

The Fresno Bee



Volunteers pick up river trash for statewide cleanup day

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By Carmen George

The San Joaquin River and its tributary watersheds in the mountains received some love on Saturday as volunteers combed over riverbanks and lake beaches searching for trash.

Along the San Joaquin River, more than 9,000 pounds of trash was picked up by 200 volunteers in Fresno and Madera counties, said Marji Feliz, project manager for the Great Sierra River Cleanup, sponsored by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.



Justin Patterson, 14, along with a group of 17 high school students with the Madera Interact Club volunteered in the California Coastal Cleanup Day at Sycamore Island on Saturday, September 21, 2013.

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The litter removal was part of California Coastal Cleanup Day, which includes the fifth annual Great Sierra River Cleanup.

Last year, nearly 66,000 people statewide collected almost 770,000 pounds of trash. The cleanup is the largest single-day volunteer event in California.

Along the San Joaquin River near Fresno, 106 people with RiverTree Volunteers led the charge, collecting 8,000 pounds of trash, including an old washing machine, Feliz said.

Other participating groups included the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, Inc., San Joaquin River Stewardship Program and the San Joaquin Valley Forum.

Many of the conservation trust's 44 volunteers were young. The Madera Interact Club, Clovis Girl Scout Troop 305 and the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission's Career Opportunities Reached through Participation in Service program all assisted the nonprofit in picking up trash.

Along with learning about taking care of the environment, many were introduced to new worlds as they enjoyed the scenery.

"It's crazy how all this stuff just grows on its own," said Madera Interact Club president Haley Stegall, 16, as she picked up trash and pulled up invasive weeds along the riverbank with about 20 club members at Sycamore Island north of Fresno, about two miles from Children's Hospital Central California. "There's so many trees, goodness gracious. And I didn't even know there would be trash out here. I didn't know there were enough people out here for there to be trash."

Four Girl Scouts and their moms were also surprised by the amount of litter they found while kayaking downstream. Clovis Troop 305 also picked up lots of plastic water bottles, food wrappers, plastic foam containers, fishing line, bottles and cans.

Marissa Lopez, 10, said she hopes people pick up trash every day, not just during cleanups.

"It's bad for the animals," Marissa said. "They get caught in there (fishing line) and die ... I hope when people see this (story), it will inspire them to pick up trash on the playground or park or something."

The girls also enjoyed the peacefulness of gliding on the water, led by Sharon Weaver, deputy director for the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, Inc.,

At Sycamore Island, Lost Lake Recreation Area and around the Coke Hallowell Center for River Studies in Friant, volunteers picked up 74 pounds of trash, including 303 cigarette butts and 20 shoes, said Rachel Locke, project manager for the nonprofit.

Great Sierra River Cleanup officials said about 3,100 volunteers collected approximately 61,500 pounds of trash on Saturday at nearly 110 locations.

The most interesting items found during the cleanups were a blue plastic dinosaur, a pink flowered tiara, an unopened package of ham and a baby stroller with a demon mask attached, officials said.

"Some 23 million Californians get their water from the Sierra, so it is gratifying that so many volunteers take part in cleaning up our rivers, lakes and streams," said Jim Branham, executive officer for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. "In five years, the Great Sierra River Cleanup has removed 580 tons of trash and debris from our watersheds."