

PROJECTS

Riverside Revival



Tribal partnership helps Lower Brule Sioux Tribe reclaim its lost heritage

DELANIE STAFFORD/ U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

By Robin Roenker

In July 2023, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Omaha District completed an environmentally and culturally responsive shoreline restoration project in Lower Brule, S.D., in close partnership with the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe (LBST), whose reservation adjoins the Missouri River there.

Launched in 2020 after a two-year feasibility study, the \$11.6 million project addressed shoreline erosion along the river and its reservoirs, which had been eating away at reservation land at an average rate of roughly 13 feet per year.

Environmental surveys suggest the tribe has lost more than 2,000 acres to erosion since Corps-led construction of the Fort Randall and Big Bend dams in the 1950s and 1960s — in addition to land destroyed when the resulting reservoirs

flooded the tribe's ancestral headquarters, causing the town of Lower Brule to be relocated.

Without mitigation, continued shoreline erosion was expected to soon compromise the tribe's communal wastewater sewage lagoons, potentially contaminating nearby reservoirs.

MODEL PARTNERSHIP

The shoreline restoration project represents the first to be completed nationally under the revised Tribal Partnership Program (TPP), part of the Water Resources Development Act, which was amended in 2016 to incorporate not only feasibility studies but also project construction.

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5,000
FEET

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SOURCE: U.S. Army Corps
of Engineers

didn't have an authority vehicle to deliver that until the Tribal Partnership Program was amended," says Greg Johnson, plan formulation section chief for the Omaha District.

Using the revised TPP authority, the Corps was able to work with tribal leaders to develop and enact an erosion prevention plan that not only preserved but also beautified the site. A core facet of the project is a 5,000-foot-long, rock breakwater structure designed to sit roughly 100 feet offshore to reduce further erosion from waves and winter icing.

In spots where crumbling, vertical cliff banks previously provided little access to the river, there are now restored native habitats of cottonwood trees, native shrubs and other medicinally and

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ceremonially important tribal plants. The project also added a 2-mile walking path, a new boat dock, a swim beach and a waterside park for both tribal members and the general public to enjoy.

RECONNECTING TO THE RIVER

Tribal elders named the new recreation area Wata Onazin, which means “boat park” to recall and honor a previous boat crossing used by the tribe before the dams were built. Reconnecting the reservation to the river was a key goal for tribal elders, who wished to share their long-held, river-based cultural traditions with younger members, according to Brian Molyneaux, deputy director of the LBST’s cultural resources office.

Because of the restoration work, “the (LBST) people can conceptually start to see themselves as reintegrated with the Missouri River, which is so important to them. They were forced away from it. And a big part of this project is focused on giving them a chance to return (to it),”



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says Molyneaux, who noted the recent Corps-LBST partnership leveraged the culturally and environmentally focused approach earlier adopted by the tribal community’s cultural resources office in a 2007 shoreline restoration pilot project.

The project serves as a model for the Corps’ other pending tribal partnerships around the country, and already the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe and the Omaha District have plans to collaborate on

additional shoreline restoration efforts elsewhere on the LBST reservation.

“The tribe has miles and miles of shoreline they’d like to partner with us on, and we’ve completed a feasibility study to conduct a second, similar restoration project 4 miles upstream, to begin in the next 18 months,” says Drew Minert, chief of planning for the Omaha District.

Before the restoration, sheer cliff drops

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deputy director, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe’s cultural resources office

meant “you couldn’t even go down and stick your foot in the water — erosion had completely severed the relationship between the tribal people and the river,” says Joel Bich, wildlife biologist for the LBST. “Now, there’s been a tremendous response from local people who are getting out and using the walking trail and recreation area. I think it’s going to have a large, positive impact on the physical and mental health of the community.”