

Misunderstood mussels focus of research

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During the last decade, the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium's aquarists have been researching freshwater mussels, which are considered an endangered species.

The specific mussel species of northeastern Iowa includes Higgins' eye pearlymussel, fatmucket, yellow sandshell, black sandshell and pistolgrip.

Andy Allison, director of living collections, said, "Most of the mussels in North America are here in the Mississippi River Valley. ... Many people see mussels as a parasite, but this may only because we don't fully understand their roles."

At the very least, mussels are "communicators of water quality," Allison said. The museum undertook a study on the mussels to be able to understand them better, which is something that nearly 700 high school and college students can help with as an educational opportunity.

The aquarists have placed 12-20 cages in prime locations to help the mussels grow to be juveniles. Once released, the mussels, which have clamped down on their hosts' gills, move up and down stream to an ideal habitat, which is likely a well-aerated substrate location.

High school and college students benefit from the on-site research. It is an "authentic conservation project," said Jared McGovern, education program manager, and the hands-on tasks may help more people learn about the necessity of conservation.

-- Angela Jones

