

John Sullivan Q&A:

Bio: I am married and live in La Crosse, Wisconsin. I am a water quality biologist by training and have worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for 35 years with a focus of monitoring the water quality of large rivers especially the Mississippi River. I enjoy photography, gardening and cross country skiing when the rivers turn hard. I am paddling/poling enthusiast who enjoys extended solo canoe trips on streams, rivers and waterways of the United States. My long excursions started in the late 1990s and were focused primarily in Wisconsin. Since then I expanded my travels by paddling the state-named rivers that drain to the Mississippi including the entire Missouri River from Three Forks to St. Louis.. In the fall of 2013 I finished paddling the Mississippi River. A description of some of my previous canoe trips, including portions of my canoe journals, can be found at: <http://www.irishvoyageur.com/default.aspx>

Here is what John had to say:

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did) the situation? “My most difficult challenge was dealing with very strong winds on the big reservoirs that often came up suddenly. I normally headed to the nearest shoreline for a place to take out safely. I also had to learn to be patient too when being windbound on shore for two or three days at a time. During these times I tried to relax, read, repair/clean gear, took photographs, and got more sleep including midday naps.”

#2: What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from? “I benefited greatly from reading the accounts of others who had paddled the Missouri River. I also read Dave Miller’s Missouri River paddling guide and thought it was very useful and provided great insights on what to expect.”

#3: Was there anything that you planned for then you felt was unnecessary or overdone? Explain. “No, I can’t recall anything that comes to mind. I think I benefited from having made many other long paddling trips before tackling the Missouri River.”

#4: What was the 5 most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain. “1. A cover for my canoe, which kept rain and waves out, reduced wind stress and

provided a means for hiding gear in the canoe. 2. A Sierra Designs Meteor Light 2man tent. This tent provided a lot of room to spread out gear and had extra places in the fly to tie it down in windy weather. Also, the tent could be staked at the four corners before adding the support poles. This was important during windy weather. 3. Three, 2.5gallon polyethylene jugs for carrying drinking water. 4. A sturdy light weight paddle. The blades were fiberglass but the shaft was carbon fiber. 5. My widebrimmed hat and SPF 50 sunscreen. I have had previous bouts with skin cancer and I tried to minimize my exposure to the sun.”

#5: Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how did you overcome this? “I took a canoe carrier that was too small for the long portages. I asked for portaging assistance around the large dams. I lightened my load by having others take some of my large packs around the dams at the portages.”

#6: What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for? “A Sven saw for cutting wood. I’ve taken this saw on thousands of river miles and have never used it. I don’t build campfires but for some reason always take the saw with me on my trips. I guess it is something akin to a “security blanket” and nice to have in my bag of supplies.”

#7: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate? “I was overwhelmed with the beauty of the Gates of the Rock Mountains, especially as the early morning light spread across the river’s valley at dawn. It is something that I will remember for the rest of my life.”

#8: What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it? “I paddled a Wenonah prism canoe using a kayak paddle. I also had a canoe cover made by Cooke Custom Sewing. It was very easy to load and unload, very fast and maintained a straight course when paddling. When loaded it was very stable and seaworthy. However, the canoe was difficult to maneuver (turn) in strong winds (>20 mph).”

#9: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this? “I purchased freeze-dried dinners, packed trail

mix (nuts, raisins & cereal) and took energy and granola bars. I had enough food to last 30 days. This food only provided about 2500 calories per day which meant I lost weight during my trip. In hind sight, freeze-dried dinners should be servings for two and high calorie energy bars with protein should be used instead of granola bars.”

#10: What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water? “I took three, 2.5 gallon polyethylene containers and always tried to have them refilled whenever I ran across a source of drinking water. Water was obtained at campgrounds, cities/towns or residences I found along the way. I also took a water filter but never had to use it. I had plenty of room to store the water in my canoe but it also meant more weight to carry at the long portages around the big dams.”

#11: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey what do you feel would be best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey? “Read the accounts of others who have paddled the Missouri. Get a copy of Dave Miller’s paddling guide, get your questions answered through social paddling networks or direct conversations/email with folks who have paddled the Missouri River. Obtain experience paddling large open waters in windy weather prior to tackling the Missouri River reservoirs.” John Sullivan.

