



RiverWatch Teams Up With Upper Sangamon River Conservancy for River Cleanup

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GODFREY - This August, 35 volunteers took to the Sangamon River and trails to clean up garbage and clear invasive bush honeysuckle from Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve in Mahomet, Ill.

The joint effort was coordinated by the Illinois RiverWatch Network and the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy (USRC) with support from the Illinois EPA's SCALE Grant Program and Republic Services.

Armed with gloves, shovels, grabbers, clippers and the will to make the world a better place, the group divided into two teams, appropriately named for the targets of their efforts - Land Lovers and River Rats - and took to cleaning.

The Land Lovers were directed by Mike Daab and other staff from the Champaign County Forest Preserve, as well as Cecily Smith of Prairie Rivers Network. They spent the morning picking up litter and clearing invasive bush honeysuckle. The River Rats, 16 volunteers led by Scott Hays of the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy (USRC) and Nate Keener of Illinois RiverWatch, departed from Lake of the Woods in kayaks and canoes, and headed downstream toward their final destination roughly two miles away at the Route 47 overpass.

The amount of trash dumped in the Sangamon River surprised even the veteran paddlers, so the river clean-up, scheduled to finish by noon, made for a longer day than

expected. In five hours, volunteers removed an estimated two tons (dry weight) of garbage from the river, including 24 tires, a water heater, a dishwasher, two clothes washers, several 55-gallon drums (including an herbicide container), three bicycles, a cash register (curiously found beneath the I-74 overpass) and a kiddie pool, not to mention the innumerable bags of everyday household litter like food wrappers and soda bottles.

"The garbage and the water level turned what we thought might have been a leisurely paddle spent picking up cans, into the '2012 Dig and Drag,' but I know Big Mama Earth thanks them for it, and I think they all had fun," said Keener, lead event sponsor and statewide coordinator of the Illinois RiverWatch Network, a program of the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center.

"RiverWatch is dedicated to teaching people about stream ecology, and events like these drive home the importance of that effort," Keener said. "Our rivers are home to a dizzying variety and abundance of life and provide us with many valuable ecosystem services, but only if we take care of them. It's disheartening to find all of this stuff, but all these volunteers really represent momentum in the other direction, so that's always something to smile about."

The Illinois RiverWatch Network is a statewide, non-profit volunteer monitoring program that teaches volunteers how to collect and identify benthic macroinvertebrates, or water bugs, that can be used as indicators of water quality. Macroinvertebrates, or 'macros,' help break down organic matter in streams and provide an important source of food for both fish and frogs. Some can tolerate pollution and others cannot, so knowing what macros are in a stream can provide information about its water quality.

The USRC is a local all-volunteer, non-profit organization whose purpose is to preserve, maintain, monitor and promote appropriate public use and awareness of the Sangamon River. They are perennial participants in the annual RiverWatch macro survey.

The event was coordinated by the Illinois RiverWatch Network and the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy (USRC) with financial support from the Illinois EPA's Streambank Cleanup and Lakeshore Enhancement (SCALE) Grant Program, a section 319 Clean Water Act program that provides funding for community groups that wish to establish recurring clean ups. Republic Services donated a large dumpster for the event, which the river stewards filled to the brim.

The Illinois RiverWatch Network's website is <http://ngrrec.org/riverwatch>
The Upper Sangamon River Conservancy's website is <http://sangamonriver.org/>

More high resolution photos are available for download at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ngrrrec/sets/72157631307405076/>