

Maya Dizack - Personal Essay

This summer, I am planning to sea kayak from the headwaters to the mouth of the Mississippi River, while conducting water quality research and organizing outreach events for community members. The goal of my research is to better understand the baseline of health in the Mississippi River. The Mississippi River is a key economic, ecological, and cultural resource for the 18 million residents who live in the 1.2 million square mile watershed. However, over the past century, climate change, human impact, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events have dramatically altered the River's ecosystem. This makes tracking water quality baselines in the Mississippi River imperative to assess and inform management decisions that impact the health of both human and natural communities. As a student at the University of Vermont, I have been working on creating this research project with academic researchers and state experts in the surrounding watershed. Along my journey, I will be sampling every 100 miles for water quality and microplastics, degraded plastics that cannot be seen with the naked eye. I intend on publishing my research and creating an online map that combines historical data with current data. Additionally, I have partnered with a non-profit that coordinates citizen science efforts along the Mississippi River called the Mississippi River Network (MRN). With MRN, I will be hosting a series of outreach events where community members and scientists alike can meet. A large component of this project is sharing an understanding of the environment. Currently, I am working with two student filmmakers, Michael McGuire and Colby Yee, to create a visual narrative that encompasses three main themes of this expedition: the significance of scientific research and findings on the Mississippi, the relationship between citizens and the River, and my identity as the youngest documented woman and woman of color to paddle the Mississippi River solo. McGuire and Yee's film will highlight the intersectionality of these themes with the intent of showcasing this film as an educational tool. They plan on submitting the film to conferences, film festivals, and symposiums. With the social climate we live in now, I want to demonstrate that anyone can pursue their passion; regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class or education level. Our waterways are non judgmental spaces, there are no walls to segregate those that wander in our backcountry. I strive to use my identity as a first generation college student and woman of color to inspire an atmosphere where young women and minority identities feel welcomed in the outdoors.