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Clackamas River gets a good scrubbing

I DID IT!: 'Pods' of volunteers net more than 5 tons of trash

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I grew up with family outings in canoes, inner tubes and sailboats. But after living in Portland for more than two years, I was embarrassed to admit I'd only been kayaking twice.

When I found out about the fourth annual "Down the River Clean-Up" on the Clackamas River – combining protection of Oregon waterways with a fun day on the water – I immediately signed up.

The Clackamas River is popular with summer partiers and outdoor enthusiasts alike. By the end of summer, however, the Clackamas – which provides drinking water and sustains salmon and steelhead populations – is strewn with discarded bottles and beer cans, flip-flops and other garbage.

Each September, eNRG Kayaking, the Clackamas River Basin Council, and the Portland State University Outdoor Program organize the Clackamas cleanup. Hundreds of volunteers spend the day picking up trash while drifting down a 13-mile stretch of river from Barton Park to Clackamette Park.

On Sept. 10, I arrived just before the 9:30 a.m. registration time. The parking lot already was packed, and cars were having to double- and triple-park. I pulled in behind my mother's car, grabbed a bite from the table Noah's Bagels had set up, and got in line to register.

Covered head-to-toe in SPF 45, I was ready. I'd even picked up an REI Sahara Cap to keep the sun off my face and neck. I looked like a reject from the Foreign Legion; when I asked the opinion of another REI shopper, he responded, "It's very functional."

Pods get their assignments

For the cleanup, the river was divided into three sections, with multiple "pods" – made up of rafts, kayaks, divers, drift boats, canoes and others – assigned to each.

A member of Pod 10, I was in a raft donated by All Star Rafting. Our raft captain was volunteer Mike O'Brien, area manager for Dale Carnegie Training, and he gave us a basic paddling lesson before we pushed off.

I was in front with Cheryl McGinnis, executive director of the Clackamas River Basin Council. Rounding out our rafting crew were my mother, Lissa Willis, who is a public affairs representative with the Oregon Department of Transportation, and our friend, Rosie Apodaca, administrative assistant for Kiwanis International.

Also in Pod 10 were several kayaks and our very own garbage scow – a privately owned rowboat. Our team grabbed some free Clif Bars and headed out to scout for trash.

A 6-foot tire's collected, too

With O'Brien navigating, our raft acted as "mother ship" for the more maneuverable kayaks. They



COURTESY OF CLACKAMAS RIVER BASIN COUNCIL
Once a year, volunteers hit the river in rafts, kayaks and scows to haul garbage out of the Clackamas River. This year's take included a 6-foot earthmover tire, sofa stuffing and at least 100 mateless flip-flops – all of which eventually made it to Dumpsters on land.

brought us bottles, soggy six-pack boxes and other not-so-lovely – and smelly – items they found in the water. We sorted the recyclables from the trash, and ferried full garbage bags – and a collection of car tires and random pieces of metal – to our scow.

We rowed to shore to scour the rocks, weeds and mud for scattered debris, including water-logged stuffing from a disemboweled sofa. We left some refuse – including an abandoned couch and a carpet stuck in the mud – for better-equipped crews.

Another pod found a tire from an earthmover – measuring 6 feet wide. The ingenious volunteers inflated plastic garbage bags and floated the tire downstream.

Although we were one pod of many, two-thirds of the way down our section of the river, the scow already was full. In our raft alone, we collected at least 100 mateless flip-flops.

The river was serene, though we encountered several “Class 0.05 Rapids.” One kayaker got knocked out of her craft by low-hanging branches.

When we reached our takeout point, my trousers were soaked. I had to dump river water out of my shoes. We emptied the boats of garbage and recyclables and drove back to the start point.

The cookout was in full swing, and the Lewi Longmire Band was setting up. All of the produce – including some very tasty melons – came from local farmers markets. We sat at picnic tables, sharing stories of the cleanup over hormone-free burgers from New Seasons. It was the perfect way to end the day.

Trash and cash are gathered

All told, there were 280 volunteers for this year’s cleanup, removing nearly twice as much garbage as last year. eNRG Kayaking’s Kristin Dahl reports that we hauled 5.27 tons – 10,540 pounds – of trash and recyclables out of the river. No wonder we were exhausted.

“It was great to be out on the water on such a lovely day, with people who put action above words in their concern about the environment,” volunteer Rosie Apodaca said. “I was surprised at the amount of debris human beings are still leaving in open spaces. I had thought we had all become more enlightened.”

Organizers raised more than \$2,500 through the raffle, silent auction and T-shirt sales, with a portion of the funds going to support the Clackamas River Basin Council’s Stash the Trash campaign.

The cleanup was a lot of work, but it was a lot of fun.

If you’re going to party on the Clackamas next year, a few words of advice: Take some extra trash bags, and be sure to pack out what you pack in. Nothing is “lost” on the river, and litter does add up.

And please, don’t lose your flip-flops! Or we’ll be pulling them out of the river again next September.

On the Web

For information about future Clackamas River cleanups, visit

www.enrgkayaking.com or www.clackamasriver.org.