



Organizing River Cleanups

River cleanups improve the water quality of a river or stream, but they do much more than that. Cleanups are also a great way to develop a sense of “river community,” identify negative impacts to the waterway and educate participants about the values of watersheds for recreation, fish and wildlife habitat... all while having fun! Cleanups do this most effectively when they involve and inspire the entire community, reaching out beyond existing river enthusiasts to create new “river allies” in the community. This newfound river and watershed awareness can translate into increased support for your organization’s future river protection projects.

PLANNING...

(Adapted from *Organizing a Successful Cleanup*, America Outdoors)

A successful cleanup takes dedicated people, extensive publicity, proper equipment, and lots of planning. (**Note:** Planning for a single afternoon cleanup may take several months.) To get started, here is a sample list of the tasks involved in planning a cleanup:

- ✓ Organize a planning committee
- ✓ Line up support
- ✓ Select a date and an appropriate site
- ✓ Recruit volunteers
- ✓ Publicize the event
- ✓ Arrange for waste disposal and recycling
- ✓ Establish a safety plan
- ✓ Coordinate volunteers on cleanup day
- ✓ Recognize participants
- ✓ Evaluate your efforts

What You Will Need

- Topographic map of the area
- Work gloves and hats
- Trash bags
- Rakes, shovels and/or pitchforks
- Long pants, a long-sleeve shirt
- Waders, high rubber boots, old hiking boots or other footwear
- Watercraft and PFDs (if you are cleaning the streambed)
- First aid kit
- Insect/tick repellent
- Sunscreen
- Refreshments
- Camera and film

Organizing a Planning Committee

If possible, recruit people to the planning committee who have some knowledge or experience in volunteer recruitment, safety, transportation, waste disposal, sanitation and communications.

Delegate responsibilities for:

- ✓ Public Relations
- ✓ Volunteer recruitment and orientation
- ✓ First aid
- ✓ Waste and recyclable pick-up
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Refreshments
- ✓ Sanitation
- ✓ Evaluation of the cleanup



Lining Up Support

Your own enthusiasm will make the task of getting support for the cleanup much easier. Involving other sectors of the community will not only help you offset the costs of organizing the event, but it will go a long way toward helping publicize it and increase its effectiveness in building community around the river. Here are some ways others can help:

- Local restaurants or soft drink distributors can donate snacks, lunches, or sponsor a celebratory picnic for the volunteers.
- Grocery and hardware stores or supply companies can donate gloves, trash bags, and other items.
- Businesses can lend dumpsters, sanitation facilities, tents, tarps, tables and 2-way radios.
- Check with local waster haulers or local government agencies for help transporting the trash.
- Approach other businesses and organizations for financial contributions to help fund publicity items (e.g. posters and newsletter ads) or souvenirs for volunteers (e.g. t-shirts, reusable mugs or tote bags.)
- A local print shop can underwrite the expense of printing a publicity poster.

Selecting Site and Date

In selecting a date and a river stretch to clean up, consider the following...

- ✓ **Access** – Be sure to get the permission of the landowners along the stream.
- ✓ **Access roads** – Will you need to put up directional signs? If the site is difficult to locate, consider arranging transportation from a more convenient meeting place.
- ✓ **Location** – Is it so distant from the volunteers that it will discourage their participation?
- ✓ **Safety** – Are the riverbanks on a steep gradient? Are the flows dangerous?
- ✓ **Sanitation facilities** – Are facilities available nearby? If not, arrange for them.
- ✓ **Size** – It should be large enough to keep the volunteers busy, and small enough so they can complete the job and see their accomplishments.
- ✓ **Weather** – Choose a rain date and include it in your promotional materials.
- ✓ **Other cleanups** – Contact your local parks department, the Wisconsin DNR or the River Alliance of Wisconsin for information on existing river cleanups projects in the area.

Volunteer Recruitment

Get creative in finding volunteers and reach out to folks who may not already be active in protecting your river and watershed. Invite area businesses and industries, the local newspaper, television and radio stations, and local government agencies to send a work crew to the cleanup. Contact civic organizations, 4-H clubs, Scout troops, school clubs and church groups. Pitch this as a FUN event, and make it festive by linking it to a raffle or by giving out prizes to volunteers (e.g. “Most Trash Picked”, “Oddest Find”, etc.)

Publicity

Good publicity is the best way to attract volunteers and reinforce the idea that the river is a community resource.

- Increase the visibility of the river cleanup by tying it to an existing event such as National River Cleanup week, a local festival or an athletic event. Coordinate with the organizers of that event to do joint publicity.
- Send a simple press release to local newspapers, radio and television stations. Follow up with a phone call.

- Get a local celebrity to co-chair the event.
- Get posters printed to advertise the cleanup and display them in busy locations.
- Neighborhood associations, local churches, school clubs and other civic organizations will often advertise community events in their newsletters or bulletins at no cost. Submit the cleanup information with plenty of time to make the publications' deadlines.

Disposing of Trash

Contact the city works department and recycling centers in advance to arrange for garbage removal. If there is a dumping fee, request a waiver. Local developers may also be willing to help with the removal. Scout the stretch of river before the event and identify items that may require special equipment to remove (e.g. bicycles, appliances and furniture).



Garbage awaits pick up after a Friends of the Prairie River Cleanup. Photo: Joe Krznarich

SAFETY!

- Divide volunteers into crews (minimum of 3 per crew), and assign crews to a zone captain. Each captain should have a map with each crew's assigned cleanup area.
- Designate a first aid station and be sure all volunteers know where it is located.
- Tell volunteers where they will locate the person designated to deal with any hazardous items found, including syringes, medical waste and storage drums.
- Remind volunteers to keep an eye out for safety hazards such as poison ivy, snakes and beehives.
- If you are cleaning the streambed, volunteers in watercraft should wear personal flotation devices (PFDs) *at all times*.
- Tell volunteers when the cleanup will end, and designate an area where all work crews will meet afterward.

ON CLEANUP DAY...

Coordinating Volunteers

- Have volunteers sign in at the start of the day, and sign liability waivers. Point out the first aid station, and review safety precautions. Remind volunteers the ending time and the designated meeting area.
- Prepare maps of the area to pass out to volunteers. Divide the site into work areas and identify these on the maps.
- For large cleanups, designate zone captains to supervise work crews.
- Assign volunteer crews to work in specific areas and arrange for their transportation to and from the work areas. Keep track of the areas being covered.
- Supply work crews with large, sturdy trash bags and inform them where to take the filled bags for pickup. If you are collecting recyclables, have one crew member collect *only recyclables* in a separate bag to facilitate sorting afterwards.
- If you wish to track the types of garbage found, provide crews with forms to record their findings. Tracking the type of garbage collected (e.g. plastic, glass, paper, styrofoam, metal, rubber, cloth) provides useful information for designing future programs to reduce waste along the river.
- Take before, during and after photographs.

FOLLOW UP...

- Celebrate your success! Reward volunteers with prizes, River Cleanup souvenirs, a picnic or a party.
- Do a follow-up press release. Include specific information such as the number of volunteers involved, the length of riverfront cleaned, and the amount of garbage picked (e.g. total number of bags, approximate total weight, most commonly found item, most unusual find).
- Evaluate the entire cleanup, from planning to implementation, and identify ways to improve it in the future.

Additional Resources

- *Organizing a Successful River Cleanup*, a booklet and video from America Outdoors. Call (423) 558-3595 or visit www.americaoutdoors.org. It is also available through the River Alliance of Wisconsin's lending library by calling (608) 257-2424.
- *Organizing and Conducting a Cleanup on Public Lands and Waterways*, Water Quality Series, Booklet 3, Tennessee Valley Authority. Visit www.riversalive.org.
- The *River Alliance of Wisconsin* tracks and helps publicize river cleanups in Wisconsin. Call (608) 257-2424, or visit www.wisconsinrivers.org.
- *Tips on How You Can Organize and Conduct an Underwater Cleanup*, Aquatic World Awareness and Education. Visit www.projectaware.org
- *The Water Action Volunteers Activity Packet* includes information on organizing waterway cleanups. Call (608) 264-8948 or visit <http://clean-water.uwex.edu/wav>.