

Cleaner Water by the Boatload!

The water was all ours. It was early on a Saturday and our boats rode alone, cutting through the river's muddy waters and the morning's silence. We cruised down the Ohio River, feeling energized by the crisp wind on our faces and the excitement of a new adventure. Our first Jon boat was loaded with passengers, but the second in our convoy was empty for now. We were on a mission - with three hours, ten people, two dogs, and countless miles of river shoreline covered in trash.

Trash Travels

The recent rains had delivered much more than water through the extensive network of streams that drain the landscape and flow into the river. Indeed its tributaries had certainly contributed, transporting and depositing vast amounts of water, sediment, and floating treasures in the form of human trash. The diversity of these items provided endless entertainment as we began scouring the shores to reclaim the rubbish in the hours that followed. Frisbees, milk crates, barrels, tires, flower pots, cans, shreds of clothing, coolers, fragments of styrofoam, basketballs, cups, a toilet seat, pieces of wood, parts of cars, boards, wrappers, a prized baby doll head, soles of shoes, water bottles, water bottles, and even more water bottles! When we finally returned to the Living Lands & Waters river cleanup "base camp" barge, the second johnboat now carried our conquest... bag upon bag of captured trash.

Committing to Clean Rivers

Living Lands & Waters is a nonprofit environmental organization headquartered in East Moline, Illinois and established by Chad Pregracke in 1998. Today it has grown into an "industrial strength" river cleanup organization, implementing community cleanups in nine states per year along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Illinois Rivers, as well as many of their tributaries. The amount of trash they have collectively removed from our nation's waterways is truly staggering and commendable. Yet perhaps what is most inspiring about this organization is the story of its inception and the message it delivers. Frustrated by water pollution, Chad founded this organization at the young age of 23, committing to clean up the Mississippi River by picking up one piece of trash at a time. Chad decided that if no one else was going to clean up the river, he would. And for nearly twenty years, Chad's enthusiasm and dedication to clean water continues to profoundly and positively impact the water quality of our country and the hearts of people who share in his efforts.

Better Together

Each year Living Lands & Waters, along with countless other conservation districts, watershed groups, and local organizations, offer annual river and stream cleanups within our communities and throughout our region. The essential message of these programs is not *look at the bad things other people did*, but rather, *look at the good things that we can do!* I felt that empowerment during my first river cleanup. I saw all of the trash in that Jon boat that is now no longer in the river. I watched my young niece and nephew work hard, sweating and scrambling along the banks, gathering trash along with an awareness that they could make the world better. Though getting pollution out of our waterways will be an ongoing challenge, a little pollution is better than a lot of it and none is better than some. With increased public awareness, conscientious consumer choices, more recycling, and greater care for trash consumption and disposal, solid waste in our surface waters will be greatly reduced. Now when I see a piece of litter, I think about my morning on the river and rather than pointing a finger, I use all five and just pick it up.

Don't "Waste" our Watersheds

We all live in a watershed and our actions on land directly affect the quality of our water. This year, the Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District and our collaborating Northeast Ohio partners are delivering a stormwater message: Don't Waste our Watersheds! This initiative helps residents look closely at ways to reduce the amount of waste - whether from animals, households, yards, pets, and people - from entering our waterways. Pollution, toxins, and pathogens picked up by stormwater flowing into our rivers and lakes not only negatively impact aquatic species, terrestrial wildlife, and their habitats, but also spread disease to humans and jeopardize the health of our communities, families, and pets. Trash and litter also clog our stormdrains and cause flooding.



Pounds and pounds of trash were collected from the Ohio River last year during a series of Living Lands and Waters community cleanups. Whether intentional or not, litter pollution drastically affects the quality of our water resources. Let's do our part to keep Geauga County's rivers and streams clean.

Do Unto Others Downstream

What are some ways you can reduce the amount of waste leaving your yard? How can you better protect the quality of your nearby streams? Whether it's maintaining your septic, properly disposing of animal manure and pet waste, composting yard and kitchen scraps, soil testing before fertilizer applications, properly disposing household hazardous wastes and trash, or participating in a community river cleanup, keeping our water clean is everyone's duty. In the words of a saying I just heard this week, "Do unto others downstream as you would have them do unto you upstream." Together we can make a change and improve the health of our watersheds. A boatload of challenge is waiting!