



The Grandeur of the Wisconsin River

While enjoying a Dells Boat Tour, passengers see beautiful sandstone cliffs and interesting rock formations; they hear Native American legends and tales of lumber raftsmen. However, Dells Boat Tours would not exist without one thing – the grand Wisconsin River.

At 430 miles long, the Wisconsin River is the state's namesake and its largest river. It originates at Lac Vieux Desert, a lake at Wisconsin's northern border, and stretches to the southwest corner of the state at Prairie du Chien, where it empties into the Mississippi River. Considered one of the hardest working rivers, the Wisconsin is tapped by 25 hydroelectric dams along its route. The first such dam was built in Wisconsin Dells (then called Kilbourn City) in 1909 to power industry and farming. The dam created an Upper Dells and Lower Dells along the 7½-mile stretch of the river as it winds through Wisconsin Dells.

The Wisconsin River has its own Native American legend behind its formation. The legend tells of a large, powerful serpent that was wriggling down from the north. As it did so, its body formed the bed of the Wisconsin River and water rushed into it. When the serpent came to the sandstone ridge where the Dells begin, it thrust its head between the rocks and pushed to form a narrow, winding passage – the passage a Dells Boat Tour takes today. As the great serpent pushed through, smaller serpents were scared away, forming rocky channels, such as Cold Water Canyon and Witches Gulch, as they fled.

Geology tells us the Wisconsin River is a product of the glacial age. The Dells is part of the Driftless Area, meaning it was untouched by glacial ice. However, glaciers in other parts of the state gradually melted, forming Glacial Lake Wisconsin, which was about 150 feet deep and the size of Utah's Great Salt Lake. Approximately 14,000 years ago, the last ice dam holding back this large lake suddenly gave way, causing a great flood. The floodwaters poured through the area cutting out gorges likely within days or weeks and leaving behind the towering sandstone Dells as we see them today. The waters also tore out a channel and flooded the Wisconsin River valley.

The Wisconsin River is home to a variety of fish, including 18 species of the perch family, three species of the sunfish family and a couple of threatened species. One of these threatened species is the speckled chub. These fish have short life spans, rarely living longer than 1½ years, and have adapted to being bottom dwellers. Another threatened species is the paddlefish, which due to the shape of its tail resembles a shark. Paddlefish also have a curious habit of leaping from the water.