



Nature, history and pollution in the Battle Creek River

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A group of people stood in the middle of the Battle Creek River Thursday contemplating a physics problem.

A mix of students and teachers from the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center, and some other adult volunteers, were participating in the annual cleanup of the river spearheaded by the center's science teacher Mary Lindow.

One particular conundrum involved a buried 10-speed bicycle, its useless bike chain still wrapped around the body. As water rushed past one group of volunteers, they tried to position a log as a lever and pry the bike out of the river's stubborn floor. It was a scene repeated up and down a section of the Battle Creek River beginning at Elm Street near downtown.

The students, most of them studying environmental biology with Lindow, are getting an up-close encounter with a diverse habitat that's been negatively impacted by the presence of human beings in an urban setting. Other than the scientific lesson they're getting, though, they're also learning about another subject.

"A lot of what they're finding will be more historical in nature and how people have

not taken care of the river over time," City of Battle Creek Environmental Programs Coordinator Christine Kosmowski said. "Here they are, trying to do their part."

That involves strapping on a pair of waders and taking two boats into the river, filling them with garbage and returning it to shore to be disposed of properly. Tires, laundry machines, shopping carts and water heaters are among the unnatural additions to the river that shares the name of the city it runs directly through. Bottle after bottle, from soda pop varieties to other, unknown containers, are also pulled out.

They do serve a purpose after being taken out of the river, though.

"We've got some old bottles and some signs," Lindow said. "Those are what go on display whenever there's an event of some type."

After seeing makeshift garbage scows being pulled along the river, it may be easy to write off the waterway as a lost cause.



Lindow said that wasn't necessarily the case, though, and the river is doing better than when they started the project six years ago.

"I think part of it is the fact that we can go back to a location that we've been at and we're not necessarily seeing lots of new material in the river," she said. "We're just getting further in and seeing old stuff. I'd rather see that than see some new stuff turn up."

According to Lindow, the effort is part of a three-pronged strategy to educate the students and others about the health of local water sources. Besides the Battle Creek River, Historic Bridge Park's Dickinson Creek stream restoration project and October's Global Citizens River Conservation Day event are chances for them to learn about keeping water clean.

As in years past, the River Conservation Day cleanup of the Battle Creek River shoreline, which is open to the public, will begin at 8:30 a.m., Oct. 1, at Bailey Park's C.O. Brown Stadium. Kosmowski said the event has peaked at about 600 volunteers in one year, with recent events drawing about 350 to 400 people who care about the appearance and health of the river.

Last year's Kalamazoo River oil spill, she said, may have had a negative impact on people volunteering because of confusion over which river was being cleaned. Still, seeing young people come out to any of the events -- such as the dozen or so at Thursday's cleanup -- shows there's still

interest.

"It's very gratifying to see their interest," Kosmowski said. "The hope is that, of course, that they sustain that interest as time goes on."

Andy Fitzpatrick can be reached at 966-0697 or afitzpatrick@battlecreekenquirer.com.