



# Spirit of AWARE SOARS



*For one week each year,*  
the spirit of AWARE soars as volunteers from various “tribes” or various parts of the state unite as river warriors. They gather along the banks of a river, a community with a common cause removing trash and restoring wildness to the river. To date, more than 3,270 volunteers comprise the Project AWARE Tribe, and in the past 12 years they traveled nearly 1,000 miles and removed more than 300 tons of trash (74 percent of which has been recycled) from rivers all across Iowa. The 2014 AWARE Tribe was brought to the Big Sioux River. This time, both Iowa and South Dakota men, women and children were able to share in the experience.

From July 12<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup>, 388 volunteers paddled their way down the Big Sioux River in northwest Iowa and southeast South Dakota. In Project AWARE’s 12-year history, this was the first-ever “border river experience.” The Iowa Department of Natural Resources partnered with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks in a unique gathering of the “tribes.” Both states, as well as others across the Midwest, came together for a week on the water and to join in a common purpose.

By the final day, 30 tons of trash were removed from 91 miles of the Big Sioux River between Sioux Falls and Sioux City, 95 percent of it was recycled.

The Big Sioux River served once again as a critical gathering place, just as it once hosted native people ages ago. Specifically, such unique locations along the 2014 route included Gitchie Manitou State Preserve, Blood Run National Historic Landmark, and Good Earth State Park.

Indigenous people refer to a “great spirit” as Gitchie Manitou. Loosely interpreted, the term refers in many tribal languages across North America to the Great Spirit, the Creator of all things and the Giver of Life, and is sometimes translated as the “Great Mystery.” The Oneota culture and the Oglala Sioux are included in this group. Located near Granite, Iowa, Gitchie Manitou State Preserve contains ancient Native American burial mounds and Precambrian Sioux Quartzite outcroppings. These exposed bedrock formations are 1.6 billion years old, the oldest in the region

Located in Lyon County, Blood Run National Historic Landmark was home to the Oneota as early as A.D. 1000 to just before the year 1714 and later the Prairie Sioux. For many centuries, this land between the Big Sioux River and Blood Run Creek served as a major intertribal and ceremonial center. We know this today thanks to the burial mounds and village sites located within this sacred space. According to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, the site is a time capsule of Indigenous culture. No other Oneota site of such size and integrity is known to exist in the United States. Through arrangements with the local manager, others can also experience the beauty and uniqueness of this culturally significant site.

On the South Dakota side of the Big Sioux River, Good Earth State Park has been documented as one of the oldest sites of long-term human habitation in the United States. The river and its watershed, abundant wildlife, fertile floodplains, availability of catlinite used as a carving stone for pipes, and protection from winds thanks to the rolling hills made the area an important ceremonial gathering place and a significant trading center for many tribal peoples from 1300 - 1700 A.D.

Project AWARE resembles these early cultures as each summer, participants gather from far-flung locations to celebrate our rivers. Each year the mobile village of Project AWARE expands with new faces and new places to explore as the event migrates around the state. This year, 57% of the volunteers were first-time participants, along with a large number of “tribal elders” or long-time volunteers. This includes 18 Project AWARE volunteers who have participated ten years or more. Even those not new to Project AWARE were indeed new to the route traveled. Of both new and existing AWARE volunteers, a surprising 91 percent had never previously recreated in this part of Iowa or South Dakota. While most

participants were from Iowa, volunteers also gathered from Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, North Carolina, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin in this annual cleanup ritual.



**FREEDOM** – Evening campground activities offer education and time for play in local parks and playgrounds. Youth experience hands-on learning throughout the week in a fun, safe, inspiring environment.

The spirit of AWARE was demonstrated by those committed to participating in spite of their own challenges and obstacles. In each instance, Project AWARE allows volunteers to draw strength from the greater whole – giving each individual the ability to achieve more than each may have expected. In this year’s case, two volunteers were experiencing health issues prior to the week on AWARE. Both chose to “paddle on,” and received gracious support from fellow volunteers and staff. One infamous “tribal elder” for Project AWARE, Darrel Brothersen, paddled each day of the event, despite battling cancer earlier in the year. His strength and spirit soared during his week on the river. Much like the injured



**POWER** – The work of hundreds over the course of one week accomplishes what may take individuals years to complete. The county conservation boards, Sioux County Sportsmen’s Club, and Big Sioux Cat Anglers provided much needed power to help remove the 549 tires and 19.9 tons of scrap metal. The city of Sioux Falls provided nutrition and hydration supplies.

eagle found by Project AWARE volunteers along the banks of the Big Sioux River, Brothersen has since been in remission and is surviving – in preparation for yet another Project AWARE in 2015.

Throughout the week, volunteers participated in a variety of educational programs, sharing in the rich, native culture that exists in this watershed. Visits to unique prairie landscapes such as Broken Kettle Grasslands, campground programs featuring regional conservation experts, learning critical on-water skills such as paddling and knot tying, and enjoying the bounty of an Asian carp culling, the Big Sioux River watershed offered a special week for project AWARE volunteers.

### Sacred Land in Recovery Too!

Just a month prior to the event, the Big Sioux River experienced record flooding. Through the course of the week (and the river), volunteers saw the impacts of spring floods on both the river and surrounding landscape. With an expansive drainage area, the Big Sioux generates massive flows during major storm events. With the floods came siltation and flood debris. Thanks to the heroic efforts of staff from the county conservation boards, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, and communities along the route, river accesses and parks were recovered in time for the event.



**WISDOM** – Personally guided tours of Iowa's and South Dakota's natural areas by the states' premier naturalists, while other presentations give volunteers daily insight to the landforms and landscape features awaiting them on the river.

## 12th Annual Project AWARE July 12-19, 2014 Big Sioux River

EVENT STATS	
River Miles:	91
Total Participants:	388
Avg. Participants Each Day:	167
<b>Youngest:</b>	2 yrs
<b>Oldest:</b>	80 yrs
Total Sponsors:	88

SOLID WASTE	
Total Materials Collected	30.1 tons
Trash 5%	1.3 tons
Recyclables 95%	28.8 tons
Miscellaneous Recycling (Appliances, Household Hazardous Materials, Cardboard, Plastic, Redeemable Cans/Bottles)	2.7 tons
Tires (549)	6.2 tons
Scrap Metal	39,840 Ibs

WATER QUALITY*	
Sites Monitored	32
Transparency	20 centimeters
Water Temp	70° F
pH	9
Dissolved Oxygen	10 mg/L
Nitrate-Nitrogen	5 mg/L
Nitrite-Nitrogen	0 mg/L
Phosphate	0.4 mg/L
Chloride	less than 32 mg/L

\*represents average values



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## What Volunteers Say-

"One of a kind experience with fantastic efforts from the staff and sponsors."

"It's just an amazing event. There's nothing else like it in Iowa."

"We can make a difference!"

"It is not only about the removed trash, but perhaps more importantly, it is about the newfound awareness/connections of our rivers and how they impact our lives."

"The most rewarding vacation you'll ever take!"

"The sense of community will keep you wanting to come back year after year."

"The ability to have a direct impact on the safety, health, and beauty of the river with amazing, diverse people sharing a common goal."

"This excellent run program is informative, inspirational, and proves that we can make a difference while having FUN."

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