Volunteer effort cleans Willamette River

by Jim Titus
Copyeditor

The Willamette River received a hearty spring cleaning last Saturday in an effort that involved environmentalists, local officials, and industry.

The cleanup, sponsored by the Polystyrene Packaging Council, National Council on Solid Waste Disposal and Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism (SOLV), covered 27 miles of the Willamette from Oregon City to the river's confluence with the Columbia near Kelly Point Park. The project was researched and developed by the John Inskeep Environmental Learning Center, which is located on the campus of Clackamas Community College.

Approximately 75 volunteers picked up debris along the banks of the river. ELC Director Jerry Herrmann pointed out that the small number of people involved shows that, "it would take a relatively small commitment from communities to clean up their areas (along the river). You could easily do this on an annual basis."

The debris collected in the operation was taken to the Environmental Learning Center, where Herrmann and volunteers from Portland State University will analyze the garbage. Herrmann hopes to determine what kind of material makes up the bulk of the debris and use that information to help educate the public about the necessity of a clean environment.

According to Sgt. Dick Baker of the Marine Patrol, most of the waste found in the river comes from recreational users. Fishermen often use items such as plastic milk jugs and zip-lock bags to help float their bait farther away from their boats. Once the fishermen are done with the makeshift devices they are simply discarded in the river, posing a hazard to wildlife that live in the water and along the shore. Small animals can become trapped in the plastic containers. Even an item as seemingly harmless as a plastic "six-pack" binder can be harmful, acting as a sort of "gill-net" and trapping fish that try to swim through the binder's holes.

"Our impact is dynamic. Every time we do something we change the environment," explained Baker. Baker pointed out that the problem with debris is a behavioral one, and that people need to be trained not to dispose of waste in the river.

Destruction of vegetation along the banks of the river pose another threat to wildlife, according to Ed Ciliberti, a public affairs officer with the Bureau of Land Management. Plants that thrive on the banks of rivers are often destroyed for cosmetic reasons by homeowners who live along the waterfront.

"Vegetation is important to maintain as a wildlife habitat. This vegetation is also important because it traps water runoff and slowly releases it during dry periods," Ciliberti remarked.

In order to help replace some of the lost vegetation, cleanup volunteers also planted willow cuttings along the river.

Several local politicians and members of industry got a chance to view the cleanup first-hand during a chartered boat trip from Oregon City to Swan Island. The trip was funded by the Amoco Foam Products Company and included a catered lunch provided by Irwin Research, a company specializing in plastic containers.

The group, which included Mayor Roger Hall of Milwaukie, Dennis Denton of Denton Plastics, and members of the city councils of Oregon City and West Linn, had an opportunity to view wildlife habitats along the Willamette while listening to commentary on the history and biology of the river. The group also made a stop at Sellwood Riverfront Park, where they picked up debris and planted willow cuttings.

Photos by Jim Titus

Volunteers pick up debris along the banks of the Willamette River at Sellwood Riverfront Park Saturday. The cleanup was developed by the John Inskeep Environmental Learning Center and sponsored by several plastic industry and environmental groups.

Styrofoam cups like this one create a hazard for wildlife when discarded in the river.