

St. Croix, Namekagon known for protected corridor of clean, family-friendly waters

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Floating down the peaceful St. Croix River in a canoe, you'd never know you are close to the busy Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area.

The St. Croix and Namekagon rivers, which together make up the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, are a protected corridor of clean water, natural forest and wildlife habitat along the Minnesota-Wisconsin border.

The St. Croix is one of the last undisturbed large floodplain rivers in the Upper Mississippi River system. It attracts visitors who come to paddle its length in canoes and kayaks, test their fishing skills and camp along its shores.

For Central Minnesotans, the St. Croix offers a Boundary Waters-esque canoe adventure that's closer to home and a little less primitive.

"You get a very different kind of wilderness experience, which is amazing this close to a major metropolitan area," said Molly Shodeen, area hydrologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

The St. Croix was a favored route for fur traders and American Indians, connecting the Mississippi River to Lake Superior. It was one of the original rivers that received federal designation when Congress adopted the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968.

The riverway is unique in that it's a national park, but also is co-managed by local land management agencies.

"The history of it is really, really fascinating," said Ivan Bartha, coordinator for experiential programs at St. Cloud State University's Outdoor Endeavors program.

Bartha takes two or three trips down the St. Croix every year with groups of St. Cloud State students. Usually, they start near Trego, Wis., and canoe downstream for four days, winding through forests and past sandbars.

"It's an awesome river," said Bartha. "It's kind of a gem."

There are campsites available along the way at state parks and national forest campgrounds. The smallmouth bass fishing is excellent, Bartha said.

The students spend the week learning canoeing and camping skills and how to leave no trace behind.

Some of the students love the trip, while others aren't quite so sure about the primitive aspects, Bartha said.

Follow Kirsti Marohn on Twitter @kirstimarohn.