Peter, MN  
Nicollet County Historical Society  
August 13 - September 25, 2016

Douglas, WY  
Wyoming Pioneer Memorial Museum  
August 13 - October 2, 2016

Pocatello, ID  
Idaho Museum of Natural History  
September 3 - October 16, 2016

Miami Springs, FL  
Curtiss Mansion Museum  
September 3 - October 22, 2016

Lawrenceville, IL  
Lawrence County Historical Society  
September 3 - October 15, 2016

Red Wing, MN  
Goodhue County Historical Society  
October 1 - November 13, 2016

Riverton, WY  
Central Wyoming College  
October 8 - December 4, 2016



Courtesy of the Minnesota Humanities Center

# Florida Humanities Council Explores Water

Jon Wilson

Florida is one of five states currently acting as hosts to the Smithsonian's traveling exhibition, *Water/Ways*. It is appearing in six Florida communities.

The Florida Humanities Council helps define our state to its estimated 20-million residents, about two-thirds of them from somewhere else. We do this through speakers, workshops, tours, seminars for the public and for teachers, and media such as our FORUM Magazine, published three times yearly. Our subject matter embraces Florida's history, anthropology, literature, geography, art, architecture, music, and to a lesser degree, politics and economics. Indeed, if it is a Florida subject, we are probably interested in pursuing it at some level. Meanwhile, we co-administer with our cultural partners—libraries and universities, for example—the annual Florida Book Awards for top writing by Florida authors, and the Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, which recognizes a living author for his or her body of work. We recently have introduced to our state the Veterans Telling Project, a national program in which military veterans, many with combat experience, go on stage to tell a live audience their personal stories of service. The program has drawn standing ovations at several venues in the Tampa Bay region and in Pensacola. It will play next in Orlando.

Water, of course, is ever on our minds. This vital compound perhaps defines Florida more than any other area we explore. It's not necessarily a

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commercial when we boast about the inviting beaches that surround us on three sides; it's an accurate description of our geography. Rivers and streams course through thousands of miles of the peninsula and have provided cultural identity—not to mention survival sustenance and practical transportation—to humans since the days of the ancients. We have nearly eight thousand lakes. Hydrologists suggest that Florida has the largest collection of freshwater springs on Earth, with more than seven hundred of them. Many are considered first-magnitude springs, which means they pump at least one hundred cubic feet of water per second, or about 64.6 million gallons per day.

Water long has been used here in the abstract sense, too. Developers and entrepreneurs of all stripe have

employed its images and themes to promote projects, towns, and attractions. For example, at least fourteen Florida cities have "Springs" in their names. Attractions such as Weeki Wachee Springs, Wakulla Springs, and Homosassa Springs, all near the Gulf of Mexico coastline, continue to draw residents and tourists alike. Silver Springs, near Ocala, was one of the state's first advertised attractions beginning in the 19th Century soon after the Civil War. There, glass-bottomed boats allowed visitors to gaze through the crystal water at fish and odd underwater formations. Hollywood filmed movies there, most notably the motion pictures in the Tarzan series during the 1920s and '30s. Don't forget the fabled "Fountain of Youth," a St. Augustine tourist magnet promising a drink of life-renewing liquid.

But for all its glory, lore, and history, water in Florida faces a critical time. For the first time, the latest generation of Floridians and the most recent



*Water/Ways* in Palatka, FL. Courtesy of Florida Humanities Council

## Florida Humanities Council (continued from page 4)

crop of visitors have not been able to experience water as clean and abundant as in eras past. The water that brought such massive development has been pumped to quench the thirst of an exploding population; and pollution in the form of fertilizers, chemicals, and waste has invaded the underground aquifer, the source of both the many springs and the drinking water for residents. This crossroads is what makes the *Water/Ways* exhibition so timely for Florida. It is vital in a continuing attempt in our state to educate and to build public awareness of water's importance—and its fragility as a resource.

To that end, Florida Humanities offers several programs in the hope that we can help create what award-winning author Cynthia Barnett calls a “water ethic”—a shared resolve to use less and pollute less. Here are a few of them:

◆ Florida vs. Georgia is not just a football rivalry. It's also the title of a Supreme Court case that could affect the health of the Apalachicola River and Bay and the fate of the Florida oyster industry that depends on them. Tom Berson, a college professor who wrote his doctoral thesis on Silver Springs and the North Florida interior, is the presenter. In another program, Berson describes the numerous valuable natural springs in Florida that brought tourists here before Disney World. The springs attracted travelers into a wild and enchanting Florida interior, including Weeki Wachee, the deepest naturally formed spring in the United States.

◆ We have also presented “Water World: Canoes, Canals, and the Meaning of Water in Ancient Florida.” Dugout canoes hewn from massive logs of pine and cypress, canoe canals designed and dug by hand, and indigenous canoe trails and routes

along Florida's coast and through the interior marshes and swamps provide clues about the significance of water in the ancient world.

◆ A summer seminar for high school students is “Fluid Futures: Imaging Water in the 21st Century.” It invites this younger age group to think broadly about how water has been understood across cultures, histories, and the arts. It challenges them to explore how such understanding can help us approach the emerging global water crises. Florida educators faced with the transformation of the environment feel that it is incumbent upon them to cultivate among the next crop of leaders a keen awareness of the changing significance of water in the new century. The seminar takes place on the waterfront campus of Eckerd College at the tip of the Tampa Bay peninsula, and affords an unrivaled perspective on coastal Florida's changing environment. Classroom sessions will be complemented by (and in many cases, based upon) field experiences.

*Jon Wilson worked for 36 years as a reporter and editor for the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) and the Evening Independent. He also was editor of a Times' regional edition. He retired in 2007 and has since worked as communications consultant for the Florida Humanities Council.*



A visitor explores *Water/Ways* in Spicer, MN.  
Courtesy Minnesota Humanities Center.





Sunset paddle along the main channel of the Mississippi River. Photo Credit: Laura Wildenborg

## Finding Your Surf Wave

Laura Wildenborg

Just below the dam in the middle of Hastings, MN, there is a short section of whitewater containing a few play holes to surf with kayak playboats. I pull my skirt around the combing of my cockpit and scoot my boat into the water. As I dip my paddle into the Vermillion River, I peer down, noticing a metal shopping cart just below the surface. Pulling myself out into the current, I start floating downstream. As my kayaking crew and I slide along, signs of human impact are everywhere. Along the bank there is an abandoned blanket and a muddy pillow. Below the old railroad bridge, I swing into a calm pool. Among the mossy rocks and fresh green trees, sits a rusted-out push lawnmower. Paddling the bow of my kayak into the recirculating water of a pour over, I find the sweet spot where I can slide back and forth along the wave. From atop my surf wave, I look into the adjacent swirling eddy. A mountain dew bottle spins with an unopened can of red bull, like a synchronized swimming duo hopped up on endless caffeine. This section of the river appears to be abused and uncared for—a “tragedy of the commons”—where resources are overused and depleted. While there is visible trash everywhere in this urban riverfront, I know there is also the invisible: road runoff, pesticides, and fecal coliforms. I had come prepared for these toxins: a dry suit to protect the majority of my skin and nose plugs have my nostrils on lockdown. And then, I consider what is downstream: my hometown of Red Wing.

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The water in Red Wing is not like that of the clear lakes of northern Minnesota. It flows through the karst topography of the region, picking up sediment as it rushes along the banks, collecting stormwater runoff from tilled lands and busy roads. All waterways culminate in the muddy Mississippi, the largest drainage in North America. Poised along the river highway of the Midwest, the city of Red Wing has developed with recreation, transportation, tourism,

industry, and education continuously influenced by water. At a place where so many tributaries come together, at the big bend in the Mississippi, Red Wing is the ideal place to host

the *Water/Ways* Smithsonian exhibition. Being invited to participate in the exhibit, I began to brainstorm how the Red Wing Environmental Learning Center (ELC) and the Red Wing High School Sustainability Club could contribute to the project.

Water is integrated into everything we do at the ELC, be it canoeing down the Vermillion River into the Mississippi, snowshoeing on frozen lakes in the Cannon Bottoms, or fishing for trout along Hay Creek. A huge reason the ELC

## Finding Your Surf Wave (continued from page 6)

exists is due to the diverse ecosystems that are available to explore right here—and all of them include some kind of water source. As I reflected on my whitewater experience on the Vermillion in Hastings, I thought about the ELC students, local residents, and tourists paddling, swimming, and fishing in the local waterways downstream of that visibly polluted water.

At the ELC, we anticipate our participation in the exhibition. Xcel Energy water specialists have teamed up with Jason Jech, ELC Executive Director, and ELC staff this summer to create a fisheries program where students will get an in depth opportunity to study local fish and their habitat. The ELC will also participate in the Cannon River Clean-Up by paddling canoes down the lower stretch of the river into the Mississippi, picking up trash along the way. The Red Wing High School Sustainability Club students chose to spend this year researching the topic of water. So far, they have toured the Red Wing wastewater and drinking water treatment plants and visited an organic vegetable farm in southeastern Minnesota to learn how the farm manages runoff. Paul Drotos, Red Wing Public Works Environmental Officer, came to discuss stormwater with them. The students also chose a water-related topic, researched and created poster projects.

Topics included acid rain, dams, sediment filling in Lake Pepin, sea level rise, and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. On Earth day, Sustainability Club members Henry Patterson, Molly Cyr, and Nina Kriese, presented information to the high school student body about Flint drinking water problems, water pollution, and how to reduce personal impact on waterways. As we look forward to the installment of the exhibition, students are prepared and excited to share what they have learned thus far.

As a host site for the exhibition, Red Wing has an opportunity to bring all interest groups together for collaboration. Water joins us all in some way, and now we have the *Water/Ways* uniting us to examine our relationship with water both up and downstream, above and below ground. We can ask the questions of partnering organizations and the community: What is being done to protect water

resources and our waterways? What needs to be done? Who is going to do it?

In the end, we ask: who cares? Is it the average citizen who turns on their tap to take a bath? Is it the local brewery that depends on clean Red Wing water for their unique brew? Or is it the outdoorsman who takes his grandson fishing? Let's think back on the Vermillion River, one of the closest places to the Minneapolis/Saint Paul metropolitan area and Red Wing to find a good surf wave in Minnesota. There is a group of paddlers, the Rapids Riders, who spend a day each year cleaning up the Vermillion. This is a perfect example of how the groups who are invested, those who use and appreciate the waterways, are the ones who begin the process to clean up and protect. Organizations like this one

may eventually have an impact on what goes into the water upstream, and can definitely decrease the amount of pollution going downstream. The *Water/Ways* exhibition is a start to that conversation, that realization that each and every individual has some reason to protect our local waterways, and to care for their little section of riverbank, calm pool, or surf wave.



Earth Day presentation to Red Wing High School students. Laura Wildenborg sits in her whitewater playboat and talks about paddling the polluted Vermillion River. Photo Credit: Nina Kriese

*Laura Wildenborg is a Red Wing local and enthusiast. She earns her keep as a field instructor at the Red Wing Environmental Learning Center and provides guidance and wisdom as the advisor for the Red Wing High School Sustainability Club. Introducing students to the outdoors is her passion. Instilling a sense of appreciation and responsibility for our natural resources is her goal. At the end of the day she enjoys an ice-cold glass of water—from the tap, filtered from a Boundary Waters lake, or pouring directly off an Alaskan glacier.*

# WATER *Stories*

We all carry within us water stories which are central to who we are. These stories are at the core of a shared human experience. Stories take many forms: audio, video, photographs, and personal memories. Share your water story at [MuseumOnMainStreet.org/stories](http://MuseumOnMainStreet.org/stories).

## Spiritual Cleansing



Water is an essential component in cleansing rituals of many religions as worshipers prepare themselves for communion with the Divine. For example, practitioners of the Islamic faith perform wudu before entering the mosque.

Jasminko Ibrakovic/Shutterstock.com

## Ever Present

“I am from a town called Stockton, CA which is an agricultural hub, water is super important, if it doesn’t rain, my friends, neighbors, family, the entire community are going to be excessively impacted by that. So it was something that was very top of mind. In going to college—I went to the University of California, Davis—I can’t tell you how many people... basically everyone I know who was going to go into law school, were doing environmental law... basically doing water rights. It was a huge, huge topic; and moving here, (Washington, DC) and having the constant rain it feels like it is a reusable resource. I didn’t think about [water] as being the same issue as in California. But what I realize is that I am actually very attuned to [water].”

Katie Macko, Washington, DC

## Fleeting Encounter

“I remember once in the outer banks I had my hands in the water and as it was receding back into the ocean a starfish landed smack dab in the middle of my hand, just a full grown starfish, and no one was around see it. It was the coolest thing and so random. I flung it off my hand, and I went to tell everybody about it, but no one believed me, like it was some kind of mythological thing that could never happen; and I always wished somebody was there to have seen how awesome that was.”

Thomas Canavan, Millard Sheets Art Center Manager, Pomona, CA

## Cultural Celebration



Americans across the country (and around the world) hold dragon boat festivals to celebrate Asian American culture. These festivals feature traditional Chinese dragon boat races and often offer programs on Asian arts, music, food, and dance. Here, US Navy personnel participate in a Dragon boat race in Okinawa, Japan.

US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Carmichael Yopez.

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for 65 years. SITES connects Americans to their cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science, and history, which are shown wherever people live, work, and play. Museum on Main Street (MoMS) is a Smithsonian outreach program that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities.