Healing the Bear

The following guest commentary was submitted by Kate Cwikel, communications coordinator with Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

There is a reason why the Petoskey area is one of the most popular vacation destinations around. Thanks to its pristine waters, abundant green spaces and lush forests, the natural beauty of our area is apparent and unparalleled.

At the heart of the city of Petoskey runs a river that is now used for a variety of recreational activities. Whether it's paddling, fishing, or hiking, the Bear River is one of Petoskey's treasures. However, it was once degraded by decades of industrial utilization and dumping. The Bear River and its surrounding area encompasses 36 acres of public space in downtown Petoskey.

In the past, the river was used as a working river, providing Petoskey with timber and hydropower. Logs were floated down the River to mills near Petoskey, and dams were installed in the river to generate power for sawmills, gristmills, and electric lines to support the growing town.

While this built Petoskey to what it is today, these uses left behind a scarred riverbed, eroding riverbanks, and altered hydrology, all of which limited movement of aquatic life and impacted water flow. Even worse, perhaps, is that the river was used as a cheap waste disposal site. Still to this day, large amounts of trash are thrown into the river by those who are unaware, or uncaring, of its impacts to the river and its inhabitants.

In 2000, the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council and numerous other concerned citizens and community partners created a project to restore the Bear River to its natural glory: "Healing the Bear." Our goal was to remedy the river of its historic degradation and protect it into the future. Since its inaugural year, the Watershed Council has continued to host a river cleanup on an annual to biannual basis. This year, the "Healing the Bear" Bear River cleanup is celebrating its 15th year, and even after all this time, we are shocked by the amount of debris, trash, and recyclables that we (and our many dedicated volunteers) still find in the river.

In addition to joining us for the Bear River Cleanup we hope you will help us spread the word that the continued use of the river as a dumping grounds needs to stop! It's the right thing to do to remove the trash and debris but it is equally or more important to prevent additional trash from entering the river.

Join us for the 15th "Healing the Bear" Bear River Cleanup this year, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Aug. 3 at the Bear River Shelter on Quaintance Ave. in Petoskey (entrance across the road from city hall). Volunteers of all ages and abilities are invited to walk, wade, or canoe as they pick up trash and debris from the Bear River and its surrounding area. All pre-registered volunteers are guaranteed a free event t-shirt and a free light lunch.

To register, please call (231) 347-1181 or sign up online at www.watershedcouncil.org/bear-river-clean-up. Pre-registration is encouraged to help plan for this event. Let's make this year, the 15th Cleanup, the biggest and most successful yet. We'll see you Aug. 3!