

Hmong Voices

Fox River Perspectives and Experiences

Final Report
For Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway
Paul Van Auken, Ph.D.
Catalyst Consulting
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For more information, contact Paul Van Auken, catalystconsulting@juno.com; 608.334.9527

About the Author

Paul Van Auken has been a member of the sociology and environmental studies faculty at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh since 2007, after completing a Ph.D. in sociology from UW-Madison. Prior to that he obtained a M.A. in urban affairs & public policy at the University of Delaware and then worked in the nonprofit sector doing community and economic development full-time for four years. He began his community development consulting and community-based research practice known as Catalyst Consulting in 2003 and has worked closely with Baker Tilly Virchow Krause every year since then on numerous applications to the federal New Markets Tax Credits program for the benefit of low-income communities, and has also consulted with Wisconsin communities and organizations directly on community research and visioning. A native of Iowa but resident of Wisconsin since 1999, Paul became chair of the Sociology Department at UWO in 2014. He conducts research on issues related to community, land use planning, access to public space by diverse groups, sustainability, and teaching and learning. Paul also practices public sociology, regularly writing a column called “Shortening the Distance” for local independent monthly newspaper SCENE, for which he has also written multiple cover stories. He is a member of the Oshkosh Food Cooperative board of directors, and enjoys life with his wife and two daughters on the east side of Oshkosh, where he serves as the point person for the Menominee South Neighborhood Association.

Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION

The Fox Wisconsin Heritage Parkway and I entered into a contract in the summer of 2013 to carry out a research project known as *Hmong Voices*, which was supported in part by the River Alliance of Wisconsin’s Urban Rivers Program.

The purpose of the project is to explore the relationships between Hmong people and the Fox River in the Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay areas. More specifically, according to the instructions given to participants, the purpose of the project is to develop a better understanding of the experiences with and feelings about the Fox-Wisconsin river system from racial and ethnic minorities from the areas in which the Fox and lower Wisconsin rivers flow, and particularly Hmong people who live in the Fox Valley of Northeastern Wisconsin. The information gained from these activities will then be used to inform a variety of programming and facilities along these rivers as the Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway—an effort to preserve the history and enhance the recreational opportunities in this corridor—is developed (go here for more information: http://heritageparkway.org/).

Dr. Chia Youyee Vang, a member of the history department at UW-Milwaukee and one of the preeminent Hmong scholars in the U.S., was also retained by FWHP as a consultant to the project. Dr. Vang helped to develop project parameters to ensure that they are culturally appropriate, translated some project materials, and gave a presentation about Hmong history and culture to the FWHP board of directors and project team prior to the start of the primary research. The purpose of this presentation was to provide a contextual foundation that would allow the research to commence based upon a basic knowledge of Hmong people in historical and contemporary circumstances.

BACKGROUND

*Brief History of Hmong People*

As elaborated upon in her book *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* —the first scholarly treatment of Hmong history and culture written by a Hmong American—the people now known as Hmong have their origins in Southern China. Persecution from the Han majority and poor economic conditions in the early 1800s began to push, and the lure of economic opportunity pulled, the Hmong further south into French Indochina, into modern Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and eventually Thailand by the 1850s. In this region, Hmong people established villages and seasonal migration patterns as they lived in relative isolation in mountainous terrain, practicing swidden (slash and burn) agriculture and other traditional economic activities (Christian, Moua, and Vogeler 2009).

While living under French colonial rule for several decades (1893-1954, according to Vang), Hmong people collaborated with the French to some degree and gained increased autonomy, but also began to experience an internal divide, which was exacerbated by the wars (World War II and the subsequent first Indochina war) that followed.

According to Vang (2010), prior to the Vietnam War, the majority of Hmong people in Indochina lived in the Xieng Khouwang province in Laos. The Vietnam (Second Indochina) War (1961-1973) impacted the Hmong in ways that are more complex than is often depicted. The war brought tremendous hardship in the form of military involvement, excess death and additional suffering. The U.S. government made significant efforts to keep its longstanding and extensive involvement in military actions based in Laos and Thailand, and featuring the participation of Major General Vang Pao and thousands of Hmong
soldiers, out of the public eye. This was strategic and cost effective for the U.S. “The war effort was cheap because the vast majority of lives lost in Laos were not American, thus preventing the kind of anti-war outrage that events in Vietnam generated among a segment of the U.S. population” (Vang 2010:30).

According to Vang (2010), while much of the world was not looking, Laos was “one of the most bombed locations in world history” (p. 30). The results were devastating. “Approximately 40,000 Hmong men and boys fought as partners of the U.S., of whom nearly 35,000 were killed in battle, an incredibly high mortality rate…In all, the Hmong in Laos lost approximately a third of their total population during the course of the war” (Christian, Moua, and Vogeler 2009:2). Overall, according to Dr. Vang, the estimated 100,000 Hmong people who died during the war years included combatants and civilians who perished during the war and losses during the subsequent escapes to Thailand.

The war also led to the disruption of the agrarian lifestyle of the Hmong—many of whom lost access to land—and greater division among its people. But, noted Dr. Vang, the war also brought opportunities, including salaried jobs for men and women and an increase in the number of literate individuals (see Figure 1 for a depiction of Hmong lives during the war, courtesy of Dr. Vang’s presentation).

The upshot for our case is that scores of Hmong people were displaced from their homes because of the war and forced to flee to neighboring Thailand, the first asylum country for Hmong people. Because a portion of the Hmong people had assisted the U.S. government with its “secret” war in Laos against the Lao communists and North Vietnam, a significant number of Hmong people have been allowed to
migrate to the U.S. over the subsequent decades. According to Vang, as of the 2010 U.S. Census, there are approximately 260,000 Hmong people in the United States, making it the fourth largest location for Hmong people in the world.

**Hmong People in Wisconsin**

The first Hmong people began arriving in Wisconsin in the mid-1970s, after churches and social service agencies sponsored veterans who had served in the secret war. According to Vue (forthcoming 2016), the first two Hmong families came together in 1975-6, with one moving to Wausau and the other settling in Appleton. The Fox Valley, therefore, has been an important site for Hmong settlement and culture in Wisconsin since the beginning. In the subsequent years, as families were unified and the U.S. government eased its restrictions to allow additional Hmong refugees to be resettled, the Hmong population grew rapidly. Wisconsin now has the third highest concentration of Hmong (49,240 people according to the 2010 census) in the nation, behind California and Minnesota. Wisconsin’s 2010 Hmong population is nearly three times its 1990 level, grew by 33% between 2000 and 2010 (more than five times the state’s rate of growth during this period), and is spread across many of the state’s largest cities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Hmong population in Wisconsin places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisconsin Places</th>
<th>2010 Hmong Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee city</td>
<td>10,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wausau city</td>
<td>3,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheboygan city</td>
<td>3,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appleton city</td>
<td>3,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay city</td>
<td>3,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison city</td>
<td>2,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Crosse city</td>
<td>1,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oshkosh city</td>
<td>1,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitowoc city</td>
<td>1,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weston village</td>
<td>1,089</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As revealed by Table 1, the three largest cities in the Fox Valley are all in the top ten in Wisconsin in terms of number of Hmong people. Hmong people represent an important source of diversity in a region with a history of racial exclusion. I have previously discussed such issues as follows:¹

To produce a more inclusive, integrated city and region, we need to start by acknowledging our history of exclusion, to not only better understand our past, but also our present, and then take action to intentionally produce cross-cultural interaction and make it clear that we are now welcoming, even if this wasn’t always the case.

So said two scholars who spoke on consecutive days last spring on different topics and at different venues, but whose arguments were remarkably similar and complementary.

Sociologist James Loewen came from Washington, D.C. to give two talks at the Fox Cities Book Festival at UW-Fox Valley in Menasha. The evening talk to a large, full room, followed UW Oshkosh’s (UWO) own Stephen Kercher, an historian who presented on what is now called Black Thursday, an infamous

¹ Originally published in Oshkosh *SCENE* in May 2013 (Van Auken 2013).
day in local history when, in the fall of 1968, a contingent of nearly 100 black students at UWO conducted a sit-in at the university president’s office and most were arrested and expelled.

The author of the best-selling *Lies My Teacher Told Me*—about the incomplete and inaccurate history taught in public schools in the U.S.—and *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, Loewen provided some of the broader context to events like Black Thursday. He explained that hundreds of towns and cities became “sundown towns”—basically all-white on-purpose, unwelcoming to and even legally excluding African Americans and other non-white people—starting around 1890 and continuing in many places through around 1971, when fair housing laws made it more difficult to discriminate.

Appleton and other cities from this region are confirmed as sundown towns in the book, while Oshkosh is also mentioned several times because of evidence of its sundown practices. Dr. Loewen started the research in his native Illinois, where he found scores more sundown towns than he expected, and continues to document this overlooked, shameful part of our nation’s history, encouraging citizens of all ages to follow the simple steps he lays out on his website ([http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/](http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/)). He does it because no one else is doing it, and he thinks it’s very important, in part because it may reveal that many places still function as sundown towns, but perhaps simply in more subtle ways, and in any case we can see the imprint of sundown pasts on the presents of many places.

He concluded by presenting “Loewen’s three-step program for transcending a sundown past.” First, acknowledge it (“we did that”). If we can’t admit, we won’t be able to transcend, to get past it. Second, apologize for it (“we did that, and we’re sorry—it was wrong”), which should make it clear that we’re serious about the third step, which is making every effort to make the place welcoming to people from diverse backgrounds and to include them in local life. One specific recommendation was to become certified as a “Welcoming City”, which can be proclaimed at the city limits and send a much different signal than the blatantly racist signs that were found at the entrances to many sundown towns.

Chia Youyee Vang spoke the following day at UWO, for the African American Studies Program’s annual spring lecture series, with the topic, “The Need for a New Approach to Understanding Race in America: Connecting Asian/Hmong and African American Struggles in the Midwest.” Dr. Vang is a member of the history faculty at UW-Milwaukee and author of *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, the first major scholarly work to emerge from within the Hmong community. She has been trying to move into new terrain with her research, but “keeps getting pulled into it” because it relates to her experience as a Hmong immigrant and it is a relatively unexplored area with much more to study.

Dr. Vang recently started a new study of race relations in the upper Midwest in general, and the connections between Asian American and African American issues in particular. Echoing Loewen’s *Lies*, she argued that young people come to college and don’t know anything about the Vietnam War and very little about Asian Americans, as they simply “don’t have a chance to learn about it in high school.” Most adults probably couldn’t name a single Asian American civil rights activist (such as Yuri Kochiyama, a leading Japanese-American activist who worked closely with Malcolm X and was clearly not the stereotypical “quiet Asian”), let alone explain how connected the two groups are in the history of the U.S. since the late 19th century.

She argued that it is important to understand the history of other racial/ethnic groups to understand how one as an individual fits into society and—again echoing Loewen—that “what happened decades ago affects what we do today.” She concluded that we should push for two things in this regard in Wisconsin. First, we need to create safe places for community dialogues across racial/ethnic lines, such that there are opportunities to ask hard questions, such as, “we’re in the same place, but why do we live parallel lives?” Second, we should encourage students to be intentional, to go out of their way to not only learn about other cultures but also to try to collaborate with people from groups different than their own, because in diversity is strength.
While the population of the Fox Valley has begun to diversify, it remains relatively homogeneous. According to the 2010 Census, 86.2% of Wisconsin’s overall population was white,\(^2\) compared to 72.4% of the total U.S. population. In the three principal counties (Brown, Outagamie, and Winnebago) of the Fox Valley, the population of nearly 600,000 was 89.6% white. Given the relative lack of diversity in the region, the fact that Hmong people comprised 4.6% of the population in Appleton, 3.4% in Green Bay, and 2.5% in Oshkosh is significant. In areas like the Fox Valley, “the Hmong stand out more singularly as an ethnic minority than they do in metropolitan areas like Milwaukee, which is already more racially and culturally diverse” (Christian, Moua, and Vogeler 2009:3).

Traditional Hmong culture features several characteristics that are distinct from mainstream, contemporary American norms. According to Dr. Vang, it is common for a group of households to migrate to the same place. This practice leads to secondary, internal migration of Hmong households after their arrival in the U.S. (Christian, Moua, and Vogeler 2009) and to population clusters such as those in Wisconsin discussed above.

Dr. Vang also noted that Hmong are often “one house people”, with very strong family bonds (\(ib\) \(tsev\) \(neeg\)-\(ib\) \(tsev\) \(tuab\) \(neeg\)) that result in few nuclear households (man, wife, or wives, and unmarried children). More typical are households with three generations living in the same house. Further, couples often spend several years after marriage in their parents’ (typically the male parents’) house before establishing their own independent household. Hmong culture is also marked by respect for elders by juniors and for husbands by wives. Relating to land tenure and use, inheritance of land and household does not follow a set pattern among Hmong people, and traditionally, agricultural lands were used rather than owned.

According to Bengston et al. (2008), “Another distinctive aspect of Hmong culture—both traditionally and continuing today—is a deep connection with the natural world. Natural resource-related activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering edible plants are important cultural and economic activities for a relatively high percentage of Hmong” (p. 878).

Hmong people, like generations of immigrants to the U.S. that preceded them, have gradually increased their visibility and assimilation into American culture. Many have maintained the strong and direct connection to the land that has been so important through Hmong history through small-scale farming and direct-to-consumer sales, which have also helped them build social connections. The unique, intensive growing practices of the Hmong helped to inspire urban agriculture pioneer Will Allen’s design for Milwaukee-based Growing Power, which recently started the Southeast Wisconsin Immigrant Farming Initiative (National Immigrant Farming Initiative n.d.).

Hmong people throughout the Fox Valley have used such intensive growing practices to become prolific producers of produce, flowers, and more, and to comprise a significant portion of all vendors at area farmers’ markets; in Oshkosh, for example, Hmong people are 13% of all vendors, but 35% of the 88 total agricultural vendors, according to Dennis Leatherman, co-manager of the Oshkosh Saturday Farmers’ Market (personal communication, October 20, 2014), while 28% of all vendors (included prepared food vendors) at the Downtown Green Bay Saturday Farmers Market are Hmong (Brehanna Skaletski, personal communication, October 21, 2014).

A recent article in the \textit{Wisconsin State Journal} elaborates upon the growing Hmong presence:

\(^2\) Here I am using the statistics for people who consider themselves one race only, with white being their stated race.
Yeng Yang credits much of his family's success in a new country to the Dane County Farmers' Market and other area farmers' markets.

‘If it weren't for this, I don't know where our family would be,’ said Yang during some rare downtime between markets.

Yang's parents, like many other Hmong immigrants, came to the United States after the Vietnam War with agricultural skills but little else. Farmers’ markets gave them a way to earn money and build a better life for themselves and their children.

The family is part of a growing Hmong presence at the Dane County market, where 40 or so Hmong farmers - about 12 percent to 15 percent of the market's membership - set up stalls each week...

It has also given his younger siblings, many of whom grew up in the United States, a chance to learn about farming and, in turn, about traditional Hmong culture, since the Hmong are an agricultural society, said Phil Yang, who was born in Laos and came to the U.S. at age 13. Selling at the market also helps the family give back to the community, he said. ‘To be able to do something like this is something we can really feel proud of, being part of the American Society.' (Derby 2010)

Part of the explanation for why Hmong people are involved with agriculture may lie in an underappreciated aspect of their people’s history, according to Dr. Vang:

Although subsistence farming had clearly been the dominant daily activity in prewar Hmong society, war-generated disruptions beginning in the early 1960s changed this…The most dramatic change brought about by life in the resettlement centers in Laos was the loss of self-sufficiency. With neither enough land nor enough able-bodied men to grow their own food, the once self-sufficient Hmong became dependent on U.S. food airdrops, and a generation of Hmong children grew up without first-hand knowledge of farming practices. (Vang 2010:32).

It is no wonder, then, that the move to land-rich, agricultural areas like Minnesota and Wisconsin would result in the continuation and reinvigoration of Hmong farming practices. Research conducted in the Fox Valley by my students for the ongoing, statewide Wisconsin Farms Oral History Project supports the idea that activities such as growing food and vending at farmers’ markets have significance that extends far beyond economics, however. According to a 40-something, male Hmong farmer who vends at the Oshkosh farmers’ market, farming allows him to spend time with his family and learn and keep Hmong traditions alive: “Well, my parents were always farming…back in Laos so when we came out here you know this stuff brings out their tradition like farming. So, we just picked up from there. So, I’m learning from my mom because she does a lot of farming so you know, picked up from her and kinda helped out through my life and just you know become one myself. I like to farm so that’s how it started.”

This farmer and other respondents noted that Hmong people worked together with other Hmong people to grow and market their food. He indicated that, “we ask our neighbors to help plow because it’s hard for us to just do our slash and burn that we did in our country. We just ask them to kind of help us plow the land. That’s something that’s changed us but everything else has been done again by our own hands. Our neighbors help us twice a year; in the beginning of the year they come and till, and at the fall time they just come and help till the garden over. But it’s (otherwise) pretty much the same (as in Laos).”

Similarly, the chapter “Innovative Farming” in the book Renewing the Countryside: Wisconsin (Hembd

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3 Go here for more information: http://wisconsinfarming.weebly.com/
4 Because we have pledged confidentiality to our interviewees, we will describe them in general terms such as this.
et al. 2007), spotlights a partnership between a European-American farm family and Hmong farmers to keep the land on the family’s property, which it began farming in 1913, in active production. According to Hembd et al. (2007),

As you travel over the rim of the magnificent Niagara Escarpment and begin the descent into the historic Fox River Valley, the century-old Strenn farm lies before you like a treasured patchwork quilt. During midsummer the quilt is made up of numerous shades of green. But as the season progresses, it appears as if the farm is being viewed through a kaleidoscope. The once prominent greens change hues, and yellows and browns begin to seep into the picture.

Upon closer examination, other colors begin to appear. Ripening Thai hot peppers add brilliant pinpoints of red, orange and purple to the landscape. The maturing winter squash add shades of blue, salmon, orange and dark green to the mix. There are thousands of these squash throughout the fields—raised primarily for their stems and blossoms, not the squash itself. While seasonal changes have always been a part of farming, on this farm change over the years has been particularly significant.

The section continues to discuss the drastic loss of dairy farms in Brown County, which included dairy production at the Strenn farm, and the cross-cultural partnership that was keeping their land in cultivation and helping to bring things full-circle, since the current land tenants are operating in a manner similar to that of the farms’ founders. Hembd et al. (2007), discuss some of the recent Hmong tenants, noting, “Pha and her husband were full-time farmers in Laos, growing primarily squash and beans. Everything in Laos was done by hand and they used slash and burn techniques. ‘Here,’ Pha notes, ‘Ed helps plow.’ The only other modern equipment used by Pha and her husband is a small rototiller and a walk-behind seeder. All other work is done by hand. When asked why they choose to farm, Pha explains, ‘When the weather is nice we like to go outside and that is what we did in Laos.’”

According to Christian, Moua, and Vogeler (2009), Hmong vendors comprise a large majority of those who sell at Eau Claire’s primary farmers’ market. They concur that,

Farming and gardening within the Hmong community has a number of different roles, both economic and cultural. Traditionally an agricultural society, Hmong landscapes are still notable for their agriculture, even within urban U.S. settings. These gardens have been described as ‘reconstructed landscapes’, where Hmong gardening knowledge, tools, techniques, and plant varieties are used to recreate the distinctly Hmong agricultural landscapes. (P. 9).

Other Hmong farmers interviewed by my students also indicated that their primary motivation for farming and vending was not economic gain, but rather to be close to the land and other people. The wife of the male farmer interviewed by my students was 12 years old when they married. According to her, “I really like that my customer always come back to my booth and the product. I teach them how to eat and cook it. How healthy they are and they always come back. I’m excited to go back to the farmers’ market to talk to my customer. And get their feedback.”

The transition into American life has not been without struggles for Hmong people, though. Elders fear the loss of Hmong traditions and values, as depicted in The Split Horn: The Life of a Hmong Shaman in America (Siegert, McSilver, and Thao 2001), a documentary film set in Appleton. Loewen (2005) also cites contemporary racial strife involving Hmong students at an Appleton high school in his exploration of the lingering effects of the area’s sundown town past. Another documentary, Being
Hmong Means Being Free (Long and Vang 2000), examines the difficulties faced by Hmong people in Green Bay due to poverty and racism, which produced a tragic death that is discussed in the film.³

Dr. Vang also conducted a study of the socioeconomic conditions of Hmong Americans based upon the 2010 U.S. Census. She concluded that, “A review of economic indicators across states and in relation to the U.S. population reveals that on an aggregate level, the Hmong American population’s socioeconomic status has improved significantly. The increases in income and earnings have, however, been shortchanged by external factors brought about partially by the financial crisis and its aftermath. Consequently, this begs us to question the extent to which such developments contribute to the overall economic wellbeing of Hmong Americans” (Vang 2012:1).

Her research shows, however, that Hmong people seem to be faring better in Wisconsin than in other areas of the U.S. They are disproportionately engaged in manufacturing, which tends to pay better than other industries: “Industries that dominated Hmong employment over the course of the last three decades include: manufacturing; education services, health care, and social assistance; and retail trade. Hmong Americans have gravitated toward manufacturing jobs at a significantly higher rate than the U.S. population…In Wisconsin, 18% of the state’s population is employed in manufacturing jobs, while 40% of the Hmong population works in this industry” (p. 4).

While overall, Hmong household income lagged dramatically behind that of the U.S. population as of the 2010 Census, in Wisconsin it compared well: Hmong median household income in Wisconsin of $49,200 was only slightly lower than the state’s median household income of $50,800 (Vang 2012). The earnings of Hmong people are significantly lower than other Americans, though, and Hmong people have a poverty rate that is twice the rate for the U.S. as a whole. On this socioeconomic criterion, Hmong Wisconsinites are actually slightly worse off, with a poverty rate of 19% compared to a rate of 8% in Wisconsin overall.

Farming is not the only way that the strong connection to nature that is so important to Hmong history and culture has been kept alive, as many Hmong Wisconsinites are avid hunters and fishers. These activities, though, have also caused some problems that have only recently come to broader light. According to Bengston et al. (2008),

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group that is heavily involved in natural resource-related activities but has been largely overlooked by social scientists. We conducted a series of five focus groups with Hmong Americans in Minnesota and Wisconsin, exploring their experiences and perspectives on public lands. Our participants revealed deep cultural and personal connections with the natural world and the importance of public lands to many Hmong. But we also heard about profound problems and concerns. Perceptions of racism, discrimination, and harassment from public land managers and other agency personnel, recreationists, and private landowners are common. (P. 876)

Some of this may be attributed to a lack “of knowledge about hunting and fishing regulations among a minority of Hmong hunters and anglers, language barriers,” note Bengston et al. (2008:878). Further, “traditional Hmong hunting practices such as hunting in large groups have resulted in occasional clashes with hunters, property owners, and conservation officers” (ibid.).

There have also been multiple high profile incidents in recent years that reveal the dire consequences that can result from misunderstandings and differing values around property rights and usage of natural

³ Dr. Vang also notes that there is a new documentary called Finding the Middle Way (http://english.hmongvideo.org/finding-the-middle-way/), which was funded in part by the Wisconsin Humanities Council Board, for which she serves on the board of directors.
resources, and possibly from outright racism. The first incident occurred in November of 2004, when “Chai Soua Vang was found sitting in a deer stand on private land and was confronted by a group of white hunters. The chain of events that caused this confrontation to become violent are under dispute, but the result was the fatal shooting of six of the white hunters and wounding of two others by Chai Vang. This incident sparked racially charged harassment of the Hmong communities in Wisconsin and Minnesota” (ibid.:878). Two years later, Cha Vang, a Hmong refugee, was killed by a white hunter “with a shotgun blast and six stab wounds during a confrontation…in the Peshtigo Harbor Wildlife Area” (USA Today 2007), public land located on Lake Michigan’s Green Bay, 44 miles north of the city of Green Bay, where Vang was a resident. These incidents, though tragic and hard to fathom, are nonetheless part of the context in which this study takes place.

The Fox River

A final element of the relevant background for this study is, of course, the Fox River itself and other physical elements of the local landscape, where many Hmong people carry out their natural-resource related activities, from farming and gathering, to hunting and fishing.

The Fox Wisconsin Heritage Parkway works to preserve and enhance the river corridor that spans from the mouth of the lower Fox River where it enters Green Bay in Lake Michigan, to the mouth of the Wisconsin River where it enters the Mississippi River in Southwestern Wisconsin (see Figure 2).

For our work on this project we are primarily concerned with the area of the river corridor that flows through the Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay areas, and in particular the Winnebago Pool Lakes and Lower Fox River areas, and the Upper Fox River to a lesser extent. The FWHP (2014:paras.4-6) describes these sections of the corridor as follows:

The Upper Fox River begins as a small stream northeast of Pardeeville. It flows southwest towards Portage and comes within 2 miles of the Wisconsin River before turning north to eventually enter Lake Winnebago at Oshkosh. The Upper Fox flows for a total of 142 miles through agricultural and rural

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6 See Hein (2013) for a recent re-interpretation of the Chai Vang case in light of Florida v. Zimmerman (the Travon Martin case)
landscapes, connecting small towns, and providing homes and migratory stopovers for an astounding array of birds and other wildlife.

The lakes of the Winnebago pool combine to encompass over 166,000 acres of fresh water with everything from state park land to urban centers found along their shores. The lakes—Winnebago, Butte des Morts, Poygan and Winneconne—offer outstanding recreational and scenic values to residents and visitors alike.

The Lower Fox River begins at the north end of Lake Winnebago and flows 40 miles to empty into Lake Michigan at Green Bay. The river drops about 164 feet over this stretch, and features a system of 17 recently restored locks. Historically, the elevation change encouraged industrial development and urbanization along this river section. Today, the restored locks make recreational navigation possible along the Lower Fox.

The concept of the bioregion has been proposed as an alternative way to conceive of the areas in which we live that is similar to FWHP’s existing approach to its work. I have previously applied this concept to the case study area as follows:7

Historian Jack Loeffler says that living bioregionally requires “thinking like a watershed”. This is a geographic area in which all the water flows to a large river—such as the Fox-Wolf River in our bioregion—and a system that follows natural, rather than political boundaries…According to Bioregional Planning Associates, “A bioregion is an area that shares similar topography, plant and animal life, and human culture…Ideally, bioregions are places that could be largely self-sufficient in terms of food, products and services, and would have a sustainable impact on the environment.”

As Gary Snyder said, “the world is places.” The key to bioregionalism is getting to know the particular and unique features—places and people—of the wider area in which one lives, which should lead to greater care and appreciation for one’s surroundings and cooperation amongst its people (e.g. if the Fox River or Lake Winnebago are imperiled, communities throughout northeastern Wisconsin would be impacted, so working together to keep it healthy makes sense).

As Gary Snyder said, “the world is places.” The key to bioregionalism is getting to know the particular and unique features—places and people—of the wider area in which one lives, which should lead to greater care and appreciation for one’s surroundings and cooperation amongst its people (e.g. if the Fox River or Lake Winnebago are imperiled, communities throughout northeastern Wisconsin would be impacted, so working together to keep it healthy makes sense).

My colleague David Barnhill, Director of the Environmental Studies Program at UWO, notes that another way to conceive of bioregional boundaries is in terms of ecological landscapes, which are usually determined by a combination of soil, climate, topography, and plant communities, as the DNR has done for our state. Barnhill, however, argues that Wisconsin has six bioregions. According to him, we find ourselves in the Winnebago Bioregion, which corresponds pretty closely to the DNR’s Southeast Glacial Plains ecological landscape.

Our bioregion is so named for both a Native American tribe (the Ho-Chunk, which was formerly called the Winnebago and called this area home for many years), and our large lake. This bioregion, which was highly impacted by the movement of glaciers during the last ice age, has boundaries that are roughly defined by the cities of Sheboygan, Appleton, Green Lake, and Madison. When it comes to things local, food is often a primary concern. While this is no set definition, a survey by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture found that food from within 100 miles is most widely accepted by the general population as “local”. So, while our bioregion may seem relatively large, for people in the Oshkosh area everything within it is local by this definition (see Figure 3).

According to the DNR (2012a), in the Southeast Glacial Plains, “Most riparian zones have been degraded. Several clusters of large lakes exist…(including) the Lake Winnebago Pool system…”

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7 This is an excerpt from an article that appeared in Oshkosh SCENE in May 2012 (Van Auken 2012).
Ecological Landscape contains some huge marshes, as well as fens, sedge meadows, wet prairies, tamarack swamps, and floodplain forests. Many wetlands here have been affected by hydrologic modifications (ditching, dikeing, tiling), grazing, infestations of invasive plants, and excessive inputs of sediment- and nutrient-laden runoff from croplands.” These factors present challenges for the preservation and enhancement of the Fox River corridor.

The DNR (n.d.a) also provides additional details about the Upper Fox River Basin (which extends to a much wider area than the land covered by the river itself), including that,

The basin’s 15 watersheds are drained by 1,257 miles of rivers and streams, 164 miles of which are cold water trout streams, 310 miles are warm water sport fisheries, and 20 miles are warm water forage fisheries. There are 154 lakes larger than 10 acres in size and additionally a large number of small kettle lakes in the western portion of the basin. Over 10% of the basin area is wetland greater than 40 acres in size, accounting for 145,428 acres. The total wetland area is actually much greater, as mapping identifies wetlands as small as 2 acres in size. The Upper Fox Basin contains Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin’s largest inland lake, which is home to the largest self-sustaining lake sturgeon population in North America… Most of the basin’s cold water trout streams are located in the western portion of the basin near the Sandy Ridges ecosystem. Warm water rivers, streams and lakes support various game and non-game species including large and small mouth bass, walleye, northern pike, catfish and sturgeon.

According to the DNR (ibid.) environmental concerns in the Upper Fox River Basin include water “quality problems from in-place pollutants, runoff in urban and agricultural areas, floodplain development and overuse of groundwater supplies…Riparian/wetland, woodland, and grassland habitat loss, deterioration, and fragmentation from rapid development and conversion of rural lands. Protection and maintenance of habitat is important for maintaining spatial and temporal ecosystem diversity critical for wildlife.”

Our area of concern also includes the Lower Fox River and the Green Bay area, of course. According to the DNR (2012b), this part of the corridor is in the Central Lake Michigan Coastal ecological landscape, which is characterized as follows:

Landforms are mostly glacial in origin, especially till plains and moraines, reworked and overlain in the western part by Glacial Lake Oshkosh. Beach ridges, terraces, and dunes formed near the shorelines of this glacial lake when sandy sediments were present. At other locations boulder fields were formed when silts and clays were removed by wave action. Along Lake Michigan coastal ridge and swale complexes, drowned river mouths (freshwater estuaries), and clay bluffs and ravines occur. The Niagara Escarpment is a prominent bedrock feature that runs along the east sides of lower Green Bay and the Fox River Valley…

Lake Michigan is a key ecological and socioeconomic feature. It influences the climate, created unique landforms, and is responsible in part for the presence and distribution of rare species. The shoreline constitutes a major flyway for migratory birds. Most of the major cities in this Ecological Landscape are located at the mouths of rivers entering Lake Michigan or Green Bay. Inland lakes are scarce, and all are small. The Fox River drains Lake Winnebago and runs into Green Bay. The other major rivers here run directly into Lake Michigan, and include the Ahnapee, Kewaunee, East Twin, West Twin, Manitowoc, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee…

Agriculture is the dominant land use here by area, and there are several medium sized cities. Some large forested wetlands occur in both the eastern and western parts of the Ecological Landscape. The Wolf River bottoms are especially important in the west. Extensive marshes persist in southwestern Green Bay. The ridge and swale complex at Point Beach contains the largest area of coastal forest (with associated wetlands, dunes, and beaches) and constitutes an extremely important repository of regional biodiversity.
The Lower Fox River has been notable both for its serious environmental degradation and relatively successful clean-up efforts. The DNR (n.d.b) discusses such issues as follows:

Water quality studies reveal that most of the Lower Fox River Basin streams and lower Green Bay suffer from excessive loadings of sediment, nutrients, bacteria and heavy metals resulting in: degraded aquatic habitat and an unbalanced fish community with low populations and limited diversity; sedimentation and excessive nutrient levels resulting in an advanced state of eutrophication; and high levels of toxic materials in bottom sediments and invertebrate organisms consumed by fish.

The Lower Fox River Basin has been given statewide attention for improving and protecting water quality. Three watersheds: the East River, the Apple and Ashwaubenon Creeks and Duck Creek, have been selected as priority watersheds under the Wisconsin Nonpoint Source Water Pollution Abatement Program. The three remaining watersheds have been ranked "High" for possible selection, Plum Creek, Fox River/Appleton and Little Lake Butte Des Mort Watersheds. The main focus of these projects is to reduce nutrient and sediment loadings to streams and rivers by 50% which is necessary for meaningful water quality improvements to occur.

Figure 3. Ecological Landscapes of Wisconsin.
RESEARCH PROCESS

With my basic model of conducting participant-driven photo elicitation (PDPE) for research and action (see Van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart 2010) as the starting point, FWHP project leaders Candice Mortara and Ann Clausen, with feedback from Dr. Vang, created a set of topical categories of relevance to the project, within which Hmong people from the region would be encouraged to take photos. Below are the categories, as presented in the instructions given to potential participants:

**Step 1: Take photographs** that represent your experience with and thoughts about the Fox River, in the following categories:

1. How you experience (use or interact with) the Fox River;
2. What Hmong culture and traditions are regarding the use of rivers/lakes—OR—what you think Hmong culture/traditions are regarding the use of rivers/lakes;
3. How your experiences with the Fox River differ from or are similar to your understanding of Hmong culture and traditions regarding the use of rivers/lakes;
4. What you value most about the Fox River;
5. Things that make it difficult for you to experience the Fox River as you would like to; and,
6. One photo that captures the essence (what it’s all about) of what the Fox River means to you.

Please take at least one (1) photo in each category, but not more than fifteen (15) total photos, ideally with your own digital camera; let us know if you need a camera, and we will provide one and reimburse you for the cost of developing hard copies, if applicable. If possible, take some time to carefully think about which places/things/landmarks/people offer the best fit for you with the above photo categories, and have fun with it!

**Step 2 – Interview:** Once you have completed the photographs and are ready to discuss them, please contact us to schedule an interview, which will use your photos as the basis for a discussion about how you use, experience, and feel about the river and related resources. We will view the photos together and ask you a series of questions related to our topics of interest. You will receive a $10 gift certificate to a Hmong Grocery Store to thank you for completing the project.

*Note: after all of our interviews have been completed, we will be sponsoring events in the community to share the interesting information and generate discussion in this regard, and hope you will be involved.*

Dr. Vang also translated the instructions into Hmong, as follows:

Lub homphiaj ntawm qhov haujlwm no yog xav paub txog tej kev siv lossis kev xav txog ob tug dej Fox thiab Wisconsin los ntawm cov pejxeem tsis yog neeg dawb nyob rau thaj tsam qis uas ob tug dej no ntws, xws li cov Hmoob nyob Fox Valley qaum teb sab hnub tuaj hauv xeev Wisconsin. Tej kev xav sawvdaws qhia rau peb yuav muab coj los siv npaj ntau yam kev pab thiab cov qhov chaw rau sawvdaws tau siv raws ob tug dej no hu ua Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway. Qhov no vam hais tias yuav los pab tsim thiab khaws tej txuji thiab txhawb kom muaj kev ua si thaj tsam no (yog xav paub ntxiv mus saib qhov no: [http://heritageparkway.org/](http://heritageparkway.org/)).

**Tus Neeg Koom:** Thov ua tes dejnum raws li sau nram no.

**Nqe 1:** Thajib icov duab qhia txog koj tej kev siv lossis kev xav txog tus dej Fox River, raws li cov qeb nram no:

1. Yam uas qhia tau txog koj txoj kev siv lossi kev xav txog tus dej Fox River
2. Hmoob kab li kev cai txog kev siv tej hav dej yog dabtsi—lossis—koj pom hais tias Hmoob kab li kev cai txog kev siv hav dej yog dabtsi
3. Koj txoj kev siv tus dej Fox River no txawv li cas los zoo ib yam li qhov koj to taub txog Hmoob kab
Recruitment of Interviewees and Completion of Interviews

The goals, as stated in the project contract, were “to have 15-20 Hmong participants complete the process (take photographs and be interviewed about them), with a mix of Hmong participants that were born here and born abroad, from Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay.”

Two Hmong University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students served as research assistants to help reach these goals. Hnouqou Vang, an environmental studies major originally from the Fox Valley, helped to design and launch the project. After I trained her in the research process, she was also part of two interviews prior to graduating and moving out of the Oshkosh area. However, she participated in the training of Chong Xiong, a criminal justice and environmental studies student also originally from the region. Both students, incidentally, attended Dr. Vang’s presentation in the summer of 2013. Chong also took my sociology/environmental studies course Environment & Society in the fall of 2013, learning about the broader bioregional context, receiving training in sociological research, and conducting an applied project related to Lake Buttes des Morts. He has worked on Hmong Voices for most of the past year and has been vital to the success of the project, being a part of and helping to conduct nearly all of the rest of our interviews and completing some on his own.

We took a multi-faceted approach to attempt to recruit participants. We worked directly with FWHP to promote the project on Hmong radio in Appleton and on FWHP’s website. We also conducted “guerilla” marketing that has been carried out primarily by Chong, who took the flyers we created (see Figure 4) to numerous Hmong grocery stores throughout the Fox Valley, where he talked to owners and explained the project. He chose a particular store from which to purchase gift certificates to serve as an incentive for the project. He also posted flyers in visible areas frequented by Hmong people and talked to people at his church, to Hmong student groups at UWO and at multiple area high schools, and people he met while out fishing. Though these efforts were extensive, they produced few participants.

It was not easy to recruit participants, which I anticipated, given my previous experience with this method; while it produces excellent data, part of the reason it does so is that participants become
engaged in an active process of thinking, taking photos, and reflection prior to the interview. This requires time and energy on their part, though, which can be barrier for even the most interested person.

Therefore, we have primarily relied on strategic snowball sampling (starting with participants with whom we are acquainted, and asking them to recommend other participants, who we do not know) to produce our sample of Hmong interviewees. This is an acceptable method for qualitative research, though it is limited in its ability to produce generalizations to a population, which is true of most qualitative research. In any case, we have systematically and rigorously collected a number of stories, perspectives, and photos that should be valuable to FWHP.

Figure 4. Project flyer

THE FOX-WISCONSIN HERITAGE PARKWAY

Hmong Voices Project

Hmong people of the Fox Valley – we want to know what you think!

- We’re seeking participants for a fun project about Hmong people’s experiences with, and thoughts about the Fox River
- No requirements other than having access to a camera for taking pictures (cell phone pictures can work, or we can provide a camera) and ability to do an interview about your photos.
- Once you have completed the interview, you will receive a $10 gift certificate to a Hmong store.

Please consider participating in this study! Thanks!

CONTACT: Chong Xiong, project assistant University of Wisconsin Oshkosh student xiong35@uwosh.edu 920.645.8245 Paul Van Auker, project consultant University of Wisconsin Oshkosh UW Oshkosh professor vanauker@uwosh.edu 920.424.2038

In the end, we have accomplished our basic goals. We interviewed a total of fifteen Hmong residents of the Fox Valley. Not all participants took photos, but those who did took and/or shared 55 photos with us, which we viewed while conducting interviews with them. It should be noted that in the way I practice photo elicitation (PDPE), photos are primarily a tool to encourage active engagement with the material by participants, to get them thinking about the topics prior to the interview, and to serve as tangible, multi-dimensional stimuli for fruitful conversation and “deep” interviews. They are also great for
illustrating key points from participants and helping to bring their stories to life, which is how they are employed in this report.

We made audio recordings of all of the interviews, which yielded a total of 12 hours of narrative. Interviews ranged in length from about 17 minutes to 70 minutes, while averaging 48 minutes in length. This variation supports the idea that the PDPE process tends to yield “deep”, effective in-depth interviews, as those based upon photos taken by participants were generally a bit longer and more in-depth than those without the visual stimuli.

I analyzed all of the above data, utilizing the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software program to review and organize the data, code responses into common categories, identify themes, and systematically produce evidence-based conclusions. I discuss the key themes that emerged in the next section, using quotes and photos from participants to illustrate them. Several tables are used to summarize responses from participants on important topics; these tables should not be interpreted in the same way that tables presenting the results of large sample size, quantitative (e.g. survey) data that have been statistically analyzed would be. Rather, these numbers demonstrate the frequency and depth of discussion of particular issues by participants in this study, effectively revealing the most salient topics.

It should be noted that there is a fair amount of overlap in the data: people discussed some images and issues for multiple categories, but I present most of them in only one category to attempt to avoid repetition. While participants discussed a variety of issues, in this report I focus upon those directly related to the Fox River, via the photo categories developed by project leaders. The data is rich with Hmong voices, and I try to let them tell their stories as much as possible in what follows.
RESULTS

BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPANTS

While the number of participants that were interviewed may seem small (particularly to readers unaccustomed to qualitative studies like this), depending upon the circumstances, fifteen interviewees can be a perfectly robust achieved sample based on the principles of qualitative research. According to Bertaux (1981), what the qualitative researcher seeks is “saturation of knowledge” (p. 370). While there is no minimum or set number of interviews that will produce valid qualitative data, for homogeneous samples, 12-15 interviews are often seen as sufficient to produce saturation. One qualitative researcher recently explained the concept of saturation in this way: “By (say) the fifteenth interview, the researcher recognises patterns in the interviewees’ experiences. More interviews confirm what the researcher has already sensed” (Box 2014:para.4).

The goal in qualitative research is not to gather data on a large sample of people to perform statistical analysis and attempt to generalize to an entire population of some sort, but rather to gather rich, in-depth, detailed information about a smaller group from a population of interest, to reveal common narratives about experiences and perspectives that can help to explain social phenomena, suggest possible causes and solutions to problems, and simply gather interesting and useful stories about people’s lives.

As detailed in Table 2, the results are largely from the perspective of a relatively young, well-educated, American-born, male Hmong person. Our interviewees are primarily second-generation Hmong Americans, but our sample does include multiple interviewees who were born in Laos. While we interviewed five females, the majority of interviewees are male. Most of the interviewees are in their early-to-mid 20s, while our sample also includes area Hmong residents in their late 20s, 30s, and 50s. Most of the interviewees currently live in Oshkosh, but several grew up in other parts of the Fox Valley, such as Appleton and Green Bay, while some now live in places like Menasha and Milwaukee.

Some of these characteristics make the sample quite consistent with Hmong demographics, however. According to the 2010 U.S. Census,

The median age of the Hmong population in Minnesota was 19.7, compared to the median age of 37.3 for the entire state. In Wisconsin and California, the Hmong median ages of 20.2 and 20.4 were considerably lower than the respective state median ages of 38.4 and 35. In 2010, 43.1% of the U.S. Hmong population was under 18, in comparison to 24.2% of the total U.S. population and 25.8% of the total U.S. Asian population. (Pfeifer et al. 2012:13)

So, the Hmong population is a very young one in demographic terms, meaning that our sample is consistent with the social landscape in this regard. In terms of education, the latest U.S. Census Bureau statistics indicate that in Wisconsin, 47% of all Hmong people were enrolled in school, with 73% of those aged 18-21 being enrolled in college, and 12% of those 25 and older having completed a bachelor’s degree (Xiong 2012), compared to 26.4% for all Wisconsinites. The latter percentage is among the lowest for Hmong people amongst the five states with the highest Hmong concentrations, but consistent with the large portion of Hmong adults that work in the manufacturing sector (Yang 2012). Our sample captures the perspectives of Hmong people who are enrolled in or recently completed their college educations, an important and growing component of Hmong population.

Overall, 42% of Hmong Americans are foreign-born (Pfeifer et al. 2012), so with one-third of our sample falling into this category, it is relatively close but nonetheless under representative of people
from this segment of the population. This is likely due in part to the relatively young age of many of the potential participants in our collective social networks; while two participants in their 20s were born and lived for roughly a decade in Laos and Thailand, and another migrated to the U.S. in utero (becoming the first U.S. citizen in her large family), foreign-born Hmong Americans tend to be older. Further, there seemed to simply be greater interest and ability to participate amongst younger people, several of whom described their parents as living very busy lives with formal employment (commonly in manufacturing or small business ownership), farming/gardening, child care, and more occupying their time.

As is often the case with qualitative research, the sample is not fully representative of the population of interest. Further, the size of the sample and the convenience (not random) sampling used to recruit them limits the generalizability of the data. All research is limited to a particular frame of reference, however, and it is important to simply be clear about its limitations.

The bottom line is that our achieved sample of Hmong interviewees is consistent with the broader goals for the project and largely consistent with the demographics for Hmong Wisconsinites. Further, all interviewees have had experiences with and have valid perspectives about the Fox River, the data is rich, and the results should be considered valid and meaningful for the purposes of this project.

Table 2. Participant details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Grew Up</th>
<th>Currently Lives</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Fox Valley</td>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Office worker (college graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Manitowoc/Two Rivers area</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>Security officer (college graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>Fox Valley</td>
<td>Christian pastor (college graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Laos/Green Bay</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Twin Cities, MN</td>
<td>Fox Cities</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom (college graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
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<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Manitowoc/Two Rivers area</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
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<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Sheboygan</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Green Bay</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Manitowoc/Two Rivers area</td>
<td>Oshkosh</td>
<td>Recent college grad looking for job in field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Laos/Oshkosh</td>
<td>Fox Valley</td>
<td>Graduate student (college graduate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 We were in touch with many other potential participants, and Chong had conversations with multiple elderly Hmong people from Appleton, including two of the very first Hmong migrants to Wisconsin, but he did not manage to complete interviews in time to be included in this report. It should also be noted that we made a strong effort to promote the project in Hmong language and Chong is a fluent Hmong speaker, so it seems that the issue was less about language than simply age, the composition of our social networks, and availability. Further, according to Xiong (2012), approximately 57% of Hmong Americans are now fluent English speakers.
EXPERIENCES WITH THE FOX RIVER

The first category for the participant-driven photo elicitation process, and which also served as the first main theme for interviews with participants who did not take photos, was how the participant experiences (uses or interacts with) the Fox River.

A small number of participants indicated that they do not regularly spend time on or near the river, such as Participant 8, who noted, “To be honest, I don’t really know the Fox River that much.” As might be expected given the topic, however, participants generally reported regular or frequent interaction with the Fox River.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>12/15</td>
<td>80+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking and Hiking</td>
<td>9/15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canoeing, kayaking, boating</td>
<td>6/15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing scenery</td>
<td>4/15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fishing**

As noted in Table 3, fishing was mentioned by 12 of 15 participants as a primary way in which they interact with the Fox River. Participants referenced fishing in discussion of the category more than 80 times, and even the three participants who indicated that they do not currently fish discussed fishing extensively, as they mentioned their family members’ fishing practices or how they enjoy interacting with other Hmong people as they fish, even if they are not partaking.

Several participants who focused upon fishing indicated that they spend a good deal of time doing so. Participant 6, for example, noted, “Whenever I have time or don’t go to class I usually go to the Fox River and cast a few times”, while Participant 10 explained, “We try to go once a week when my husband’s off…on the weekends or at least every other weekend.”

Participant 3 was one of the most avid fishermen in the sample. According to him,

> I go there so much. Probably every other day during the summer. I probably walk out there and enjoy nature even if I don’t catch a fish. It’s good exercise. I go there probably every other day and go to Menominee Park every day. Every day, whether it be morning, afternoon, or at night.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with friends and family</td>
<td>7/15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>6/15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(tied): Interaction w/nature; Hobby; Relaxation</td>
<td>3/15</td>
<td>3 each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with Hmong traditions</td>
<td>1/15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As presented in Table 4, the most important reason for fishing given by participants was the interaction with friends and family that it facilitates. A number of them noted that they tend to fish in groups, and the tendency for Hmong people to fish in relatively large numbers and close proximity was frequently discussed.
Participant 3 indicated, “We like fishing in a group. To make bets, too, see who can catch the biggest fish. We bet anything from Gatorades, to push-ups, yeah. Or dinner. Whoever catches the smallest fish takes us out to Olive Garden or something. Something to pass time along in the summer or springtime.”

Figure 5. Sunset on the Fox River (photo by Participant 3)

In his explanation of this photo, which was taken near Eureka, Participant 3 noted, “Me and my buddies were at the river having a good time. One of them had a guitar and it was a way to get away from the sounds of the city. Sing kumbaya by the riverside…A little boat landing that we just sat down at and watched the sun go down. This really captures the benefit that we have of living next to the Fox River. All these opportunities.”

Similarly, Participant 4, the most avid fisherwoman in the sample, took the photo in Figure 6 and explained,

This one with all the people fishing. I have such a big family and we all like to fish. That’s what it looks like when we go fishing, just a whole line of us. It’s so funny to me….I guess that we love fishing so much, despite the weather condition. It was a very, very cold day. Despite the weather, we’re willing to be out there, interacting…we bond, we have friendly competition against each other… I guess it’s just the family (bonding) that we create together. We’re always together doing the same activity with the same interests. It just creates a stronger (bonding) between the siblings and the parents. (Do you see this as something unique to Hmong people?) I do. Hmong people just love fishing and since we have such big families…
While Participant 1 noted that she had yet not made time to fish in the Fox River since moving to the area from Milwaukee, she nonetheless expressed how important fishing in friend and family groups is to her life:

From what I remember from my childhood, my family and my relatives, we used to hold picnics along the rivers and lakes and such. That was a really big part of my childhood. Then of course, my family, we have a history of fishing every single year together. It’s family tradition and cultural. It’s pretty common in Hmong culture at least. (What got you started interacting with the water?) It started with my family, of course. My dad is such a big fisherman and he loved the outdoors. That’s how I got involved. Every summer we’ll go up to different rivers and fish, hang out with the family, barbeque.
Others noted that fishing facilitates interaction with not only close family and friends, but also with strangers (to whom they might actually be related). According to Participant 6,

I think that’s just a Hmong thing. If they want to catch fish they’ll come right next to you. It’s a good way to socialize with your neighbor and make more friends...(Do you know those people you’re fishing next to?) No, not really. Somehow in the long run, I guess. We’re kind of related somehow. We have the same last names. He could be my uncle or my cousin and I wouldn’t even know. That’s pretty interesting….

A lot of Hmong people like fishing a lot. That’s how we start out conversation. Then it leads to background, where we came from, they always ask what your dad’s name and last name is. Through that they can tell where you are and where you came from. Just through fishing you could start a conversation so easily. (I know you’re a little younger, is it easier for you to bond with the younger generation or the older generation that fishes?) I would probably say the younger generation. They’re the same age as you and it’s easier to talk to them. For the older generation, you would have to have the good background Hmong language to speak to them.
Participant 7, a pastor who has lived in the Fox Valley for nearly a decade, fished regularly in the past but has not done so in the Fox River to this point. He nonetheless enjoys interacting with Hmong people who are fishing. According to him,

When I have a chance I ride my bike up there and talk to these people (in a local park)...in the nice weather, it’s packed with Hmong people there. I think the use of it, not personally yet, is for Hmong people to do. Part of it is that you might meet your friend that you haven’t seen for a while due to work and family. It’s fishing but it’s also a fellowship in a way for the people that come there….When you’re fishing, you have some time. You can talk about how you’re doing and, ‘How’s the kids? Or work?’ It’s bonding time and fellowship. Therapy too! If I’m depressed about some other thing, I can talk to some other person fishing. Maybe I can realize that my problem is not as worse as his!

Since social interaction emerged as such an important benefit people report gaining from fishing, we asked participants to discuss the extent and quality of their interactions with non-Hmong people. They reported a variety of differences in this regard, from little to no interaction, typically very friendly encounters, to outright conflict (as elaborated upon later in the report). Participant 11 responded,

Um, we don’t initially interact. We start small talk and say ‘Hey, how is the fishing? What are you catching or how did you catch?’ It kind of gives us a heads up on our fishing day might go. We might do really good or really bad. That is probably gives us the only interaction with other anglers… Not a lot of Hmong people because they do their own thing and like I guess we really stick to our own group. That is what I see a lot. I mean if they are willing to talk, I would talk back.

Participant 10 noted, “I mean, you'll get a few that doesn't seem really interested in having a conversation but for the most part we do meet very friendly people.” Participant 4 seemed to agree; “I think because it is open water, everyone can fish. I think they’re really fine with it. Sometimes because there are so many of us, they tend to get irritated because there’s so many of us. Also, because we’re such loud people. We’re scaring all the fishes away. Sometimes they’ll be there all day and we’ll come and they’ll be like, ‘Wow, you guys are so good at fishing.’ Sometimes we make friends.” Participant 15 noted, “I met some fishermen from Milwaukee. They are more of African American and then other fishermen I have met are Hmong people and a Laotian person from Green Bay. He would come down and fish and a couple of Caucasian people here and there.”

When asked whether he has witnessed or encountered conflict with non-Hmong fisherman, he replied, “Well, um, it is more like a first-come, first-serve spots. If you see people there, you don’t go fishing next to them. It is just a common courtesy thing because it’s public land.” Participant 3 had this to say:

I’ve never got into any altercation…before. I’ve heard of them. You might be fishing this fishing hole here and people see you catching them so they’ll come right next to you and cross your line and stuff like that. Which is like, fishing ethics! You just don’t do that. I’ve heard of arguments. No fighting and stuff like that. Nothing like that has ever happened to me. I like talking to other fishermen. Maybe they could teach me what their technique is. It’s all about knowledge, to catch the biggest fish.

When asked to compare Hmong to non-Hmong fishermen, Participant 5 responded as follows:

Most of the time we see them going for catfish or walleye. (Do you have any idea why you like the white bass and they don’t seem to?) I think they think it’s too easy of a catch. If anything. I think white bass and crappies are two of the best tasting fish. Maybe they don’t want to work to clean it…It’s not something you can easily fillet like crappies. You just cut it in half and cut it off. White bass bone structure is a little bit different. A little bit cageyness too so when you try to fillet it, you have to cut half. The way I see it is that the other fishermen want something that is either bigger or simpler to fillet.
I think we tend to have fun more when we fish. We like action…Once you see a group of white bass jumping you’re gonna pull ‘em left and right. For me, that’s the biggest difference…If you think about it, wherever you see Hmong people fishing they’ll go shoulder to shoulder. We don’t have that bubble. We do have a bubble, but it’s not as personal. A pretty small bubble. I have experienced it, from people of other race. In general, they would say to me that this is my spot, the river’s so wide, why do you go right next to me? Okay, whatever, buh bye. Other than that, Hmong people are not picky about spots at all. If anything, some of them do feel uncomfortable if a person from another race comes and fish with them in that bubble. But if you’re Hmong and they’re Hmong they’re just like, ‘Whatever.’

Participant 5, clearly a strong critical thinker, stressed that we should not essentialize Hmong people as being unique in this regard, arguing that Hmong people fishing in groups may simply be about them wanting to feeling comfortable:

I don’t think it’s a racial or cultural thing, just that everyone has their own kin that they feel comfortable with. Their own social group. I go to a party and I’m the only Asian there, I feel uncomfortable. It’s just kind of hard to socialize. You have a big gap of similarities that you could actually strike a conversation with. If you go and there’s all Asians, you’re like okay and feel comfortable because they kind of look like me. It’s kind of like white and black, you would kind of stray towards what makes you feel more comfortable. I just think if you see other people with like black hair, you’re just like, ‘Oh, yeah.’ I feel like we get along in some way or another.

Figure 9. Fishing lessons (Participant 10)

Others discussed the importance of fishing in terms of the time it allows them to spend with their spouses and children, and the additional benefits this brings, such as broader connection to the natural world and teaching patience to children.

Participant 15 said that he just recently got into fishing more seriously and noted, “I started going out with my first cousin to fish there. Then later I brought my family there to hang out and to fish and to start using the river system and explore around there.” Participant 10, a young mother of four, explained,

That’s why we fish is because basically since we can’t be on the river it is still another way to enjoy the river from the side by fishing. Fishing is just so relaxing and peaceful…and it teaches patience. That is why we involved our children to fish, too. Um, I mean there is a picture you see on there where my husband is teaching my daughter, helping her with the fishing pole.10 (Your kids when you take them do they like it?) They do, they get a little impatient sometimes so…especially my son, he is very impatient from the beginning. So (laughs) so he would find other things ways to keep himself entertained. He uses his imagination and plays other games. My daughter is the more patient one and she really into it. She really believes she is going to catch a fish.

9 Here is one explanation of this term: “When we essentialize others, we assume that individual differences can be explained by inherent, biological, ‘natural’ characteristics shared by members of a group. Essentializing results in thinking, speaking and acting in ways that promote stereotypical and inaccurate interpretations of individual differences” (http://www.unm.edu/~jka/courses/archive/power.html)

10 Because Participant 10 did not want photos in which her family could be recognized made public, her photo is presented in this filtered form.
As presented in Table 4, some participants explained that they enjoy fishing for the excitement, fun, and exercise that it brings, along with it simply being an enjoyable hobby, a way to pass the time. Others focused upon the interaction with nature and connection to Hmong traditions that it engenders. Participant 11 captured a number of these sentiments in the following response:

I usually do shore fishing, but this year, my buddy has a canoe and he has introduced me to canoeing. We have gone to places that we couldn’t reach from shore. It has given me a lot of opportunities to catch bigger fish. Not too long ago, I think last week, two of my friends and I went down to Fond du Lac. We went to this place that I have never been to before. It was great because even though we didn’t catch anything that moment, we initially notice something awesome. It was a bass frenzy just going on eating bait fish. We got the chance to throw our top water and catching like crazy. It was exciting because we can get into a great position and not shore fishing where you are stuck in one area because it might be private property.

Just being outdoors is one of my favorite things to do. Enjoying the scenery and feeling the action of the fish taking your lure is just something that I feel great. It takes me from doing that I wouldn’t rather do. I use to play a lot of video games and I was always inside. I kind of cut back on that by going outdoors. Actually staying healthy. There are fishing spots there it requires a lot of walking and exercise to get to that one spot like the Wiouwash Trail. To get to that good spot, it takes a long walk. That is one of my main daily exercise I do…even if I don’t catch anything, I enjoy my time out there fishing.

Participant 3, on the other hand, noted, “I was never a person that games a lot. I always like to be out in nature. Interacting with whatever, even if it’s, like, fishing. Catch and release fish. Learning different techniques that you can fish with.” Participant 4 explained, “I first started out with lazy fishing until I started bass fishing. That’s where the real action happens. So exciting, especially top water.” She further reflected, “I guess connect with nature. It helps us value nature more. See the beauty of nature. We’re all in the city so much. Like in this picture, there’s no big tall buildings or lights. You really get that feeling of getting out in the world. In nature and the environment.”

**Figure 10. No tall buildings or lights (Participant 4)**

Participant 4 continued, “It’s like nature is important and a part of everything. We get our food from nature. Everything that we have comes from the environment and nature and without it we won’t have anything.” She was one of many participants who discussed the importance of fishing as a source of
food, and the particular types of fish they target. Participant 6 noted, “Whenever I have time or don’t go to class I usually go to the Fox River and cast a few times, catch a fish, and cook it and eat it…Mainly I fish for white bass. They’re just a really good food source I guess.” Connecting to the deep cultural desire of Hmong people to be self-sufficient, as discussed by Vang (2010), Participant 4 explained that fishing is important because it shows that, “It’s possible—you have to find your own food instead of going to the grocery store.”

Participant 5, like a number of participants, reveals his selectivity here: “I like to fish for anything but sheep head. I don’t like to keep anything unless they’re walleyes or white bass. I fish for large mouth. Anything other than that we release them ’cuz they don’t taste good anyway. The only fish I really keep personally is crappies, walleyes, and white bass.” Participant 11, like several people, noted that he typically practices catch-and-release:

Numerous participants indicated that they avoid or eat a limited amount of fish because of concerns about pollution and their health, such as Participant 10, who noted, “Well, there was a sign that was posted that, you know, the fish was not safe for eating or not much consumption was good for women and children…Yeah, so we just don't eat them. We just fish for fun.” She went on to note, however, that she and her family are looking forward to fishing the white bass run in the spring, because they have heard that the early season variety of this fish is particularly “clean.”

Many participants discussed the relationship between Hmong people and particular fish, and most notably white bass, which was reported as something that several would eat even if they otherwise do not each much fish. Participant 13 explained as follows:

Participant 13, in line with Participant 5’s previous comment, argued that the appeal of white bass lies in the relative ease with which it can be caught. Participant 11 agreed, arguing, “Yeah, it is a lot easier to catch than other fish because they come in big schools. They are easier to catch. You can put on two hooks on one line and catch two of them at the same time. It is pretty amazing how you can catch them when they are in a frenzy like that.”
According to Participant 14, “Um, the only fish I have tried from the Fox River is, um, white bass. Maybe one or two white bass, but I haven’t tried catfish or any other fish such as largemouth bass. I just usually give them away.” Similarly, Participant 3 noted, “We like to eat our white bass. All the fish we don’t keep to ourselves, we give it to our relatives, our friends, our family. Our local church.”

Multiple people indicated that white bass are a very tasty fish and that they (and fishing in general) connect to Hmong traditions, as discussed in the next section. Participant 6 pointed out, though, that he and others are happy to catch “many different species of fish. I know more and more Hmong people fish for walleye. Here and there a little catfishing. Smaller fish like crappies, pan fish, blue gills.” Interestingly, two fisherwomen in the sample mentioned their enjoyment of fishing for and eating carp, including Participant 4 who took the photo featuring a carp in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Seriously large carp (Participant 4)

According to Participant 1, “Carps are…I don’t know how big they are. It’s pretty much a struggle just to reel them in. It’s fun, a great experience. Then you eat them…I think fish la is good…Yeah, kinda like minced up fish meat. La seasoning. Fish, cilantro, green onion, I think they throw lemon grass in there. Haven’t had that for a while. But fresh fish is always good.”

Walking, Canoeing, and More

As aforementioned, while it was by far the most cited activity, fishing is not the only way that participants experience the Fox River. Two females from the sample bluntly noted that the primary way they experience it is by walking or driving over it on bridges. Others mentioned that they enjoy canoeing, boating, and kayaking, such as Participants 9 and 8, who indicated that kayaking with friends at UWO was the only way he had truly experienced the river, and Participant 4, who noted, “Other than fishing, we like to go and canoe...recreational fun activities with families. It creates that strong bond between families. That quality time that’s spent.”

Several other participants indicated that the primary way they experience the river is by hiking, walking, or biking along it. Participant 1 noted that, “Just walking along the trail is calming for anyone I guess... For the Fox River trail to connect with the Wiowash and for that to go wherever it goes...That’s really nice.” Participant 8 said, “I use it for viewing the beauty of the river. Sometimes I take a walk by the
river,” while Participant 13 noted, “There is actually a trail that run by my house. My wife and I along with my nieces and nephews use that trail to go running near De Pere and Allouez.” Similarly, Participant 15 explained, “There is a bike trail that follows the Fox River. I take the family biking there and I took a break and took some pictures. It’s the Wiouwash trail that goes behind the cemetery.” Participant 2 indicated,

The most enjoyable way or the way that I prefer to experience the Fox River is to walk along it, or even to just sit and watch it…I mainly just walk on the trails…. feel like the river is more enjoyable when I have someone to walk along with. The river’s the river and I enjoy it like that, but to experience it someone else is different. It gives you a different aspect. It just kind of is an atmosphere where you can kind of talk and walk and be active. But at the same time be out where the air is different.

Participants 2 and 5 expressed similar sentiments and took photos a la the one presented in Figure 13.

Figure 13. Relaxing by the river (Participant 5)

Participant 5 explained this photo as follows:

I had to be a little creative with this one. How we typically use it is for fishing. Or as a place to relax. I sound kind of old, but I enjoy walking by the river. Some days if I go fishing, I don’t care whether I get fish or not. Just kinda enjoy the walk. It’s very nice. Whenever you’re by the river, it’s not very hot. You always kind of get a breeze, I like that. If anything, it’s the most peaceful place for me. Whenever I see the river run, I just think it relaxes me. Whatever is ticking me off it kind of goes away. (Is that connecting you with nature more, do you think?) Kind of, not really though. If I were to say, I’m not really much of a nature guy. It’s more of just a psychological therapist, I guess.

This is one of several mentions in the data of the river being therapeutic. Participant 2 alluded to receiving similar benefits, noting, “It’s kind of hypnotizing in a way. There’s nothing going on.” Participant 8 saw it similarly, noting that she walks along the river “To get some fresh air. To relieve some stress…It’ll make you feel better.”
Prior to shifting to a discussion of Hmong traditions with rivers, Table 5 presents favorite spots or particular areas frequented by participants.

Table 5. Fox River places frequented by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Place/Explanation (all direct quotes)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I would particularly fish the Fox River. Both ends by the delta by Winnebago and Lake Buttes des Morts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I find them all unique in their own way. One might be by a bridge, one might have good scenery, one might just be a really good fishing spot.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>On the Wiowash Trail, there’s a bridge….It’s a bridge that’s all the way by Allenville? It’s a really small town… It doesn’t go to Allenville, it’s kind of in between. It’s a weird resting spot. It’s shaded by all these really nice tall trees and there’s this bridge that’s metal and wood. There’s some simple architecture to it. It’s shady. If you’ve been on that trail, there’s a lot of sunny spots, especially in the summer. It can get really hot. It’s cool when you get to that spot and really calm. And you have a lot of farmland around, and this little stream that’s running under the bridge that’s kind of nice. You kind of get to see all the little insects that are around.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>I fish anywhere that there is fish. I mean, when I first came here… I’ve been fishing since I was little, so I know the basics of this river. I fish in that spot right across the river by the senior center there a lot during the spring. When I know the white bass and walleye are coming through… Menominee Park by Ames Point. I know that there are a lot of fish there because I’ve been fishing there so long that I’ve started to know the structure of the bottom. This is where the drop-off is, that’s where all the bay fish are gonna be stacked at. I know that during the fall, the fish like to be in deeper water. I know where the water drops off. The different structures, knowing the river and the water itself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Figure 14. Hmong fisherman with bass Yea, the sense of place. Yeah, you start to understand where the fish will hole up. Where each spot would produce the best fish for you. And I go out there almost every day in the summer, morning or night. I’ll usually fish from shore, not from a boat. I do a lot of shore fishing….Um, it took me a while to learn the spots. I actually have family who live here. They’re big fishermen too. I started hanging out with them a lot, they’d take me to different places. From these places, I’d start fishing. One day I’d be casting a line over here by the weeds, and then realize the top water has a lot over here. The weeds spread out, you throw the frog on top of the water and they’ll be swimming. The bass will just nail these frogs. I actually saw a live frog, a real frog doing that, swinging across the lily pad. The bass came up and boom….I would have never caught that bass if I didn’t know the typography or the structure of the area that I was fishing around. I caught that before, like I was saying, the frog… That was that day that I saw the frog swimming and the bass just nailed that frog… Yea! So I was like, it’s a win-win situation! God has just told me to throw that frog right there to catch that bass! So as you can see, learning stuff from nature really helps me understand the animal’s behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Eureka, Omro and Fremont for white bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Well, I’m born and raised in Green Bay. So the smoke stacks by Voyager Park next to the Fox River. But anywhere I can put in some fishing time and getting out on the river. Spending time with my friends or with my wife, I don’t really have a specific spot for a picture. I wouldn’t really have a specific spot for it as long as I am out there enjoying the river.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Vets Park, Voyager Park, or Appleton North Dam. Any place where I can really access the water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>We just went to Telulah Park in Appleton the other day and we've caught a couple fish that were quite big, so that was exciting</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Rainbow Memorial Park at the T-Dock</td>
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</table>
HMONG TRADITIONS WITH RIVERS

Lack of Knowledge

First, it should be noted that a number of participants stated that they lacked or had a limited understanding of Hmong culture and traditions when it comes to rivers (8 sources and 11 references to this limited understanding). Consequently, Category 3 was not commonly photographed or discussed, so this section will focus on how participants understood Hmong traditions and history in regards to rivers, with some discussion of differences at the end.

When asked about Hmong history and traditions with rivers, Participant 12 responded, “As of right now I can’t think of any…Not particularly rivers, no.” According to Participant 1, “Yeah, I don’t really know much about Hmong tradition with the use of rivers and lakes besides washing clothes, getting water from rivers and lakes, and going fishing or swimming there.” Similarly, Participant 11 noted, “Well, for some, when they are gardening if they are close to the river or lake and stuff. They would usually use the water to water their plants and stuff. Other than that…I don’t know much about the traditions and stories behind what they would do with rivers and stuff.”

Figure 15. Tunnel vision (Participant 2)

Participant 2 took the photo in Figure 15 to represent her lack of knowledge about the old ways. She explained it as follows:

My knowledge and understanding of Hmong culture and traditions in regarding waterways is this picture. It’s kind of tunneled! I don’t know much about it. There’s a lot more to it. I know that traditionally we see almost anything can have a spirit. That might be a religious aspect but that sometimes ties in with the traditions and cultures. And um, I feel like there’s another world that I don’t understand, which is the spiritual world. A bush can have a spirit and sometimes it doesn’t depending on your luck. This tunnel vision is kind of like my small understanding. Here in the US and here in Oshkosh I understand that rivers are important because we need it as a resource for maybe manufacturing or functional uses in businesses. It’s good for your health and the environment because everything is interacting in a certain way. I know more about that with the Fox River than the rivers in Laos that my parents are used to. It’s very little that I know about Hmong tradition or culture.
Participant 4 was asked, do you feel like you have a good understanding of what the older Hmong traditions are about nature, rivers, and lakes in general? She replied,

Not really. We’re the younger generation. We don’t really know what they do or how they value nature. We can get a sense of it, but we don’t really know. Our value of nature may be different. Maybe we care less about nature or the environment…We can’t force people to value what nature gives us. Some people don’t understand that. They’re just like, ‘Oh, whatever, I don’t care.’ A simple tree will be out there and it’s more than just a tree. It’s giving us oxygen. It plays a really huge part in our lives. Some people don’t understand that because I said, technology is so big right now. They value technology more. People in my generation. They won’t even know where oxygen is from.

While Participant 4 blamed technology for the cultural disconnect, Participant 14 pinned it on religion, arguing that, “Now we are Christians and don’t know much about the old ways.” Participant 7 (a pastor and father of six children, half of whom are grown) seemed to point to more basic generational issues:

I don’t think it’s getting better. I think once they go to higher education they see the need of the language. Before then, I think they prefer to speak English. Even in my house, my older ones understand Hmong. They read a little bit, they write a little bit. My youngest ones really have a problem with Hmong. Even comprehension. She has a problem with that. If we ask her in Hmong to give us something, more than likely, we wouldn’t have the item that we ask her. I think that is a problem. After sometime I kind of lecture my kids: ‘Your language is important to you. I think when you go to college, and definitely with your kids, they’re gonna ask you, mom and dad where are we from? What language do my grandparents speak?’ At that point they’ll be like gee, I wish I studied Hmong when I had the opportunity. Or listened to dad or when my Hmong cousins said I should learn Hmong. The others are in college and now my son is working with Hmong students in Platteville. He’s speaking Hmong now even more than before he went to school. I think you are right, we’re losing it, but if we are able to have these kids go to college, they will see that. We’ll retain some of this.

Participant 3 believed he had retained some of this cultural knowledge and respect for nature, while lamenting the fact that many of his peers have not:

I see that predominantly in more modern Hmong families here. Their parents weren’t really in tact with their Hmong culture. Their kids don’t know how to fish or how to garden really. I guess you start losing that aspect of your culture that you’re supposed to interact with nature. Nature is your friend or brother or sister. You don’t do anything to harm it. You care for it and know how to use nature to your own benefit. My mom always said, ‘What if the world went straight down the drain and you had no electricity or stuff like that? Would you know how to use stuff in nature to live?’ I was like, ‘I’m learning from you guys of course.’ How to fish and stuff like that. If the world really does collapse, I would know the necessary survival tactics to live.

Participants did reference a number of Hmong traditions with water, however. As might be expected, Hmong traditions with fishing were the most popular line of discussion in this category, as presented in Table 6:

Table 6. Hmong traditions with rivers, as cited by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditions</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragons and other lore</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering water for gardening</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong River</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction with family and friends</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fishing

According to Participant 8, fishing is central to Hmong culture: “I think in general, we are fishermen. But also, we like to eat fish. That’s why we come and fish.” Participant 3 recognized the legacy being transmitted to him through fishing:

…now it’s passed on to me. For me, I just have more different instruments to use. My ancestors used fishing poles made from bamboo sticks. Now I have all these nice fishing rods that are like $150. All these reels and lures that I have. And the knowledge to know how to use them. What really spiked my interest was the knowledge that this has been going on from generation to generation. It’s definitely a Hmong thing… I think if my parents and ancestors did not know how to fish, I wouldn’t really care about fishing.

Participant 6 was generally a low-key interviewee who practiced brevity in his answers, but he had a good deal to say about this topic:

I remember I was fishing and an older guy came up to me and was telling me stories about back then when they lived in Laos. How there were so many fish there. When they come to Oshkosh and catch so many white bass it reminds them of those good times where they used to go catch so many fish. And how good the food is….I guess there’s always Hmong people saying those sayings (says a Hmong saying) every time they don’t catch a fish or they miss a fish they say those old sayings. You kind of learn from it. … I learn a good deal of our culture. Sometimes when I talk to an elderly they usually tell me how things were back then. How good those times in Laos were. They like to refer back to their villages. Certain areas where they would go to the same spot where they would get water or vegetables.

Participant 7, who grew up in Laos, also noted fishing’s important role in Hmong traditional culture:

Um, fishing. We’d do a lot of fishing. I remember my dad and I were net fishing. You put nets in the river. We would pull the net and set up a little shop and sleep by the river. Then go out late in the night and check that out. We’d go a couple times a night. Sometimes we’d have some fish other times we don’t. As I tell my kids now, I think that was one of the most fun times with my dad. We’d get to go by ourselves, set up a fire, a little shed there, go out in the water and check the net for fish. Other times, because I was born into the war already going, my dad also and other Hmong people also fished with guns. The river’s not that shallow of a river. You see a river it’s pretty hard to catch it. They shoot it and get a fish. Or use a grenade to fish too…

Participant 15 took a picture of his father with a fish that he caught (see Figures 8 and 11), explaining,

He used to tell me of the fish he caught in Laos where they would watch the fish take the bait and the fish over there were not as hard to catch as the fish over here. This was one of the very first times we took him out fishing. This other picture here is not very similar to the Hmong culture here, but this area here is the area is A. Rochlin Park by Congress Bridge. I put this picture here because on hot biting days, there would be a ton of Hmong people here next to the river, probably 30-50 people and over 10-15 coolers of white bass.

As noted, white bass were a frequent topic of discussion, and Participant 11 makes a direct connection to Hmong history in his explanation: “I think white bass is particularly the main target because…(it) is in their nature to collect a lot of fish and make sure that they have enough to feed the family. So, catching white bass is something that they are accustomed to back in Laos when they were living there. I guess it was one of their childhood memory and they come here and it’s a tradition to catch fish like that.”

According to Participant 14, Hmong people have particular connections to other Fox River fish as well:
I don’t know much about white bass, but for largemouth, my girlfriend’s family like to fish for largemouth bass and they would keep everyone of them. I tell them it’s bad for them to keeping eating largemouth bass and one time I truly asked my girlfriend’s dad and he said ‘It makes me feel like at home because these fish taste like the fish at home.’ Then I said, ‘If we are going to fish all of these fish, then why don’t we go white bass fishing?’ Her father stated that White bass doesn’t taste the same like Largemouth and this makes him feel great about America…My dad didn’t really like to eat white bass because he likes to eat chubs because it reminds him of the little white fish back in Laos.

Participant 14 recently earned a college degree in biology. He elaborated upon his concern about eating too much largemouth bass, while linking the issue to additional cultural nuances:

I usually cut the belly fat and the head off of my fish because that is where a lot of the mercury builds up. My parents are from Thailand and they like fish heads. I would catch a salmon and filet it so nicely, but my mom would insist on eating the fins and the head in soup. That is their favorite part of the fish. (Do you think that it is bad but it is worth it to keep their traditions alive?) I believe that their style dictates the mercury because they are not educated about it. I would always tell my parents that mercury is bad for them and they would listen to me but right after that, they would make their fish head soup.

Gender Issues

Gender issues also emerged as important in our discussion of fishing and traditional Hmong culture. Traditional Hmong culture is quite patriarchal, which may help to explain the fact that our snowball sampling produced an oversampling of males interested in discussing their relationship to the Fox River and the participants’ common indication that males are much more heavily (but certainly not exclusively) involved with fishing. According to one female respondent (Participant 2),

I enjoy sitting around more than fishing and sitting around. It’s a little distracting for me. It’s like I wanna do one thing or the other. Sometimes you’re fishing and enjoying the view and then all of a sudden you get distracted by this fish biting on your pole. I just don’t find it enjoyable. I think it might be the fact that I’m not that good at fishing. I don’t know how to attach bait. But, um, no, my sister doesn’t fish. My mom doesn’t fish either; I don’t think I’ve ever seen her fish at all. It’s mainly guys in our family.

When asked whether his mother and sisters fish, Participant 11 replied, “They don’t fish at all but I have taken my little sister fishing at County Park and she enjoyed it. Sometime when my father goes fishing, my mom would also go along. Yeah, she is not that great. A little slow to react to the fish biting.” Participant 15 indicates that some foreign-born Hmong people are avid fisherwomen, noting, “My mother actually likes to fish. She is more of the person who would cast all day to catch a fish rather than just sit there and wait for a fish to bite. For walleyes or white bass. She is more active.” While his sisters do not fish, Participant 15’s wife does, which is strategic to his own goals: “My sisters, I haven’t seen them fish yet but my wife, whatever I try to get into such as hobbies, I tried to incorporate my family and wife in there so that they would be more likely to allow me to go fishing.”

Multiple female participants described their keen interest in fishing, and for one in particular (Participant 4), this was the focus of her discussion of experiences with the Fox River, including this portion:

For me, I grew up with all the boys and I’m down for it. I’ll touch a worm and my sisters are like, ‘do it for me!’ I’m like, ‘No, if you wanna fish, do it on your own.’ We have a competition. They ask can a guy go with them to put the bait on and I’m like, ‘No!’ If they want to win or really really fish they have to learn to do it on their own. What’s the point of fishing when you won’t even touch the bait?

Participant 4 presented three different photos that represented her experiences with the Fox River and
important elements of her own identity, two of which featured her feet next to the water.

Figure 16. Who I am (Participant 4)

Describing Figure 16, Participant 4 noted,

It says I’m not scared to explore…I’m a female but I’m not just interested in shopping. I can wear sneakers and rock them while being outside and enjoying what typically guys do. Women can do that and still be good at it. Not only that, but the sneaker does play a really big role. Imagine the sneakers being heels, what does it say? Oh, a typical girl at the lake, thinking about shopping and her boyfriend, being sad. It really does! And the sneaker says oh, she’s really out there enjoying fishing. Actively doing it. Not just wearing heels and taking pictures. I’m just focusing on myself. Every aspect of being out by the river. Me as an individual. Who I am.

Her second photo (Figure 17) is even more blatantly about gender.
Participant 4 further explained her pride in transgressing societal and cultural gender norms as she explained the meaning behind Figure 17:

I put that on Facebook and said I can’t wait to be out on the lake with my pink Crocs. Pink! Right away you think girl! It still represents myself as a female, but I’m still out here doing guy things I guess it just came to mind. But I guess it is me saying I’m a girl fishing. Cool! Like what girl fishes? As a fisherwoman I am really proud. Some girls are like, ‘You like fishing? I’m like, ‘Yeah, it’s fun.’ This is how I go out and do what a typically girl does. I like to hunt too. That really shocks…When I first came to UW Oshkosh, I don’t know how the girls around here are, but when the guys found out that I fish they were like, ‘You fish??’ I was like, ‘Yeah, why is it surprising? Because. There’s not that many girls here who fish. Oh that’s pretty interesting, I hunt too! No way!’

It seems fitting to conclude this section with a photo of Participant 4 with one of her fish.
Socialization

The roots of many sociological issues are in socialization, or how beliefs, values, norms, and practices are taught and transferred from one generation to the next. As noted, the most frequent connection made by participants in terms of Hmong cultural traditions regarding rivers and lakes was fishing. Some expressly discussed being socialized into fishing by their elders, as Participant 3 did in discussing his $150 fishing rods above. Participant 11 echoed such sentiments:

I have fond memories of my dad taking me out in Oshkosh. We would go out to County Park and just go pan fishing. I just remember those days and it just came back to me and I want to do it myself. My dad has always been fishing too. I have seen all of his fishing gear and when I started making my own money, I got my own gears, went out fishing by myself. Started out small and caught some Bullheads and stuff. Then finally came here and my friends and they showed me a few tricks and stuff and I have been catching some big fish. I have been falling in love with it.

Participant 12 explained how he began fishing by noting, “Everybody was doing it, so I did it… I think I learned how to tie a fish hook with my dad… When I was small was when I went on a lot of fishing trips. (Who did your dad learn from?) Mainly friends and family, I guess.” Participant 13 indicated, “I used to go fishing with my dad once or twice, but it was my grandpa who taught me how to fish. Then I haven’t gone fishing with him since because he is getting old and stuff.”

While fishing appears to be becoming less gendered, it seems that socialization has perpetuated gender differences in this arena. Given that the bulk of our participants are in their 20s and 30s, they were likely to have been socialized by parents with relatively traditional practices, including those related to gender. Several participants alluded to this. Participant 10 discussed the importance of socialization in her response to whether she grew up hunting and fishing: “I didn’t, I guess. I could have but I guess, you know, my parents are more traditional, so I think girls are more supposed to stay home go to school here and do chores. So, I wasn’t really introduced to that stuff. Yeah my brothers still hunt and fish.” Similarly, Participant 4 argues that, “It’s often a father and son out fishing. But like my story, it could be father and daughter or mother and daughter. It’s the relationship between parents and kids. How they treat their relationship.”

Younger Hmong people, with perhaps less traditional views, have begun to socialize younger, and even older, friends and relatives into fishing, including females. Participant 3 noted that,

All of my friends go fishing, even the ladies. Some of my friends didn’t fish when they first met me. I introduced them to fishing. I really got out there and found out what’s around Oshkosh. What Oshkosh has to provide from a nature point, I guess. (So, do your sisters fish at all?) Oh, yeah. My mom, my aunt, my sisters. They started out not liking to fish. We take them out a lot and they’re not as crazy as me, but they know how to tie a fishing lure and know how to use it to their own advantage. So yeah, I taught them well!

According to Participant 10, the mother of four young children, “That's why we fish is because basically since we can't be on the river it is still another way to enjoy the river from the side by fishing. Fishing is just so relaxing and peaceful…and it teaches patience. That is why we involved our children to fish, too.” She took the above photo in Figure 9 to illustrate this socialization process.
Dragons and Lore

One tradition that I can think of is back in the day... The Hmong people believe there are dragons in the river. When someone lost their life in the river or someone got sick after swimming in the river. They use the river to call the spirit or the soul back into its original body. But that is like a tradition that the Hmong people have, I just don’t know much about it.

This was Participant 8’s discussion of another of the most frequently mentioned topics in this category. Similarly, Participant 1 was vaguely aware of these traditional views: “Uh, I mean there’s stories of zaj, or dragons and stuff. If that’s what you mean. (What is zaj or dragon? What do you mean by that?) I don’t really know! There’s all these folk tales about dragons, which they call zaj. I guess they’re living in the water. I don’t know if you would say it’s the afterlife? I don’t really know. That’s basically what I know about the dragons.”

Others had more detailed understandings. Participant 5, who was generally quite creative with his photos, indicated,

From what I know, Hmong people are really superstitious. Rivers and lakes tend to have dragons and stuff like that. Of course there’s no dragons I know of in the picture, so I went with the stop sign (Figure 20). For us, it means something that we shouldn’t play around with. For example, if a woman is pregnant, she should not go to the river. The dragon will take her baby and she will have a miscarriage. Also, you shouldn’t swim in the river because when you drown it means the dragon ate you. The stop sign shows caution...because according to culture, this has potential danger.

Dragons are the only mythical beasts associated with rivers and stuff like that. Usually from what I know it’s dragons. There’s a possibility of ghosts and stuff like that, like if people drown they could take you. Most of the time it deals with dragons and it could be marked as a crossroad when people die. For example, when a person passes away, the week of the funeral you’re not supposed to...Back in the day you’d do your laundry at the river. You’re not supposed to do that because you could mistakenly go meet up with them as they go where they’re supposed to go. They’ll go back to your house and follow you.
Participant 7, the oldest participant, who grew up Laos and is now a Christian pastor, had extensive direct experiences with rivers in Laos, fishing and swimming in them as a child, which according to him is relatively unusual. He also had a good deal to say about traditional Hmong beliefs about water:

I think it is a fear not so much of age…Most of our ancestors grew up on higher elevations in Laos. We rarely get into rivers. Sometimes we get into rivers because A) we don’t know how to swim B) we’re not used to the climate so we get sick and a lot of people actually die. So there was a fear. To cross a river is a fear. Hmong believe in the zaj…the dragons. The dragons will take you. That too is also a fear of the water. Unless people are really good at swimming, many of them don’t want to go into a river. Especially a larger river.

I thing zaj probably is the main creature that everybody fears. If you go near a river and say zaj, everybody knows about it. The only thing you say is, “Don’t get too close, there’s a dragon in there.” Everybody will know that already. Not so much other things. On land there’s other things the Hmong will fear. That is the one creature that everybody fears of and knows about it. We’ve been taught about it. With folktales, everybody knows that. That’s part of the river that Hmong experience.

We further asked, are these traditions and beliefs anything that you concern yourself with in the church? Participant 7 replied,

Not so much anymore for myself and my immediate family. A lot of it I look at from the logic point of it. So a lot of them I don’t take them in like I used to when I was a kid. There’s a story that a bunch of people go fishing in the water tunnel which flows through the mountain. They go fishing in there. Eventually, their torch die off because they wanna fish and someone die in there. It has to be a spirit in here that is killing the people in there. Now we know it’s because it’s lack of air. You don’t have air to breath so your torch gets extinguished. You stay in there longer and of course you’re going to die. So I think for us, now that we look back, some of the things people were fearful of, we didn’t have the education to understand those. Some of those superstitions or things like that where kids were naughty and the parents say there’s zaj or dragon in there. If you go in there, it might grab you and you may not make it back. Keeps them from getting in the water.

It appears that lack of education, however, does not fully explain why these beliefs persist to at least some degree. Some of the younger participants admitted that they or their family members do not fully discount these traditions. According to Participant 13, “Um, I believe there are some truth in them. I,
myself have not experienced anything because I am very cautious to what I do around the water. Because I know it can be dangerous because a lot of people are great swimmers but it is safe for people to wear life jackets to be safe. But I do believe there are some truth behind it.” Similarly, Participant 10, a college graduate who did not flatly disregard these stories, indicated that while she is very laissez faire with her children around water, her husband (also a college graduate) is very cautious, which may have some connection to him regularly hearing warnings about water while growing up.

Similarly, Participant 15, a graduate student, argued,

Those superstitions, it really depends on how traditional you are. If they are traditional and still believe in a lot of their older ways, they would probably be more cautious of these beliefs. If they are more assimilated and don’t believe in these superstitions, they are either in denial, don’t believe it, or haven’t seen anything. Basically, you need to have an open mind and accept all the possibilities whether it’s true or not and just go from there to be on the safe route.

Yet, when asked, do you believe in it?, he replied, “Well, for me, there is nobody out there to disprove or prove that there are spirits out there so I can’t truly say that I believe in it. But I keep the possibility open that it may or may not be true.”

Participant 14, who experienced physical abuse at the hands of his father when he was caught fishing, was asked by us, did your dad really think there were demons or dragons in the water that prevented him from taking you guys out into nature after your brother almost drowned? He replied, “Well, yes and no. After my dad became Christian, he didn’t really believe in that stuff. But my mom would always tell us to be aware of the water, like don’t cut your hair or leave any of your belongings near the water.”

Again, we see the importance of socialization. Participant 10, when asked directly whether she believes in these stories, gives a reply that suggests the complexity of a legacy that could otherwise be disregarded as a relic of a simple people lacking formal education. She replied,

I guess I kind of do. I would be lying if I didn't because that, I mean, that has made me fearful of, you know, the river because, but…I mean the bad things that could happen it could be for any reason not because there was dragon, but because I've always grown up hearing stories I think that just kind of engraved me a little bit that something bad could happen.

She also noted that she does not discuss these beliefs with her four children, explaining that, “I wouldn't want my children to grow up with that kind of fear.”

Participant 3 shared two photos to illustrate the dragons and lore, including Figure 19 and one meant to convey what these spirits contribute to the culture. According to him, “To the right is a piece of paper in Hmong (with lyrics to a song on it that) we call it ‘zaj-chong’. I learned this from Hmong culture—that they learned their language from the dragon that predominantly lives in the water. No matter how big or small the river is, there is an entity there. A spirit that lives there. The spirit we learn from is the dragon. We learn how to sing songs for marriages.”

Gathering Water For Gardening And Other Practical Uses

When asked about Hmong traditions with water, Participant 7, who grew up in Laos, noted that water was used “for food and things like that. If you’re near a river you have a chance of catching fish and feeding families. Taking it to the market. As my generation grew up, the river became part of our life. It irrigates the rice patty. Water is drinking water. Washing your clothes and things like that. People that get to live near water, their lifestyle is also around water.”

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As discussed, gardening and relatively small-scale farming have been and remain key elements of Hmong culture and, to a lesser extent, livelihood strategies. As noted in Table 6, this is a traditional use of rivers and lakes that was quite frequently discussed by participants. Participant 4 saw the popularity of food production amongst Hmong Americans as directly linked to her people’s past in their homelands, arguing, “being in nature is all they do. Garden, being outside. Here, I guess it’s basically the same thing. We have respect for the environment and nature.” Similarly, Participant 9 noted, “I do know that water is a really big deal for the Hmong. Uh, it holds a big significance because I guess for life everything revolves around water… ‘Course my mom gardens so the water that they use comes from the lakes and the rivers.”

Participant 3 took the photo in Figure 21 and explained it as follows: “That garden is my roommate’s girlfriend’s mom’s. From that garden she takes all the vegetables and sells it at the Farmer’s Market here in town… I didn’t take a picture of the river. It’s a tributary coming out of the Fox River. They actually use the water from the Fox River to water their own plants. They don’t use the water from their house or anything.”

Participant 14 echoed these sentiments, explaining that,

The Hmong people see the river as life for their crops. My grandma still goes down to the Manitowoc River and get buckets of water to water her plants. I know that some of my aunts who live in Appleton who use the Fox River to water their plants as well because it’s free. I have been telling them to restrict their use of the river because you can be caught and fined for transporting river water because you can spread invasive species to other water.

Mekong River

As noted in Table 6, the other primary connection made by participants to their Hmong heritage with water was to the Mekong River, the most important waterway in the Hmong story.

The Mekong is the tenth-largest river in the world. The basin of the Mekong River drains a total land area of 795,000 km² from the eastern watershed of the Tibetan Plateau to the Mekong Delta. The Mekong River flows approximately 4,909 km through three provinces of China, continuing into Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam before emptying into the South China Sea.
The Mekong Delta begins near Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and ends up as a huge fertile flat plain in southern Viet Nam where the largest tributary, the Bassac River, branches away from the Mekong River. The Mekong and Bassac Rivers split into a number of smaller distributaries, forming an area known as the “Nine Dragons.” (Mekong River Commission n.d.: paras. 1 and 7, emphasis added)

Its primary significance for contemporary Hmong people lies in the fact that the Mekong River forms a wide barrier between Laos (which, prior to the Vietnam War had the largest concentration of Hmong people in Indochina) and Thailand, the first destination for Hmong people seeking refuge from persecution following the war. Crossing it was hazardous, due to the strong current and debris carried by the river, as well as soldiers firing and criminals preying upon people attempting to escape. According to Vang (2010), while many people swam across,

Others paid exorbitant fees to boat owners for transport across the Mekong River. The means varied by which refugees made the journey…depending on when they began their trek. Some traveled alone, while others moved in groups ranging from a few families to hundreds of people….Because it would seem suspicious if all members left together, many families decided to leave some elders and small children behind while young adults escaped. Many were successful in finding refuge in Thailand, but others died of illnesses, hunger, and drowning. Still others were captured along the way and received severe punishment, sometimes including unexplained disappearances. (P. 38).

While Participant 8 was born in Laos, he claimed that he only “flew over the river” on the way to the U.S. when he was “10 or 12.” Others heard stories of the dangerous river while growing up, such as Participant 1, whose mother told her that she had had to swim across, noting, as she recalled it, “People swam across the river. Some made it, some didn’t make it.”

This was obviously a traumatic experience for many Hmong families, as alluded to by Participant 2. When asked how her parents made it across the Mekong, she admitted,

I don’t know. At one point they probably told me, but it was when I was younger. I think I had never wanted to ask them. I didn’t want to bring those memories up. They could be attached to other memories. Maybe they lost someone along the way. I personally am not ready to ask those questions because they’re deep for my parents. They hold a lot of meaning that I probably couldn’t understand. (Do you think there will come a time where you will have those conversations with them?) Um, I think so. Maybe not in the near future, but I’ll definitely need to. Or I can always ask someone else too in my family. They’re all pretty close and know each other’s story. It’s what they bonded over. They have a story too and you wanna relate your stories. It’s therapeutic in a way to know someone’s story is similar to yours.

Still others reported that they personally survived the perils of the Mekong. Participant 15 crossed the Mekong River with his family as a boy, on the way to a refugee camp in Thailand and then eventually to Wisconsin. His parents had heard stories of people drowning or being robbed, but were eventually convinced to attempt to cross by one of his older brothers, who had previous done some traveling and led the group.

They basically gave one silver bar per person which was the price to pay a boater to smuggle them into Thailand because if they stayed in Laos, they were going to get repatriated and the people who were going to get repatriated or get trained keep disappearing. There were some suspicion that they were probably being killed one at a time because they used to be against the Communist in the war, and when they lost the war. I remember a story where my dad told my uncle that if they didn’t hear back from my dad, this is the boater men that took us and probably something bad happen to us. There some pretty intense stuff that happen back then.

As noted, Participant 7 had a relatively uncommon upbringing in Laos, as a strong swimmer and
someone who grew up actively engaging with rivers. As he entered his teens, his parents told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to leave, because they foresaw that he would either be drafted into the army or simply killed by the Lao government. He eventually did leave as a 15-year old, saying goodbye to his immediate family and heading off on a treacherous journey with a cousin who helped pave the way.\footnote{11} He told the story as follows:

We crossed many rivers. I can’t remember exactly. Two of them were pretty good size ones. One was a day after I left my parents and the other was the Mekong River. In maybe in May, which is the rainy season, so it was quite bad. That’s interesting too because I grew up around rivers. I knew how to swim already. When we crossed Mekong, my cousin has one of those donuts that are useful. I don’t have anything so we cut bamboo and wove it in so air could pass. We tied the tube into two larger tubes. It actually worked pretty nice, because I already knew how to swim and it kept me afloat… I think we were blessed that we didn’t run into any trunk or trees. There’s a lot of trees flowing through the river during a rainy season like that. It was an experience. Plus we crossed at night and you don’t really see a lot of stuff! That too can keep you going….During the rainy season the river can be quite large. It could have been overwhelming to think oh, I’m gonna cross there. So the only thing to keep us going was to see the lights. If you look at Thailand you see lights. If you look at Laos you don’t see the lights. The only thing is if you get closer to lights you keep swimming to the other side. If you don’t see lights you have to turn around and make sure you face the light. That was it. We didn’t think of any tree trunk that might be flowing down the river.

I was on my own. My cousin was pulling his brother and his brother’s wife. I was pretty much speedy out. I had to come back for them because after a little bit we kind of separated. They’d have to call me, ‘where are you, where are you?’ So I heard them and came back and be with them. Because I’m by myself I was much faster moving out into the water. (Were you scared about being caught then too?) Yeah. There’s an instance when the army actually shoots people when they get into the river. So actually, we got shot at but we would be out of the range at night. (But they noticed you were there?) Oh yeah. We were over so it was not as hard to get in the water and move out. When they had multiple families, it takes some time to get out. That too, sometimes they would suffer casualties. It’s an experience.

Differences Between Traditional and Contemporary Hmong Experiences With Rivers

As noted, many participants expressed their lack of understanding of Hmong culture and tradition regarding lakes and rivers. Some did identify differences between their understanding of Hmong traditions and how they experience the Fox River, however. Several noted that younger Hmong people may be fully aware of the traditional beliefs and superstitions about rivers as discussed above, and while some admit their ambivalence or even possible belief, others are less likely to put stock in them. Participant 5 took the photo in Figure 22 and was perhaps the most adamant in his disbelief, as when he explained the photo:

I put that like that to show that Hmong culture is more cautionary of all that stuff. If I wasn’t at the risk of dropping my phone, it would have been my feet touching the water. For me, it’s not something I’m worried about. I appreciate that it’s a lot of first generation Hmong Americans here. For all the people more traditional, they’d be even more iffy to go out on the dock or whatever. On the river itself. If it’s a lake they don’t care, but if it’s a river because it’s running, for some of them, it may be something they’re very cautious about. (Do you believe a lot of the dragons and ghosts in the river and stuff like that?) No, just ‘cuz I guess I’m somebody who wants proof to believe in something. To have a logical reason to believe in it. To me, it’s not something I believe in or care much about.

\footnote{11} Sadly, while Participant 7 did return to Laos once, in the 1990s, he never saw his father again, as he died in the early 1980s. His father had previously been able to track him down by placing an advertisement in a Hmong newspaper, that he was eventually told about, and they were able send some letters. His mother has now died, and after the government rejected his request for a visa in the 2000s, he has doubts that he will ever see his brother again.
Another difference mentioned by participants was that because of changing circumstances in the U.S., related to livelihood or housing type, or due to experiencing trauma related to the outdoors, some Hmong Wisconsinites seem to have lost their connection to the land. For example, Participant 6 noted that, “Hmong people like to do gardening stuff. They use the water source to water their garden every now and then like every weekend. (Do you have your own garden?) My parents used to, but when we moved here we moved into an apartment. We don’t really plant any gardens.” According to Participant 8, who immigrated to Wisconsin from Laos as a child, his parents “don’t do farming or gardening. They work, that’s all they do.”

Participant 5 echoed this sentiment. One of two participants who indicated that they came from a family in which their father had multiple wives (a traditional Hmong practice), Participant 5 grew up in a blended household with a total of three mothers and 16 children. He learned to fish from one of his older brothers, noting that his father is very busy: “All my parents own small businesses. They don’t make a lot, enough to feed the family. My two moms have a partnership that they jointly run…My dad owns a shop in Marshfield. I’m not sure what he does. I haven’t been there. We don’t really talk about it much.” He then noted that his father gave up fishing because of work: “I think it’s a Hmong thing. It’s a very masculine culture—you gotta provide for your family. So, that’s something that he kinda gave up. If anything, he could go fishing in his spare time. But in his spare time he’s always trying to feed his big family.” He noted, however, that hunting is where his father would draw the line: “He does not want to give up the hunting life. That is something that he seriously enjoys. Fishing and other family type stuff he doesn’t really mind, but if he ever had to give up his hunting he would be very depressed.”

The other participant who discussed having a father with multiple wives was Participant 14. He had been referring to his father in the past tense and when asked about this he explained, “he married a second wife and now lives in California. He comes back and forth visiting us.” Related to his connections to the outdoors and to the water, he explained,

To tell you the truth, I have a lot of connections now but when I was young, not really. My brother almost drowned and my dad quit hunting and fishing. He never took us fishing or took us any place near water. One day I snuck out fishing and it was one of the greatest things to happen to me. Ever since then, I couldn’t stop being outside.

Participant 14 continued sneaking out to go fishing and generally be outside, even at the risk of being beaten by his father, who seemed to have been serious traumatized by nearly losing his other son to drowning. He explained,
Yeah, he tried stopping me. He took his fishing rods and lures and hid them. He locked up my bike so my friend and I would have to walk 4-5 mile every day back and forth from his house to my house and fish the river behind my house. My dad would beat me up pretty good but eventually he got tired of beating me and I just kept doing it. I wouldn’t say I hate him because he was just looking out for me.

Others noted that differences between traditional and contemporary Hmong experiences with rivers and lakes were primarily related to changes in technology and standard of living, such as participants discussing their use of high tech equipment for fishing or diminished reliance upon natural resources for subsistence, but that many Hmong are nonetheless engaged in age-old practices. Participant 8 summed up this sentiment in this exchange: “(How does your use of the river differ from Hmong culture as you know it?) Well, according to what I know, there’s not much of a difference. They use it in the same way. Pretty much the same thing. (Just fishing and gardening?) Same old thing.”

As discussed above, though, numerous respondents described the lack of understanding of Hmong history and traditions—including the connection to nature that has been central to the Hmong experience—on their part or on the part of others of younger generations. This actual or potential loss of cultural continuity was lamented by some, such as Participant 3, who noted,

If we don’t pass it on to this generation our tradition might be lost. Some of my cousins, they’re like 30 or 40 years old, they don’t know any of these traditions. What if one day your daughter does get married? You don’t know how to help each other. Back to that helping thing. If you can’t help yourself how can you help others? You lose that sense of attachment to who you are. Back to your old tradition roots, you basically cut that tradition off. It’s like you don’t know who you are. You’re doing this tradition because you want to find out who you are. I want to be connected to my own culture and tradition. It’s not like you have to learn it. It’s to get to learn the old traditions here.

Participant 5, a skeptic of what he sees as Hmong superstitions but who remains intrigued by Hmong beliefs about the afterlife, asserts that younger Hmong Wisconsinites do not have time to carry out the rituals that are central to the traditional culture:

There’s big feasts you’ve got to prepare. You’ve got two to four hours of the actual shaman thing that goes down. The animal sacrifice thing you have to deal with. There’s actually cleaning the animal itself. It’s very expensive too. Purchasing and stuff. So, like, simpler…A lot of people are giving it up to go to Christianity. For families of newer generations, they see it as you don’t really have to stress out that much about your shamanism. It also makes your life simpler. You have more time for your family and yourself.

Others drew the connections between the decline of traditional Hmong practices and a decreasing appreciation of nature on the part of some. According to Participant 4, the fiercely proud female fisherwoman,

We can’t force people to value what nature gives us. Some people don’t understand that. They’re just like, ‘Oh, whatever. I don’t care.’ A simple tree will be out there and it’s more than just a tree. It’s giving us oxygen. It plays a really huge part in our lives. Some people don’t understand that because like I said, technology is so big right now. They value technology more. People in my generation. They won’t even know where oxygen is from.

Participant 7 has six children, half of whom are grown. He worried about the loss of Hmong language:

I don’t think it’s getting better… Even in my house, my older ones understand Hmong. They read a little bit, they write a little bit. My youngest ones really have a problem with Hmong. Even comprehension. She has a problem with that. If we ask her in Hmong to give us something, more than likely, we wouldn’t have the item that we ask her. I think that is a problem. After sometime I kind of lecture my kids. Your
language is important to you. I think when you go to college, and definitely with your kids, they’re gonna ask you, mom and dad where are we from? What language do my grandparents speak? At that point they’ll be like gee, I wish I studied Hmong when I had the opportunity. Or listened to dad or when my Hmong cousins said I should learn Hmong.

Somewhat ironically, however, he sees hope for the future of Hmong language in higher education:

I think once they go to higher education they see the need of the language. Before then, I think they prefer to speak English…Now my son is working with Hmong students (at a Wisconsin university). He’s speaking Hmong now even more than before he went to school. I think…we’re losing it, but if we are able to have these kids go to college, they will see that. We’ll retain some of this.

The common and meaningful interactions amongst Hmong people—friends, family, and strangers—in the land, through fishing next to one other and working together to raise and market food, were cited by numerous participants as of major importance in terms of bonding, provision of support, and perpetuation of culture. Participant 6 sees hope in his interactions with older Hmong fisherman, while lamenting his own lack of Hmong language ability:

I remember I was fishing and an older guy came up to me and was telling me stories about back then when they lived in Laos. How there were so many fish there. When they come to Oshkosh and catch so many white bass it reminds them of those good times where they used to go catch so many fish. And how good the food is. (Does it enhance your communication with other Hmong people?) Oh yea. I guess there’s always Hmong people saying those sayings. (says a Hmong saying) every time they don’t catch a fish or they miss a fish they say those old sayings. You kind of learn from it. When you come back to the place you learn from it and I guess you say the same thing….You learn a great deal. Different language. Yeah, I learn a good deal of our culture. Sometimes when I talk to an elderly they usually tell me how things were back then. How good those times in Laos were. They like to refer back to their villages. Certain areas where they would go to the same spot where they would get water or vegetables.
KEY VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOX RIVER

As noted, there was a fair amount of overlap amongst the categories in the discussions by participants, and this was particularly true for this category. By the time conversations reached the question of what participants value most about the Fox River, they had already discussed many of the key points, so this section is shorter in length than the first two. It nonetheless contains some interesting insights from Hmong people of the Fox Valley.

Table 7. Why participants value the Fox River

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty and diversity of nature</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time with family and friends</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks, recreation, and fishing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Its provision of food</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacefulness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional connections and place identity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Beauty and Diversity of Nature

As presented in Table 7, participants commonly described the Fox River as something they value due to the beauty and diversity of nature to which it provides access.

Figure 23. They were here first (Participant 4)

Participant 4, the avid fisherwoman, explained that a primary reason she values fishing and the resources provided by the Fox River watershed is “the whole beauty of nature and enjoying nature. Sometimes we’re so busy that we miss such important beauty of the outside world. That’s one of the things I enjoy the most when I’m out on the lake fishing. The view, the sunset. We’re so busy that we don’t get a chance to see that.” She continued,

The cool little creatures you find along the way…you encounter interesting things. The huge carp. We don’t ever get to see…We tend to forget that other creatures share this environment with us. It’s the turtle’s home…One thing is that we tend to be greedy: “We were here first. These animals are not supposed to be here.” We lose the value of nature and what the animals provide for us. We’re all so greedy that we say this is our environment. When in reality, they existed way before we even did…It reminds me, oh yeah, we’re sharing this world with them.
Similarly, Participant 8 noted, “I think about the animals that live in the river. If I lived near the river I would want it to be clean because I care about the animals that live there.”

Participant 10 explained her photo (Figure 24) as follows:

Um, how I see the river I love, me and my husband love birds. Just the different type of birds that there is. Um, we live by Heckrodt wetlands…so we've taken our family there quit a few times…with binoculars and there is so many different animals. But the birds there are just amazing you know: hawks, birds, and eagles, whatever, and you know a lot of ducks and these stay living by the river and actually during the summer time at one point right by the spot where the photo is taken they have a lot of nest in that area.

(What do you get about that interaction?) I guess peace from every day, just a break, you know, from every day responsibilities, life, stress, um, that's kind of my piece of mind. It is like taking, uh, a deep breath of fresh air…It’s like you become small but when you become one with this whole thing…just the fact that you know there is life, I guess, and that everyone, every life is actually quite similar whether you’re an animal or a person. Being around that and seeing that you know, and knowing that sign. Respect it…Yeah and children their mind are not that broad in spectrum yet. But, yeah, I tell them about these things how I'm feeling about the nature…so hopefully that I will help impact a difference to them too.

According to Participant 2, “What I value most is this picture.”

She explained,

I value the spaces that are kind of unused on the river. That’s where you get a lot of scenery and quiet
spots. You get a lot of ticks and stuff but I value these spaces because you don’t get too many of those along the river. This particular picture I’m guessing is them trying to restore some prairie plants out there. I find it very nice to look at. It’s a variety versus just grass. Grass attracts goos and they poop a lot which is unpleasant to look at. And with this you get tall grass that’s not so green and one colored. Changes up the side of the river, I like it. It represents diversity along the river. It’s healthy to have these ‘barriers’ they call them, because then you don’t get those unattractive things like bird poop and dead fish. If you do get dead fish you don’t see it because of the tall grass… I personally think they should have more of these set aside wildernesses. Or just more diverse plant life areas… I think I like it messy and there’s beauty to it. My view is obviously not the popular one. I think it could help in changing the view like when you’re walking or running. You get bored of seeing cities and sidewalks and the same things. It’s healthy for your mind. You notice that everything’s not the same.

Time With Family And Friends

As discussed, many participants value the Fox River for the social interaction it facilitates.

Figure 26. Family bonding (Participant 3)

Participant 3 explained, “It’s a time that I can go out and bond with my dad and my uncle. I go to school here and barely see my parents. That was actually a time I got to have a fun time with my dad.” Similarly, Participant 6 noted that he values the Fox River because, “I could go there whenever I want and just have a good time with friends and family” and Participant 13 indicated, “I value family because we use the river a lot for family gatherings. I mean all the food we get from the farmer’s market comes from the Fox River.”

According to Participant 15, “There are a lot of places to relax and enjoy family time. This picture shows one of the biggest catfish I have caught. My little boy brought it in. Also this other picture shows a new park called Buchanan Park. So it does have a lot of good sightseeing areas and good areas to picnic with the family.”

He went on to make specific mention of the parks along the river: “One thing I value most about the Fox River is the recreational use of the water system and the parks that are bound to the Fox River.”

Several others elaborated upon their valuation of the Fox River for the fishing and source of food it facilitates, as well the sense of peace and relaxation that it engenders. While it was only mentioned by a few participants, Participant 9 brought to light an interesting reason for valuing the Fox River, which connects to the concepts of place and bioregionalism that are discussed in the background section above. She noted, “Uh, well, the Fox River runs through Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay right? Does it run through Fond du Lac too or no?” Among other things, this suggests that education efforts geared towards increasing the place knowledge of Hmong and all people of the Fox Valley may be fruitful, as
she was not the only participant who did not realize the Fox River flows north into Lake Winnebago at Oshkosh, and my students (as well as faculty and staff in workshops that I conduct) routinely fail to correctly identify the source of the Fox near Portage in south central Wisconsin and eventual mouth of the river in Green Bay in the northeastern part of the state.

In any case, Participant 9 went on to explain how the river relates to the identity of the region: “Well, to me the Fox River is important because it kind of connects all these cities in a way because it is the river that runs through each city…anywhere you go in these cities, if you bring up the name Fox River, it’s uh, something that people know.” And then, in an excellent lay definition of bioregionalism, she noted, “The Fox River is like a second home. Like Oshkosh is the city for me, it’s home. But then it wouldn’t be Oshkosh if it didn’t have the Fox River in it.”

Figure 27. A second home (Participant 1)
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT WITH THE FOX RIVER

In discussing this category of inquiry, participants discussed both issues of concern, which detract from their enjoyment of the Fox River, and ideas for how to improve the physical and social landscape in which it lies. The most frequently discussed items are presented in turn below.

Table 8. Issues that detract from enjoyment of the Fox River

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pollution/litter</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict/racism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of public land</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Pollution/Litter*

By far the most frequently mentioned concern by people in this sample was pollution of the river and the litter that they come across along its shores. Participant 12 noted, “As a natural resource, I believe it should be preserve and we should do what we can to keep it clean so that following generation are able to enjoy what we have.” Participant 2 was one of many concerned that it is not being kept clean.

She explained that,

I don’t know what the heck that was, but it was green or yellow oil and some foam. Those bubbles might be naturally occurring or from boats. It looks like soap. That kind of worries me the most! It was green or yellow film. Just on a regular day walking by…That’s the thing with the Fox River, there’s a few companies that use the river for their system. In addition, it’s people not having appreciation for the river and dumping in whatever they needed to or wanted to. With the foam, I know it’s sometimes naturally occurring, but it could be a detergent causing this foam or bubble substance.

As discussed earlier in the report, many participants expressed concern about the health implications, particularly since fishing and consuming fish are such a big part of Hmong culture. Participant 15 noted, “from my experience with Hmong people and growing up and their attitude towards fish in the area here, I don’t think they really see how it’s polluted. If they don’t see proof immediately at the park or any tests to test the biochemical pollution to see how it is but I don’t think they are aware of it. But I am
aware of it and I try not to eat a lot of fish out of river.” Participant 11 agreed: “It’s so polluted that obviously every time I catch a fish I don’t keep all of it. Or I might not want to eat it. Just in general, you know that it’s not the cleanest river in the world. Maybe I want to eat the fish, but I know that it’s not the healthiest river.” Pollution clearly impacted the enjoyment of the river by Participant 6, who indicated, “It makes me shy away from fishing. The point is to go fishing and bring back home a meal. Once you find out the fish is not clean and the water is dirty then you don’t want to fish for them. It gives you a disgusting feeling.” Similarly, Participant 10 (the young mother of four) lamented, “I would like that part of my diet and being able to have that free to us but that is kind of a bummer. Yeah, if we could eat the fish that we caught I would be eating fish more often.”

Figure 29. Harming my therapist! (Participant 5)

Participant 5 was particularly concerned about the litter that he regularly encounters:

If anything, we’re already destroying nature as it is. We should value the things we have left. Of course, it’s my therapist! I don’t wanna see people harming it in any way. I guess it makes me sound like a tree hugger. I guarantee that once we lose it, people are gonna regret it. It’s little actions that can save you or do so much for you. I guess people just don’t see that. It makes it kind of hard for me. Especially when I do a lot of fishing and walking around. Some days if I have an extra bag I’ll pick up some of the stuff just to throw it away. You should just not only be respectful to the river itself.

Multiple participants placed at least part of the blamed directly upon Hmong people themselves, including Participant 13:

I would particularly fish the Fox River. Both ends by the delta by Winnebago and Lake Buttes des Morts…especially down by 41. They just built the trail last year and me and my buddies and we were some of the first people there and it was awesome. It was nice and a great place to fish, but this year, I have noticed the decline of the environment. It has gotten really dirty. I have seen a lot of Hmong people fishing there too. Um, seen a lot of littering and that kind of made me sad to go and fish there some more. The quality of the area just got worse. One day I just got so fed up with it and I took a trash bag out there and cleaned it up a bit. It looked a little bit better but still one man can’t do the job.

Participant 3 added to this his concern about the negative perception of Hmong fisherfolk that such
behaviors can produce:

It takes only a few to give a bad name to all the rest of the Hmong fishermen. You’re sort of getting labeled, I guess you could say. The Hmong people over there might be littering, but you might not be a part of them. Then you’re getting labeled as a group with them. It just makes it really hard because people would be looking at you weird. Especially the non-Hmong fishermen. You get a bad vibe and just don’t feel like fishing. You have these people over there looking at you every five seconds thinking you’re gonna throw trash around.

It is little wonder, then, that Participant 3 was one of several who advocated for increased signage targeted towards Hmong people and additional garbage/recycling receptacles in popular fishing areas.

Conflict/Racism

Most participants indicated that they generally got along well with non-Hmong fisherfolk and others using the natural resources. Several made comments similar to that from Participant 8: “My whole time in Oshkosh I’ve never experience racism or anything like that.” Several participants, however, shared stories of racism and conflict.

Participant 11 noted that while he had not experienced such issues on the Fox River, he has observed “Facebook drama” around such conflict. According to him, “It’s pretty graphic stuff, I don’t want to go into detail. I don’t think it would be appropriate…I think it’s just that 1 or 2 percent that just ruins it for everybody.” Participant 12 noted, “I have personally been not a part in any altercation before fishing at all. But other recreational activities such as deer hunting and squirrel hunting, there has been some out there.” Participant 8 argued that it goes both ways in uncomfortable or conflictive interactions between Hmong and non-Hmong people, noting, “I guess sometimes they do say hi or they just ignore them and it’s how you give a vibe that isn’t welcoming they not want to converse with you too.”

Participant 14 had the most direct experience with this issue and it was therefore not surprising that he also had the most to say about it. According to him, “Well, I think, um, there was an earlier case where my first cousin was beat up and killed by one of his high school bully. It was prejudiced and he was killed. This was the one that happen in Green Bay on the parking ramp. It was in a documentary (Being Hmong Means Being Free), and the girl talking in the documentary was (my cousin).”

Both he and Participant 3 pointed to the ongoing legacy of the aforementioned Chai Vang case. In providing his take on why the DNR now prints some pamphlets in Hmong language, Participant 3 noted, “I think it really comes from the Chai Vang case. The Hmong hunter who shot those Caucasian hunters. Stuff like that really opened the eyes for many Hmong hunters as well…I know that that year when it happened I went hunting as well up in Crivitz. I saw this bumper sticker that said ‘Save a deer, kill a Hmong.’ It was a redneck guy. He had two big Confederate flags on his big truck. As you can see, there’s that racism and hatred out there.”

Participant 14 has had more direct experience with race-oriented conflict:

Well, I worked for Clean Boats Clean Water Sea Grant and when I was working I inspected this one guy’s boat. The next day I accidentally inspected his boat again and he really got mad at me and called me a ‘gook.’ I kind of got mad, too, but then hey I am just doing my job and helping everyone in the long run. I backed off and he got into my face even more and I believe that was right after the Chai Vang incident as well. So I had to talk to my manager about it and he had someone work with me for a while so I would feel more comfortable. It was my first day of work and we worked on the weekends as well and it usually busy during the weekend. After this, it got better and it was one of the most rewarding thing in my
Life. I would help people who couldn’t read and there were more people who harassed me at work but not to the point where they would call me ‘gook.’

Lack Of Public Land

While certainly not as dramatic as this race-oriented conflict, several participants lamented the relative lack of public space for fishing and other recreational and leisure activities along the river. According to Participant 2, ‘There’s this big private lot that’s just cement. That makes it difficult to experience the river as well. It’s unused. They say don’t trespass because it’s their property, but it’s kind of hard to walk along the river when you’re all of a sudden stopped by this private land.”

Figure 30. Stopped by private land (Participant 2)

Participant 11 expressed similar frustration, coincidentally using an example from a place that lies near the above scene. According to him, “Well, I haven’t been to every fishing spot but there is that one spot I like down by Bowen Street. It is both public and private because you can only stay there till 10 pm and some of the best fishing comes late at night. Some of the locals don’t mind if you stay there fishing late at night but, um, any other places it would be hard to access it. There is no trails or ways for you get to that spot especially in private areas.”

Participant 3 was frustrated by the private property near the UWO campus, as well as the fact that fishing is not allowed on the public land of the campus:

As you can see, a lot of the property on the Fox River is private property. That picture is taken right by the spot. If you even step on there, that guy over there will yell at you. (Property manager guy?) Yeah, he will yell at you. There’s a bench right where the tunnel is and he will sit there all day watching just to make sure nobody will cross over his property. (Another sign) is right by the trail by UW Oshkosh here. It says that Chapter 18 is enforced...It prohibits fishing on campus here. Even if it’s recreational, catch and release. You can’t do that on campus, which I think…I don’t know. You’re right by a river and you can’t fish. It really restricts your recreational activities.

Figure 31. No further (Participant 3)
Multiple people also expressed concern about the possible overuse of the Fox River system. According to Participant 14, the Manitowoc River “is the future version of the Fox River. There is not that many fish in the Manitowoc River and the water has gotten really low. One time I went fishing, the whole Hmong soccer team were fishing right next to me and they cleaned the whole river out. I caught one fish and they all switched to the same lure as me. Small fish or big fish, they took it all home to feed the soccer team. I love fishing around the Fox River area because there are still fish but it is declining, unlike Manitowoc where one fish is a trophy.” Similarly, Participant 14 noted, “I guess on a weekend or a very good day, there would be too many people using the Fox River. So that is one difficult obstacle.”

Table 9. Things that could improve enjoyment of the Fox River

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Improvements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signage</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More garbage and recycling cans</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More public spaces</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to boat, license, registration</td>
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**Signage**

Participants said that various physical amenities, such as more recycling and garbage cans, additional park-like public areas with picnic tables, grills, and places to sit and enjoy the river, and more walking/biking trails would enhance their enjoyment of the Fox River landscape. As revealed by Table 9, however, additional and particular types of signage were the potential improvements most frequently mentioned by the Hmong people in our sample. As alluded to, some indicated that informational signs presenting facts about the Fox River and its environs, to help increase place (ecological, historical) knowledge, would be beneficial. Participant 4 would like to see, “Signs that grab people’s attention. What actually lives in the Fox River. I don’t know about other people, but when they have signs about that it interests me. I take the time to read it. It interests me.” Participant 3 was a strong advocate for signage of various kinds, including the type mentioned by Participant 4, calling for “different signage about important facts too. Just about the river, certain facts. I would love to see that.”

More common were calls for signs (and other written material) in Hmong language that could help educate people about rules and regulations, as well risks, related to fishing, of which most people had seen very little in the Fox Valley. Participant 1 is accustomed to seeing more of such signs in the Milwaukee area, noting that in “some places they have signs about what fishes are there. How many inches. The fishes you can keep and if they’re shorter than a certain length then you have to let them go and stuff.” A number argued that more “no littering” signs in Hmong language would be beneficial.

Figure 32. Sign with translation (Participant 3)

That’s actually underneath a bridge on Hwy 10 by New London...What I like is that they translated it into Hmong and people can understand. The reason that I don’t like it is that that part of the river a lot of Hmong people fish. They do litter a lot. What I tell myself, from any minority perspective, is that it just takes one person to ruin it for the rest of the people. If you see one Hmong person littering, every Hmong person gets the label of littering...But I like the way that they’re using these signs and translating them to Hmong. They acknowledge us as a minority group. We do like to go fishing out in the state of Wisconsin. We like to get out there and interact, and I see the sign as a positive thing. With the Department of Natural Resources, it’s a positive thing. (Participant 3)
Participant 11 believed that signage would help reduce littering, which Participant 3 argued has been the result of pairing the above sign with garbage receptacles: “Right next to it they actually put garbage cans around it. I see people using it all the time now, that I go there. It’s gotten better, yeah, definitely.”

Others expressed interest in more Hmong signage that would educate people about fishing rules, the risks from eating fish caught in the river, or about how to avoid encourage the spread of invasive species. Participant 4 argued that, “I think that putting up signs, especially in Hmong, would really help them. Sometimes they’re confused about if they can fish there or not. What if they can’t fish there but they can’t read English? What happens?” Participant 5 also saw the need for more education, noting that, “It’s kind of like marketing. You’ve gotta kinda market these rules to them. Make an interesting poster. Like, eye-catching. I do think that once you get someone to think the way you want them to think, they don’t really forget it. It’s kind of like education. If you teach someone something that interests them, they don’t really forget it. I think it would work.” Participant 13 advocated for signs in Hmong about boating safety, while Participant 14 recalled his time working in the field for the DNR:

It was nice because I was teaching these older Hmong people. I mean all these older Hmong people knew they just wanted to come out on the water and bring their families to have fun. They didn’t know any rules or regulation. I would talk to them and explain to them about the rules and regulation about cleaning up their boats. I would explain about the fines if you didn’t clean your boat correctly and the older Hmong folks would clean their boats nicely after that. I really think I made a difference…I actually want to see some regulations to be translated in Hmong. I see some on the Great Lakes that explains that you should eat this type of fish once a month or something like that. I wish there was a seminar. Actually, back in Manitowoc, I gave a seminar on invasive species to the younger Hmong people to educate them about topics like these. You have to educate the younger people to really move on.

Participant 10 agreed with Participant 3’s call for more Hmong signage with “Information about the Mercury level. Not eating too many fish as well.” She noted, however,

I don't know for sure but I can't say that all of the Hmong population know the written (Hmong) language…I mean for my in law they older but they don't really know how to read and write so they can't really learn the written language. When they get mail (we) read it for them so, I mean, I don't have to interpret but I read for them obviously and know Hmong so I read it for them and they know but if they were going to see a sign they read it anyways…(some) have had the opportunity to learn the written language. And I myself did through college.

When asked if there would be benefits from such signs, even for people like her, who can read the Hmong language, she replied, “Yeah, I think it would. They would recognize it is Hmong. If they know the written language they'll be able to read it, but I still think it is the feeling of being included or just knowing that they do recognize that we use the river, too, and we're part of it. So, in that sense it could be nice too.”

Having addition Hmong DNR officers or other land stewards out in the field was also noted as something that would be beneficial. “We created a friendship with the DNR guy,” said Participant 4. “Whenever he comes he’s like oh, how is it going? Does his job, checks on the license, has a little chat, then he goes home.” She also noted, though, “I guess one concern I have about this person going out and talking to Hmong people is that we would want him to have the right knowledge. Not to exaggerate things or assume things. Not to say oh if you eat this from here you’re going to get ill. He can’t make false statements, it has to be accurate.”
Access to a Boat

Several people mentioned better access to the river and specifically through the use of a boat or kayak as something that would increase their enjoyment of the Fox River.

The other thing for Hmong in general, most of the Hmong people don’t own a boat. When they fish they do offshore. I think there’s an experience in the past that they get tangled with people on a boat. Sometimes they have a problem community wise. If there’s a way of helping this for the people on the boat and people fishing offshore, that might be helpful. Then again, it’s hard. How are we going to do this so everybody can have a safe fishing area or things like that? Other than that, I think especially here, behind Main Street here they sort of redid the area so it’s more friendly for people to fish. Hopefully it’s like that in other places too so people can easily get to it and fish. I think if I had a boat I’d travel a little bit farther out. I don’t have that. The other thing is that the trail does not get close to the river itself. It’s hard to get to the river edge and experience that. (Participant 7)

Figure 33. Something we would like (Participant 10)

Participant 10 took photos of someone in a kayak and a family in a boat (Figure 33) to illustrate this desire. She noted, “You can see there is a family on the boat and that is something I would like to do with my family and how we would definitely use the river. It’s just we never really had a chance to I mean we can still rent a boat and stuff, and a pontoon or what. We've been meaning to, just haven’t yet.” She continued,

I would love to kayak, for exercise and the scenery. I think the experience would be phenomenal. You know I've been on a canoe before so I it kind of similar so I know what that's like. Um although in the other one you know we can't swim. My husband can't swim either. None of my kids know how to swim, we've haven't been giving them many swimming lesson yet…so I wouldn't anticipate that until they knew how to swim. Of course, there is life jackets but if it is just my husband and I, I wouldn't be able to save him. (Laughs) (What is it about the kayak and the boat that is so appealing to you?) Just the river, being on the river itself you know. It is so serene, being in nature, and being in one with nature.
THE ESSENCE OF THE FOX RIVER

As with the section about key values, most of the topics related to the essence of the Fox River had already been thoroughly discussed by the time we reached this category in our interviews. Therefore, this will be a brief final section that reiterates familiar themes, particularly around the Fox River helping facilitate enjoyable recreational activity, social interaction, and relaxation. According to Participant 1, for example, “When it comes down to rivers and lakes it’s all about spending time together.”

Figure 34. Wraps it up pretty well (Participant 2)

Participant 2 explained, “This picture wraps it up pretty well because it has a lot of colors. I think the sun is setting and it’s a place to converge for ideas and feelings and thoughts to come all together. The restaurant feel, when you go out to eat you’re usually with friends or family.”

Participant 15 noted, “I couldn’t get a whole family picture. But the Fox River is more of making our life less stressful. To have access to the river, you can have more things to do…We would go to this spot usually in the evening before dark.”

Participant 2 sums it up by simply observing that, “The Fox River is this intersection where nature and humans can interact.”

And, finally, Participant 11 discusses its importance to the identity of the area and its people: “It means life to me…I really like the ecosystem itself. It’s a part of us.”

Figure 35. Less stress (Participant 15)
CONCLUSIONS

Hmong people are clearly an important part of the landscape of the Fox Valley, while the landscape of the Fox Valley has likewise become an important element of Hmong life in this area. In the words of Christian et al. (2009), Hmong people have in some ways produced a reconstructed landscape in Wisconsin as they engage in practices here that are similar to those they previously carried out in Southeast Asia, even while the landscape of the Fox Valley has in some ways reconstructed their culture, through helping to perpetuate and reinvigorate Hmong farming practices and introduce modern activities, such as sport fishing, kayaking, and picnicking.

I hope that this report can shed additional light on the many interesting and complex dimensions of these relationships for the benefit of Fox River ecosystems and all who inhabit its bioregion, including Hmong people, with their deep connections to nature and interesting experiences with the river. There is much that can be learned from Hmong people, and much that they can learn about the Fox River system and others who interact with it and them.

Some particularly noteworthy conclusions that can be drawn from the data produced by this project include the following:

Experiences with the Fox River

- Hmong people are avid users of the Fox River for fishing, primarily from shore. Participants we interviewed indicated that they particularly enjoy very active fishing that involves using bait that mimics the prey of fish, etc., rather than the passive, bobber-and-worm style of fishing that some enjoy.
- Many Hmong people enjoy fishing in large groups and working together, including through sharing the harvest of fish. Some attributed this to its roots in historical practices, while others indicated that it might have as much to do with a marginalized group feeling comfortable together. In either case, it is clear that Hmong people place a great value on the social interaction that results from fishing and otherwise spending time in and near the Fox River system.
  - Through education and outreach, FWHP could perhaps encourage greater understanding of Hmong fishing practices such as those discussed herein by non-Hmong people, which could help to reduce tension and produce appreciation of common goals and values, potentially leading to the development of community between the various.
- White bass, while not necessarily sought or valued by people from other groups (such as some European Americans), are a very important resource for Hmong fishers, and when these fish “run” in the spring (i.e. April/May) it is likely to be the peak time for Hmong fishers to be active because according to participants, they value quantity of fish in particular, as well as the taste of white bass. There is another run in the fall, but it is smaller. It has been noted that Hmong people come from a wide area to fish the Fox River during these runs, with the dam in the river near Eureka being a hot spot.
- Hmong fisherfolk, particularly older Hmong people, are likely to consume the fish they catch and often enjoy fish fries, fish stew, and other methods to prepare the fish with their extended families. While younger and more educated people may be more likely to limit their intake of fish from the river due to warnings about the potential hazards, cultural traditions related to the consumption of fish are strong and the related practices will not be easily altered, even when education in this regard takes place. Nevertheless, many participants called for additional signage in Hmong language.
- It appears to be less common for females to fish, which is understandable given the patriarchal nature of traditional Hmong culture, but our sample includes multiple participants who are avid
fisherwomen. Socialization can introduce additional Hmong females to fishing and the many benefits reported by those who fish.

- Perhaps FWHP could sponsor activities designed to encourage fishing amongst Hmong females.
- Though fishing was, as expected, revealed to be very popular amongst the people in our sample, numerous participants indicated that the primary way they enjoy the Fox River is through activities such as walking, biking, canoeing, and simply sitting and relaxing with the river in view. This report contains suggestions not only for improvements that could be made related to fishing but to such activities as well.

Hmong Traditions with Rivers

- Fishing and farming activities were frequently cited as providing direct and meaningful connections between contemporary Hmong people and their heritage. Both activities appear to provide fertile ground for the transmission of culture and even language from one generation to the next.
  - FHWP could potentially create facilities and/or activities expressly designed to encourage Hmong people of different generations to fish and/or grow food together.
- Cultural traditions (such as the idea that dragons inhabit rivers and that spirits can be found there as well) and historical circumstances (such as the required and dangerous crossing of the Mekong River from Laos to Thailand by Hmong people fleeing the Lao government in decades past) remain very salient to Hmong people of the Fox Valley, even with a relatively small percentage of Hmong people in the area having direct experience with them. The result is that some older/more traditional Hmong people fear rivers, while most in the sample did not necessarily fear the Fox River for such reasons. They further may not necessarily understand the unique geography of the Fox River system.
  - Interpretive signage, about the Fox River system and its bioregion, could be very beneficial to Hmong people (and the health of the river system if it causes more people to care about the health of ecosystems) and other residents of the Fox Valley. Perhaps some of this signage could also feature elements of Hmong culture and history, for the benefit of both groups as well.
- Multiple participants reported that they or their immigrant parents have been too busy with other things to engage meaningfully with the river through fishing or other activities. The result may be a bit of a cultural loss stemming from the migration/integration process.
- While several participants lamented the decline of Hmong language and cultural proficiency amongst younger people, the study confirms the deep appreciation of nature by Hmong people in the Fox Valley and their perpetuation of Hmong traditions and practices in numerous ways.

Areas for improvement with the Fox River

- This study revealed some difficulty for people, older and younger alike, related to not understanding or simply being uncertain about issues related to fishing regulations or advisories related to consumption of fish.
- It appears that social relations between Hmong and non-Hmong fisherfolk are generally okay, but tension between Hmong and non-Hmong people was reported and multiple participants discussed direct experiences with race-oriented conflict. Given the history of the Chai Vang case and other high profile tragedies discussed in this report, these issues should be taken very seriously.
  - For this and other reasons noted here and throughout the report, at the very least FWHP should have or develop a clear understanding of the extent to which the DNR and related land stewardship organizations employ Hmong staff and volunteers in the field, as well as their level of visibility and effectiveness. Should research in this regard reveal the need and the requisite funding allow it, FWHP may be well served to hire Hmong land stewards to
carry out education and outreach activities. Based upon the number of young, well-educated people in the sample who indicated that they are seeking environmental jobs, such Hmong stewards should not be difficult to find.

- The relatively young people in our sample generally seem committed to contributing to a positive future for Hmong people and the environment of the Fox Valley overall. For example, Participant 11 noted, “I have always had a passion for it. I love the animals. I love the outdoors especially learning about the ecosystem and learning how it works together. And just learning about how animals interact about us, too. It is just something that has always fascinated me with. Hopefully I can get somewhere with the DNR.” Participant 2 noted that, “We take education very seriously and we appreciate the opportunity to learn,” and, “I just want to be able to teach someone something or implement practices that are more environmentally friendly. That’s what I ultimately want to do.”

- Additional signage in Hmong language, improvements to shoreline fishing and picnicking areas, and targeted education and outreach efforts through Hmong land stewards in the field and seminars about invasive species and the like were suggested by participants as having the potential to address such concerns.
  - Signage of various types seems to be an obvious area in which the FWHP could make a positive impact on the experience of Hmong people with the Fox River.

- Participants who took photos for our study generally reported that they really enjoyed it. For example, Participant 12 indicated, “I thought it was really great because I’ve never really thought about it, like why I go fishing. Now that I think about it, it’s a place for me to go get away and relax.” Participant 4 noted, “I really enjoyed it. It’s a time for me to get to express a part of myself I don’t really get to express because it’s not the same interests. When they talk about their stuff I just sit over here like, ‘okay.’ It’s a very good experience. I got to say who I am. I’m a female capable of these things.”
  - Implications of this include that a gallery-type exhibit with viewing of participant photos and discussion of these issues with the individual photographers and perhaps as a large group could be a great success. Given the potential for the participant-driven photo elicitation process to empower the people who engage in it (Van Auken, Stewart, and Frisvoll 2010), FWHP should consider asking additional Hmong stakeholders to complete it, to potentially produce addition participants in the exhibit and to simply encourage more people to reflect upon and learn more about these important issues.
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