

Breaking Tradition
By DAVE McNEILL
Managing Editor

For David Busse, it began with dialogue and trust. The Army Corps of Engineers' Water Control Team in St. Louis had one mission: to aid navigation on the Mississippi River. But Busse, the senior water control manager, and his crew thought they could do more. So once a year since 1994, they have had another goal in mind: helping the environment. For about 30 days or so in the summer, they lower the water level in pools that form upstream of dams so grasses can grow along the banks, providing oases for migrating birds, food for fish and oxygen for the river.

What was it that allowed the Corps of Engineers, long considered by some to be environmentally unfriendly, to work together with conservationists? Dialogue, pure and simple, broke through the way things had been done for 60 years.

"In St. Louis, we meet with different groups and hear different opinions," said Busse, who's been with the corps for 15 years. "We will go to environmental conferences to get a feel for what is important to them and see if we can do something. And we invite them to our river engineering conferences. Most confrontations arise because people lack an understanding of each other's position."

For years, such confrontations were the norm, according to Busse. Much of the time was spent yelling across the table at one another, with both sides taking up extreme positions. Eventually, though, some people began to feel that that approach wasn't very productive and began to listen, seeking a common ground.

"The walls started breaking down," Busse said. "We realized that our two goals — navigation and conservation — weren't complete opposites. Through continual dialogue, we came to understand that it is not one thing or another."

As the two sides talked, they began to trust each other, and less drastic proposals emerged. And one day on a boat in the middle of the Mississippi, wildlife biologist Ken Dalrymple made a suggestion and Busse said simply, "We can do that." Hungry, tired birds soon had 3,000 new acres of grassland.

The lower water level leaves less of a cushion for the 80,000 ships and barges that pass through the locks each year, but sensitive satellite technology allows the corps to monitor the river's flow every hour and make any necessary adjustments.

The idea that existing structures of locks can be used to enhance the environment at no extra cost to the taxpayer is catching on. Now called Environmental Pool Management, the principles Busse and his colleagues have developed are being used at other locks and dams up and down the river. Busse himself was named conservationist of the year by a local organization in 1996.

Though justifiably proud of his team's innovations and the positive chain reaction they have caused, Busse may be most proud of what started it all: a commitment to dialogue. "You've got to trust each other," he said. "You have to know where each other is coming from."

WT

With reporting by Cheryl Utley of Prairie Village, Mo., and Richard Pappalardo of St. Louis.