

Balancing Commerce, Nature

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When you think about protecting the environment you typically don't think about economic development.

Yet a group of about 40 government, business and conservation officials converged in Washington last week to discuss how conserving the natural resources of the Missouri River Valley could lead to more economic development opportunities.

The state and local officials heard an interesting pitch from a representative from The Conservation Fund — a national environmental group.

The pitch was that land and water conservation and economic development are not mutually exclusive but rather, can be the best of allies.

That isn't something you often hear in discussions about protecting the environment. In a culture where everything is politicized and viewed through ideological lenses, the juxtaposition of preserving the environment and creating jobs seems an anomaly.

But it doesn't have to be.

That is the message of The Conservation Fund, one of the few, if not the only, national environmental group whose mission statement emphasizes the integration of economic and environmental goals.

For nearly 30 years the organization has been guided by the principle that for conservation solutions to last, they need to make economic sense. The group recognizes that a balanced approach to conservation — one that blends environmental stewardship with economic and business objectives — leads to greater good.

The Conservation Fund's approach to conservation is collaboration, rather than confrontation. They don't litigate. Instead, they forge partnerships with environmental groups, government and the business sector to foster entrepreneurial solutions to conservation.

It's a smart approach, one that has led to the preservation of 7 million acres across America. It's an approach that can attract a diverse group of stakeholders.

That was evident at last week's meeting. Among the participants were farmers, state conservation officials, environmental advocates, members of various Chambers of Commerce, government officials from cities and counties and business leaders.

The question before the group is how can the region better utilize the Missouri River Valley's unique natural assets to leverage an even greater economic impact?

There is no question the assets are bountiful. They include some of the most scenic parts of the state and include the Shaw Nature Reserve, Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, The Katy Trail, the confluence area of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, the winery regions of Hermann and Augusta and the riverfront areas of numerous communities like Washington.

The effort has promise. The fact that so many diverse leaders from across the region participated in the initial planning meeting demonstrates there is strong interest in this initiative.

We think it's a discussion worth having. We also think The Conservation Fund is the right group to lead the discussion.