



DARLENE GETZ... local dentist and a strong supporter of the community donates \$1,000 to the Friends of the Paw Paw River. These funds are to help in the pilot program of opening the river from Watervliet to Coloma. Accepting the check is K.C. McKay, secretary of the Paw Paw River Water Trail.

Woody debris is a good thing, Paw Paw River clean up volunteers told

"Woody debris in the river is a good thing". That was the message last week as representatives from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) and Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) spoke in Benton Harbor to a group of stakeholders planning the Paw Paw River Water Trail. Marcy Hamilton of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) convened the meeting of officials from townships, municipalities, and other organizations up and down the river to allow them to hear directly from state agencies about the right way to create a pathway for canoes and kayaks, without adversely impacting fish and wildlife habitat. Hamilton said, "Water trails are hot right now and are being promoted by the State of Michigan as a means to attract out-of-state tourists".

Water Trails are marked routes on navigable waterways such as rivers, lakes and coastlines for people using small non-motorized boats such as kayaks or canoes. Locally, there are existing water trails in New Buffalo on the Galien River, between Bangor and South Haven on the Black River and along the Lake Michigan coast.

Brian Gunderman of the MDNR Fisheries division explained that logs in the river provide cover for fish from potential predators. Log jams also help provide cooler water for fish during summer heat. And logs even help small fish withstand flood events by creating eddies for them to shelter from the full force of the current so they are not swept away in a flood. But perhaps most importantly, woody debris is the most abundant place where aquatic insects live, which is what fish eat. Of course, other wildlife is also dependent on fallen trees. Turtles are often seen sunning on logs and paddlers are used to being startled by loud splashes as turtles drop from logs several feet above the river surface. And even birds benefit from fallen trees. Rob Pearce, a naturalist from Sarett Nature Center, said he has seen the rare Prothonotary Warbler nesting in snags on fallen logs in the river.

So how do you create a paddle pathway that does not disrupt the wildlife habitat that makes the Paw Paw River so special? Instead of cutting and removing logs, Patrick Ertel of the MDNR said the preferred approach is to use small portable winches and cable to pull trees that are blocking the river to a position parallel to the current. This allows passage for small boats while keeping the log in the stream. When chainsaw work is neces-

sary, Ertel urged only removing the bare minimum of wood from the river. He suggested always try to open up a passage through log jams by removing loose and floating logs first. When a log is completely across the river and has to be cut, Ertel recommended keeping the opening small and using cable to secure the newly cut section of log so that it does not float downstream and cause problems during high water events. Another alternative is to put the cut out sections of log on the bank and stake them down (after first getting permission from the landowner).

Kyle Alexander of the MDEQ commented on permitting issues. He said not only would it be bad for habitat to remove stumps and roots from the bank, it would also be contrary to state regulations regarding sediment control and prevention of erosion. The portion of fallen trees that are secured to the bank cannot be removed without a permit from the MDEQ. Similarly, logs that are embedded in the river bottom cannot be removed. During the discussion, Kevin Haight, President of Two Rivers Coalition commented that it should not be difficult to follow the recommendations of the state agencies and still make several segments of the river easy to paddle, even for families. "Our goal should be to preserve the natural beauty and wildlife habitat of the river," said Haight, "even as we make the river more accessible to paddlers".

For more information, contact Marcy Hamilton, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission at hamiltonm@swmpc.org.

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