

The Stillwater River Lives

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The seventh annual Stillwater River Cleanup was hosted June 22nd by Miami and Montgomery Soil and Water Conservation Districts, The Stillwater Watershed Project, the Stillwater Bass Club, and Veolia Water North America.

It's not customary for us modern folk to think of a river as something living, but maybe our "scientific" definition is a bit narrow - dare we say - snooty? If you take a closer look, life is everywhere - water moving, kingfishers and dragonflies swooping, rain falling, breezes chilling with the passing front; it isn't just things that live and breathe, but simply all things moving together through time.

Twenty sturdy people gathered at Aullwood Gardens Friday morning to float the lower section and load their canoes with what people throw onto streets and off bridges. There was some concern about inclement weather, but neither lightning nor wind visited us. The rain was a welcome experience, amid the Midwest's looming draught this summer. A gentle rain covered us throughout the morning, clearing just in time for the take-out at Dogleg Road.

At our launch point, everyone received the usual talk about safety, safety, safety. But more than that, there was a spirit of camaraderie in the air, mingling with the rain – smiles all around as we rallied the troops about why we do this and yes, can have fun at it, too.

The river teaches you vigilance. Better stick a paddle down in by the shore line, so you can avoid getting sucked into the mud up to your hip. Dan York found that out, and made a masterful recovery without tipping the canoe. Shallow riffle areas present a particular challenge to find just the right spot where your canoe can get by with scraping the bottom but still keep moving.

Sometimes there is a competitive streak that runs through the group, to see who can get the largest or most items. Jeff Lange (of Protect Our Water Ways), a.k.a. Master Riverdog, managed to get part of a truck frame into his boat. It took three of us to haul it out and up to the waiting roll-off container, generously supplied by the City of Englewood.

At other times, the real challenge is personal. You're hungry and tired, smelling like mud and river water, gritty sand squishing in your shoes, weary of repeatedly getting in and out of your craft, and you start to think – "is it really worth the effort to get that can?" Some other thoughts begin to drift in: "Look at these trashed fishing camps- you'd think fishermen would care more about the river..." Some homes with back yards next to the river bank, show obvious signs of dumping. "You'd think people who live next to the river would care more..." I guess it's a take-it-for-granted thing.

At the take-out point, it was all hands on deck. Everyone pitched in to carry trash up the hill, help rinse out canoes and load them on the trailer, and volunteer vehicles for shuttling. Back at the launch point, master griller Russ Heintz provided a well deserved lunch of hamburgers and fixin's for hungry volunteers. By then the sun was shining and another successful cleanup event was on the books. We came away with strong sense of satisfaction, looking forward to next year.

Two other sections of the Stillwater experienced trash-hunting canoeists that day: Pleasant Hill to Fenner Road, and Fenner Road to State Route 55. For all three sections, 49 volunteers paddled a total of 11 ½ miles of river, and picked up 5,740 pounds of trash, which included 71 tires.

We may never change the minds and behavior of people who show their contempt for the river by dumping. The river is home to insects, butterflies, deer, raccoons frogs, fish and Kingfishers, canoeists and fishermen. The water and the wind, the trees and rocks all form a web of life that deserves respect not only for its' peace and beauty, but also because it is connected to the water we drink and use in so many other ways. Yes the river lives, and so does the community of people who do more than take it for granted.