

## Mississippi Headwaters emit a Flow of Emotion



It was a baptism of sorts for the elderly woman, the culmination of a pilgrimage that had taken her from her home state of Mississippi to the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

The woman had grown up on the banks of the Mighty Mississippi, always wondering what the river was like at the headwaters, a half-country away.

When she finally did make the trip to Itasca State Park, home of the headwaters, she was quite old and fragile, ultimately unable to actually make it down to the water's edge. So an Itasca staffer brought the water to her – a cupful or so.

She splashed the water on her face and, at first, Connie Cox thought it was that splash of the headwaters that ran down the woman's cheeks.

It was, in fact, tears of joy.

“That inspires you to keep protecting it,” Cox, the lead interpretive naturalist at Itasca, said of the headwaters.

Or maybe she was referring to iconic Itasca State Park as a whole. The park, near Park Rapids in northern Minnesota, is regarded as the granddaddy of all Minnesota state parks. Established in 1891, it was the first in what is now a system of highly popular state parks and recreation areas. Yes, state parks have become a Minnesota tradition.

None more so than Itasca.

“People come back year after year – some for 60 years,” Cox told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates those traditions, embracing the resources that make places like Itasca and the headwaters a Minnesota institution. (For more, go to <http://www.minnesotatraditions.com>.)



“They always come back to the headwaters,” said Cox, in her third decade at Itasca. “It’s a tradition that people have developed. I would say that 90 to 95 percent come for the headwaters. It’s just a tradition. It becomes a part of their life. The headwaters is a part of their vacation tradition. I don’t know if a lot of places can say that. There’s something magical and mystical about the headwaters.”

And Itasca as a whole. While the headwaters are undoubtedly the centerpiece, among other things, the massive 32,000-acre park also includes dozens of quaint lakes and fisheries as well as a huge variety of wildlife offerings – all synonymous with Minnesota.



“When people get here they don’t realize what it all entails,” Cox said of the park, which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. “They know about the headwaters, but there are also more than 100 lakes here.

“A lot (of visitors) come to see the headwaters, but the amazing thing is, the first thing they say is they want to cross the river (at the headwaters). And they say it (the water) is so clear here, especially those from Eastern European countries. They say how polluted the rivers there have become. That just amazes me. And there’s so much more we can do in our country.

“We see a lot of erosion that occurs at the headwaters. The people like to walk down there. There’s an impact. But for as many people that visit, nature still comes right up to you.”

*This information is produced and distributed by the Mississippi Headwaters Board in an effort to motivate everyone to protect our natural resources. A recreation based lifestyle is part of our MN Traditions and is only preserved when we protect our aquatic resources from invaders such as zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil. To support Minnesota Traditions join us on social media here*

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