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The Paw Paw River Trail is underway, and that's a good thing

By ROD SMITH - HP Correspondent Apr 27, 2018



Kevin Haight and Marcy Hamilton, back, navigate their way past fallen trees and branches while kayaking a section of the Paw Paw River Trail near the Bundy Road access last summer.

Don Campbell / HP file photo

PAW PAW — The Paw Paw River Water Trail can be a tourist draw.

So promises Kevin Haight, president of the Two Rivers Coalition, which reflects the Paw Paw and Black rivers. “It’s been an idea for many, many years,” Haight said.

Haight told Van Buren County commissioners this week that 20 million Americans take part in recreational kayaking or canoeing. A study on the Huron River in southeastern Michigan two years ago showed 2.6 million user days. And these people spend money: "\$30 million in direct spending," Haight said.

The Huron is about twice as long as the 68-mile Paw Paw trail.

Two Rivers is not a paddling organization but a watershed organization. Two years ago it got a \$100,000 grant from the state to clean up the Paw Paw. That jump-started the work. They took out trash, including a porta-John, and trimmed deadfalls so kayaks and canoes could get through.

They'll be out again this summer.

"Our goal is to have at least eight segments that are at beginning (skill) level at the end of the season," Haight said. "We're already out scouting to see which sections need work after the two floodings this winter."

The river trail, which begins below Paw Paw's Maple Lake Dam, has portions that are suitable for beginners, intermediate and advanced paddlers. One of the advanced sections goes through the Sarett Nature Center.

There are 22 segments. Most are two or three miles.

"The longest one is nine miles," Haight said, "and it's an all-day trip."

The Paw Paw is unusual, Haight said, because it lies in a flood plain corridor.

"It's just never been developed," Haight said. That means instead of a parade of farmland and housing developments, paddlers are enveloped in green nature. Haight said the water is unusually clear.

In some places there are blue heron rookeries.

The grant money will run out.

"Even though we did a vast amount of work last year, there's still going to be maintenance on this trail," Haight said. Because of that, he's going to local governments in Van Buren and Berrien counties saying he's going to hit them up later this year for donations. Some already have.

Haight said he had gone to the Van Buren County Board of Commissioners because, unlike Berrien County, Van Buren has no parks commission.

There's website for the trail. It's at www.pawpawriverwatertrail.org.