



Local News

Padding with a purpose



Photo courtesy Kevin Haight Kevin Haight paddles the Paw Paw River earlier this year. To draw attention to this unique water system and get locals thinking about water quality, he kayaked, in sections, all 66 miles of the stream.

Hartford man travels length of Paw Paw River to draw attention to unique waterway

By Scott Aiken – H-P Staff

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The Paw Paw River isn't known as a destination for canoeing and kayaking.

Kevin Haight is working to change that.

To raise awareness of water quality issues in the important river ecosystem, the Hartford resident paddled a kayak the stream's entire 66-mile length.

Haight divided his kayaking odyssey into 11 sections. Starting at the Maple Lake Dam in Paw Paw on Aug. 22, he completed one part each weekend, sometimes accompanied by other kayakers. He was to finish the last leg Saturday, paddling from the Coloma Road bridge in Riverside to Benton

Harbor.

Because vast sections of the river's natural forested floodplain are intact, a paddler passes through areas that seem remote and uninhabited, even though population centers are nearby, he said.

Birds and animals are prevalent and the landscape changes frequently.

"That's what makes it enjoyable," Haight said. "There's always something new."

Haight, a lawyer in St. Joseph, is a board member on the Two Rivers Coalition, an advocacy and educational group that aims to improve water quality in the areas drained by the Paw Paw and Black rivers.

Haight said he undertook the trip to raise money through donations for the non-profit coalition's conservation activities, and to put a spotlight on the importance of the river and its watershed.

After completing each week's leg of the journey, Haight posted a detailed account and lots of photos on the Two Rivers Coalition's website. He describes the topography, side excursions to explore backwaters, bayous, creeks, trees and plants, and the wildlife.

On one leg of the trip in Van Buren County he encountered barred owls gliding under the forest canopy and a great blue heron rookery. Surprised turtles regularly fall from low-hanging limbs into the water and trout are visible along gravel bars in the clear water.

At one point, Haight peeked into a hole in a tree to observe some odd-looking creatures he later identified as turkey vulture chicks.

Along with the wild and scenic, Haight encountered the bad - sofas, TVs and other trash dumped in the river and on the banks - and logjam after logjam.

Haight, who has been kayaking for five years and experienced in canoeing for much longer, is adept at "jumping" his lightweight kayak over smaller obstacles. But at times the jumbles of logs, limbs and brush are impassable, forcing him get out of the water and portage around the mess.

On two tiring legs of the journey, Haight was forced to portage 10 times.

Still, the efforts of several people have cleared a paddle path on long stretches of the river, making a 30-mile section open from 48th Avenue east of Lawrence to Watervliet.

Mike Gilliam, who operates a canoe livery in Watervliet, keeps a path open from that city to Hartford. Kenneth Nesbitt of Lawton, who was to finish the trip this weekend with Haight, and several friends cut a patch from 48th Avenue to Lawrence.

The section from Lawrence to Hartford was cleared early this year. Two deteriorating dams at Watervliet, the only dams between Paw Paw and Benton Harbor, are scheduled to be removed.

Haight said he could see a day when the Paw Paw River is a paddling destination, like the Pere Marquette and Pine rivers in the northern Lower Peninsula.

"I think it could become a destination for eco-tourists," he said.

More public access sites must become available for that to happen, Haight said.

Now, sites are available at a park in Lawrence and at a park and another site in Watervliet.

Marcy Colclough, senior planner at the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said the Paw Paw River's intact floodplain makes it unique in the area.

"The potential is incredible," she said. "It's a beautiful river and it's a beautiful river to be on."

Colclough helped write watershed management plans for the Paw Paw and Black rivers. The Two Rivers Coalition, which emphasizes working to improve water quality, was formed to follow through

on the plans.

The plans provide detailed descriptions of the two watersheds, which is all the land they drain, its natural resources, and the role government can play in protecting water quality. Pollutants and their sources, goals for improvement and strategies for reaching them are also outlined.

The Paw Paw River starts in the glacial moraines (an accumulation of soil and rock left from melting glaciers in the last Ice Age, creating hilly areas) of western Kalamazoo County, crosses Van Buren and northern Berrien counties before emptying into the St. Joseph River in Benton Harbor.

The watershed takes in 446 square miles, or 285,557 acres.

Like Michigan in general, the watershed has lost about 50 percent of its wetlands since the mid-1800s, resulting in some water quality degradation.

Wetlands filter pollutants, prevent sediment from getting into water bodies and inhibit flooding by acting as sponges during periods of heavy rain and snowmelt.

Colclough said the recreational potential of the river can be tapped without spending a lot of money.

"It takes dedicated people to keep it open," she said. "It can really happen with these volunteers but we need help from municipalities and places to legally access the river."

Although the Two Rivers Coalition's focus is on water quality, she said, increased recreational use goes hand-in-hand with that goal.

"It gets more people watching it, and understanding the issues. The more people are connected to the resource the more interest there is in protecting that resource."

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