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A decade of celebrating Rhody's rivers

Saturday, 20 June 2009

Corridor Commission plans to spearhead movement to get Valley national park status.

By ANDREW THOMPSON

CENTRAL FALLS — "Look!" someone called out from the back of the Blackstone Valley Explorer as the boat crept along through Lonsdale Marsh. Sure enough, explained National Park Service Ranger and tour narrator Kevin Klyberg, there was a large blue heron perched on the west bank of the river.

The bird was a concrete example of the progress the Blackstone River has made from its once-polluted state towards becoming a fishable and swimmable waterway.

The free tour on the Explorer was part of the tenth annual Rhode Island Rivers Day, held this Saturday and sponsored by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council (BVTC). Rivers Day aims to celebrate waterways across the state, with special emphasis on the Blackstone River.

The main event of Rivers Day was the presentation of the John H. Chafee Rivers Day Award, named after Rhode Island's late U.S. Senator and the namesake of the heritage corridor. This year's award went to Citizens Bank, specifically in recognition of their "River Rescue Study" in the 1990s, and the bank's other efforts in protecting the quality of Rhode Island rivers. The Citizens Bank Foundation has also supported riverboat tours of the Blackstone through the Free Sundays on the River program for the past three years. "You can't receive this award unless you've spent some time in the trenches by the Blackstone," said Robert Billington, President of the BVTC. Billington and David Balfour, Chairman of the BVTC presented the award.

Billington said that Citizens Bank's early involvement in efforts to clean up the river was an "awakening" that had precipitated more support from other areas of the private sector.

Branch Manager for the Citizens Bank branch on Social Street in downtown Woonsocket, Steven Thibault, was there to accept the award on Citizens Bank's behalf.

Thibault, who grew up in Woonsocket, said, "20 years ago when we played around the river as kids, we sure wished we could swim in it. It's really amazing what these organizations have done [to improve the river]."

Jan Reitsma, executive director of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, was also at the event. He said that the corridor has existed for 22 years and is due to expire in 2011.

"Obviously, we don't want to expire," said Reitsma. He continued to say that the commission would be embarking on a national campaign to designate the corridor as an actual National Park.

Several other environmental organizations exhibited as a part of the Rivers Day event, and included the Blackstone River Coalition, the Blackstone River Watershed Council, and the Ocean State Dragon Boat Club.

Peter Coffin, of the Blackstone River Coalition, said that there were continuing challenges to the successful restoration of the Blackstone. Though the heavily polluted sediments originating from the mills that lined the river since the industrial revolution have been capped on the riverbed by more recent, cleaner sediments, they still have an effect on the river when river currents and wildlife stir them up.

Coffin also said that dumping, much more common before the 1972 Clean Water Act, had a lasting effect. "The Clean Water Act is pretty strict, but [the EPA is] just now getting around to enforce it," said Coffin.

"It's about getting standards out there."

One of the more significant pollution challenges is storm-drain runoff, said Coffin. Street level storm drains run directly into the river, and can carry fertilizers and other pollutants, which are harmful to aquatic life in the river.

"[The Coalition's] job is to get education out," said Coffin. "What we do on the land effects the river."

Frank Geary, of the Blackstone River Watershed Council, explained his organization's current project to build "fish ladders" for dams in the river. The dams prevent species of fish that live in the ocean, but breed upstream in fresh water, from reaching their traditional breeding grounds. The fish ladders will help fish to swim over the dams further upstream.

Prior to the Clean Water Act, only two species of fish lived in the Blackstone. Now, a total of 19 exist in the river, illustrating the improvement in conditions. Probably the most noticeable improvement, said Geary, "you can't notice. There's no smell [anymore]. The smell used to be terrible back then."

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