

Cleanup Crews: Nature will ‘bounce back’ if we let it

Volunteers spring up to tidy outdoor areas

By RYAN BILLER, Sentinel Correspondent
Photos by MCKENZIE LANGE/ The Daily Sentinel

A number of local groups spent the day outdoors on Saturday, working on conservation initiatives throughout Grand Junction to promote planetary health. Those groups, which included the Grand Valley Paddling Club, the Grand Valley Audubon Society and the Colorado Mesa University Sustainability Council, all said their conservation efforts are not reserved for once a year around Earth Day, but instead are a constant mission.

The Grand Valley Paddling Club took to the Colorado River on Saturday morning to remove rubbish from the fresh water source.

“We do river cleanups every year. This one just happened to end up close to Earth Day. We’re just trying to make our river ways a little more clean. We want to make the river a little more enjoyable for everyone who uses it,” said Tor Larson, vice president of the Grand Valley Paddling Club.

The group will be doing another river cleanup on Aug. 20.

During Saturday’s event, the flotilla of trash-cleaners came upon a homeless encampment shortly after they first got on the river.

“We came across a single homeless encampment. There was so much trash that it filled up our whole barge, so we’re stopping here to drop the trash off. We’ll pick it up tomorrow with a dump truck. Now, we’ll continue down the river and load the barge again,” Larson said.

When Larson first saw the volume of waste at the encampment, he jokingly remarked that he “nearly cried.” “Most of the big trash that we used to collect were bathtubs and tires and things. Now it’s turning into micro-plastics. Homeless camps have also polluted the water quite a bit,” Larson said. “We’d like to not have to do this, but every year it seems to get worse.”

A more sustainable means of assisting the homeless, Larson said, would prevent a social problem from creating an environmental problem.

“This is all from one camp,” said Nick Denunzio, as he gestured to a gigantic heap of rubbish on the shore. Denunzio is new to Grand Junction and has become an active member of the Grand Valley Paddling Club. “The saddest part was the amount of kids’ things there. Toys and stickers, little signs hung up in the trees. Children were living there long term.”

According to Mesa County, the landfill in Grand Junction receives about 170,000 tons of garbage annually, which amounts to an average of 7 pounds of waste generated per person per day. That number is thought to have increased considerably throughout the pandemic.

“(I feel) less hopeful. My joke is always that the earth will be better 5,000 years and one day after the last humans are here, because that’s when the last plastic bag will be gone. A lot of this stuff, even the metals, will eventually go back to the earth, but these plastics will be here for 5,000 years,” Denunzio said.



Whit Blair, 23, volunteers with the Grand Valley Audubon Society to remove trash from a conservation easement along Dike Road near the Audubon Nature Preserve.

About four miles west of the river cleanup, members of the Grand Valley Audubon Society were planting trees in degraded areas and removing trash from the ecosystem at Audubon Nature Preserve.

Twenty-eight young cottonwood trees were planted throughout the preserve.

Like the paddling club, members of the Audubon Society have various conservation projects going all year long, not just around Earth Day.

“We know that if we tie it into Earth Day, we’d get more volunteers. We’re down here year-round; we’ve got a lot of projects going all the time. We just know that a lot of people are motivated to volunteer close to Earth Day, so we got a lot of volunteers with the city today,” said Mike Campbell, a board member of the Grand Valley Audubon Society.

Society officials noted that worsening regional drought, a byproduct of climate change, is posing a considerable threat to the flora and fauna at the preserve.

A pond on the preserve, for example, is the home of a few different species of endangered fish. There’s an inlet from the river that feeds into the pond, refilling the water levels each year when the river gets higher.

Because of ongoing drought, the flow of water is becoming less and less to the point where it is struggling to rejuvenate the pond.

According to Campbell, “it’s been an issue.”

“Climate change is getting a lot of press, as it should. But because so much attention is going into climate change, we’re forgetting about habitat loss. When you lose habitat, you lose important plant life that absorbs carbon, so it’s a vicious cycle. The more habitat we lose, the worse climate change gets,” Campbell said.

Loss of vital habitat is certainly an ongoing issue in Grand Junction.

According to Chuck Hunt, another board member with the Grand Valley Audubon Society, “we’re trying to improve the wetlands here, but housing developments are creating major loss of habitats in the community.”

The past few years have been some of the driest in Mesa County in the past few decades, making drought a concern for not only conservation groups, but the city of Grand Junction and even the state government.

Mike Campbell is still hopeful about preservation of wild places and wild things though. Because of restoration efforts at the preserve, many species have returned to take refuge.

“I’m really hopeful about the future of the preserve,” Campbell said.