

Volunteers gather at the river — and the streams — for 20th Yuba River Cleanup



Liz Kellar
September 15, 2017

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File photo submitted by Dan Chaplin |

Volunteers with the South Yuba River Citizens League pick up an old chair found during an annual Yuba River cleanup effort.

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BY THE NUMBERS, 1998-2016

Total number of volunteers: 9,685

Estimated pounds of trash collected: 163,260

Estimated pounds of recycling: 41,273

KNOW & GO

What: Cleanup & Restoration

When: 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday

Where: Over 30 sites throughout the Yuba & Bear watersheds

Caleb Dardick, who grew up on the San Juan Ridge, can remember a time when popular Yuba River swimming spot Kneebone Beach was "knee-deep in broken glass — it was unsafe to walk there."

Dardick — who is just about to step down from his six-year tenure as the executive director of the South Yuba River Citizens League — has had a lifelong attachment to protecting the Yuba and is clearly passionate about the work the league does.

SYRCL's annual Yuba River Cleanup might be the most visible and popular expression of its mission — and this Saturday marks the event's 20th anniversary.

'HANDFUL OF VOLUNTEERS'

The cleanup started in 1998 with "a handful of volunteers" who decided to do something about the garbage they were seeing at the river, Dardick said.

"It started very modestly," he said; that first year, there were two sites and 65 volunteers. This year, SYRCL expects more than 850 volunteers to clean up more than 30 sites along 90 miles, encompassing four counties and all three forks of the Yuba River and its tributaries.

Afterward: Volunteer Appreciation Party, 1-5 p.m., Pioneer Park, Nevada City

For info:
<https://www.crowdrise.com/20thAnnualYubaRiverCleanu>

Part of SYRCL's mission is to unite the community in protecting the Yuba, and the cleanup is the most visible and direct manifestation of that, Dardick said.

People are willing to give one day, he said. But often that one day becomes a springboard for their deeper involvement, as river ambassadors or monitors, or by finding other ways to participate — "regardless of politics, regardless of age, regardless of background."

The event has grown over 20 years, and so has the volume of visitors to the river, noted Jenn Tamo, SYRCL's community engagement manager — from 300,000 in 2005 to 700,000 just within the boundaries of the South Yuba River State Park, in 2015.

And at the same time, the state has disinvested in its staff, she said.

CELEBRATING LOVE FOR THE YUBA

SYRCL works to educate people about issues, partially through the river ambassador program, which staffed nearly 50 volunteers at the busiest river crossings every weekend from Memorial Day to Labor Day to make contact with more than 8,000 visitors this summer.

The message, said Dardick, is that we have something precious at the river, but it takes all hands to protect it.

The nature and scope of the cleanup has grown, so that now it extends to the river's tributaries, coordinating with land managers off the beaten path.

"We're able to get to the nooks and crannies of the watershed," Tamo said.

Because volunteers are now accessing more remote locations, they tend to find more dumped appliances and vehicle parts, Last winter's heavy rains washed things down hillsides, including a car chassis, Tamo said.

According to Dardick, one worrisome trend is abandoned homeless camps, with mattresses, clothes and debris.

"It's definitely an issue in terms of water quality — and fire safety," he said.

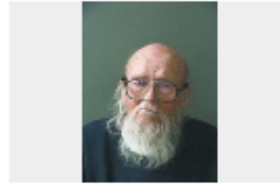
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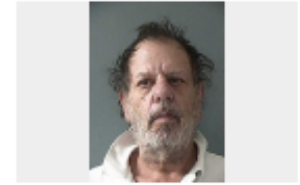
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Both Dardick and Tamp emphasized the collaborative nature of the cleanup, with the league partnering with public agencies and other entities such as California State Parks, the Tahoe National Forest, Caltrans, Bureau of Land Management, NID and Waste Management. There are also nearly 50 monetary sponsors and 20 in-kind sponsors, and more than a dozen community partners, Tamo said.

"It's a beautiful celebration of how much this community loves the river," Dardick said.

Contact reporter Liz Kellar at lkellar@theunion.com or by phone at 530-477-4229.