Building Bridges Between the St. Joseph River and Local Archaeology

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project (hereafter “the Project”) has an ally among naturalists (experts and/or students of natural history) and recreational users of the St. Joseph River (fishermen, kayakers, and canoeists).

THE ROLE OF THE RIVER: PAST AND PRESENT

During the 18th century, Fort St. Joseph was surrounded by a deciduous forest which supported a variety of flora and fauna. The wildlife of the forest and river were utilized in the everyday lives of local inhabitants. The French and Native Americans hunted beavers, raccoons, and muskrats for their fur and meals, used the river for transportation, and collected other local resources to construct their houses. The St. Joseph River continues to play a pivotal role in the lives of people today, albeit in new ways. Although the river is seldom used for transportation, subsistence, or trade today, it is a recreational attraction. Kayakers, fishermen, and canoeists visit the river to practice their outdoor hobbies and enjoy the area’s natural beauty.

THE MUTUAL INTERESTS BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

Anthropologists and naturalists share an interest in the St. Joseph River and how humans have interacted with it through the ages. Archaeologists have been investigating the ways in which people have used the St. Joseph River through their excavations of the Fort St. Joseph site. Archaeological studies shed light on the types of animals that previously occupied the area. Some animals, such as passenger pigeons, have since become extinct. Thus, archaeology can contribute information on changes that have occurred in the natural environment over the past 300 years.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT

The Sarett and Fernwood Nature Centers have both been affiliated with the Project in the past. The Sarett Nature Center has provided Archaeology Open House attendees with the opportunity to ride in a historically accurate replica of an 18th-century voyageur canoe. The Fernwood Nature Center has provided taxidermic specimens of animals similar to those recovered from the ongoing archaeological excavations of the fort for display at the Open House. These previous partnerships have the potential to serve as a foundation for further collaboration.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE COLLABORATION

The Fernwood Nature Center and the Fort St. Joseph Museum offer opportunities for collaboration between naturalists and archaeologists. Both have the knowledge to create brief exhibits or lectures on either the natural history of the St. Joseph River valley or the history of the fort. The Fernwood Nature Center can educate Archaeology Open House attendees about the natural history of the area as well as animal pelts from animals once exploited at the fort found during excavations. These are a few examples of how collaboration between the Project and the natural history community can promote understanding of the history of the St. Joseph River valley. Will you join us as we continue to study, protect, and enjoy the natural world surrounding Fort St. Joseph?