

Caretakers of a historic and beautiful river

By Tom Lounsbury

Michigan is truly blessed with countless rivers, and where ever you go statewide, you are never very far from one. Folks closely associated with one of those rivers often come to realize its true value, and band together with other folks of a like mind, to enhance and promote their beloved river. This may entail performing efforts to control erosion, pollution and eliminating invasive aquatic plants which can quickly displace native plant species, and all of this combined can be an ongoing process requiring serious dedication and devotion. These folks are literally the volunteer caretakers of the river, and are all too often unsung heroes.

One such group located in Michigan's Thumb area, is the Cass River Greenway (CRG), which was first formed in 2007, and has been striving ever since to enhance and promote the Cass River. This involves working with professional resources as well as all the various municipalities associated with the Cass River corridor. It is clearly a dedicated regional effort which strives to unify communities toward an overall goal.

Ecotourism has become very popular in Michigan, and it is important to be able to provide public access points along a particular river for all to enjoy, and this has been a CRG priority. This entails creating canoe/kayak launches at various points, and it remains to be an ongoing process. In 2018, due to CRG efforts, the Cass River is now an Official Water Trail from Saginaw, upstream to M-46, near Vassar. The ultimate goal is to eventually extend the Water Trail upstream, all the way to M-53 in Sanilac County, and to do so requires establishing more canoe/kayak launch sites. Obtaining the various municipal, state and county support and cooperation is very crucial to achieve all.

From CRG's beginning, a priority is doing "trash cleanups" on various sections of the Cass River. This is done during low water levels which more readily expose items, and involves teams of volunteers getting into the water, doing some serious wading, and towing a canoe or small boat to haul the collected trash out, which can include some amazing items. Besides trash cans, car parts (including engine blocks), and LP tanks, the most common and numerous items to

be removed are rubber tires of all sizes, entailing some huge examples from farm tractors and even commercial-type equipment and trucks. Some tires have been in the river since automobiles first came into vogue, and rubber does not biodegrade. Sadly, many of the tires are more often than not, recent arrivals.

It seems that isolated country bridges, of which the Cass River has many, are the perfect spot for lame-brained, and obviously very ignorant idiots who don't give a hoot, to get rid of their trash. One can only imagine the effort it took to roll some of those large, heavy tires up and over a bridge railing. I can readily picture it took at least two or more idiots to accomplish the task. Nope, folks, you sure can't cure stupid!

A problem with all this, is that spring run-offs, featuring some rather impressive hydraulics, steadily moves tires and other trashy debris downstream, and distributes all of it at some amazing and very spread out distances from the bridges of which it originated. Due to the silt involved and eventually covering matters up, it often requires a sharp eye to identify debris littering the river bottom.

When it comes to rubber tires, there is a technique required to extract them from the water. To begin, they are filled with silt, mud and even rocks, and are literally impossible to lift. A shovel, trowel and even hands are required to scoop everything out. Rubber gloves are needed to protect hands, not only from sharp objects, but also harmful bacteria. Yep, folks, this all takes a certain mindset beforehand to successfully accomplish matters. Teamwork is also very essential to lift the heavy tires, even with the debris eliminated, into a canoe or small boat. It is quite literally some very wet, dirty and muddy work. And, needless to say, it is sure a bit strenuous, too!

I had an opportunity to observe this teamwork last Saturday morning. A whole bunch of folks arrived at Caro Motorsports, that was the host-site for this 12th annual event (due to the 2020 Pandemic restrictions, matters were necessarily put on hold for a year), to get their assignments. Among them were plenty of eager young people from the Reese Outdoors Club and the Tuscola County 4-H Youth Council, both girls and boys, all ready and willing to get 'er done. Yep, folks, youthful enthusiasm never hurts a bit! Especially with such a very dirty job!

As for me, still recovering from a leg injury, I was pretty much a “go-fer”, by hauling and providing my 12 ft aluminum flat-bottom boat which has a shallow draft and can handle quite a load. I would also be on hand to transport folks, and my having a durable Jeep, they all being wet and muddy in the very end didn’t hurt a thing! It was my honor to give them a lift.

On this cleanup event, there were six groups of assigned teams to cover from just downstream of Cass City, all the way upstream to near Caro. Some of this entailed a bit of “mop-up” from previous cleanups, entailing trash and tires of a quantity which couldn’t be hauled out before, and some stretches were entirely new and untouched. My team was number “3”, and that is all I can relate to. They were definitely venturing into “untouched” territory. I would like to state here about the wonderful landowner support the CRG cleanup plans and crews receive. The riverside landowners are absolutely delighted to see matters being cleaned up. My number 3 team, entailing several eager young lads from the Reese Outdoors Club, launched off from the Russ Ostic residence, just upstream of the Deckerville Road Bridge. I would later connect with them, and all the tires and trash they had collected, a mile downstream, at the riverbank owned by Bill Walker, who was on hand and willing to offer a backhoe, chains and whatever, to remove matters, if required.

Actually, those young lads used marvelous teamwork to bring matters up a steep and muddy riverbank all by themselves, and I’m talking about some seriously big rubber tires. It is amazing how much was discovered and collected on just a short river mile. I didn’t know my boat, as well as a canoe (provided by the city of Vassar, that always offers a trailer-full of canoes for this effort), could hold so much and still have a bit of freeboard! It is quite obvious that the Deckerville Road Bridge is a favorite dumpsite for the idiots.

All of this was loaded onto a couple trucks provided by Star of the West Milling Company, of Frankenmuth, which has always generously provided trucks for the Cass River cleanup efforts.

In the end, by early afternoon, there was quite a collection of trash, and of course a whole lot of tires of every description.

It had been a fine morning spent with great, very dedicated folks during some splendid, sunny September weather. I know the Cass River is now a whole lot prettier, at least in my eyes, due to all their efforts.

Thank you, one and all!