

In Place of Walking Across Graduation Platform UC San Diego Student will Paddle Mississippi River

Graduating senior opts for project to illustrate water quality decline

June 13, 2008

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While his fellow Thurgood Marshall College graduates are receiving their diplomas at UCSD commencement ceremonies June 21, Kristian Gustavson will be in Chicago preparing to launch a 17-foot aluminum canoe on a 1,000 mile research trip down the Mississippi River.

The 23-year-old political science major will leave June 29 on a journey from central Illinois to Louisiana "to illustrate the dangerous decline of water quality in the largest river system in North America, and the impact on the ocean." Along the way he will give presentations, film a documentary, and meet with various environmental support groups.

Gustavson says his trip was inspired by an identical voyage taken in 1966 by two of his uncles, who journeyed from Pekin, Ill. to the Delta in the same aluminum canoe he will paddle. However, for his trip he incorporated as a non-profit entity focusing on marine research and called it "Below the Surface." Support has come from the Surfrider Foundation and its Blue Water Task Force.

"The health of America's heart and soul is represented by current conditions in the Mississippi River, he says. "If the Midwest is the Heartland, then the Mississippi is its pulse and primary vessel."

"However, he notes, "the Mississippi River carries more collective water contamination from human activities (nonpoint pollution) into the ocean than any other source in the U.S. Its drainage basin is the third largest in the world; practically all of the water between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachian Mountains is channeled into the Gulf of Mexico by the Mississippi."

Gustavson's goal, through water samples, is to inform the public that the Mississippi River impacts the ocean more than any other form of water pollution in America. "Many symptoms take time to develop; hopefully this effort will shed light on the gradual decline of water quality before it's too late," he says.

While at UCSD Gustavson worked as a surf instructor for Clayton Claiborn in the Recreation Department, and studied with professor Paul Dayton at Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

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