
Celebrating It's Our River Day

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Education, recreation and conservation are important to the health of our rivers. They are interconnected like a river within it's ecosystem. It is important to keep the history and culture of life along the rivers alive, to continue efforts to address the threats against their health, and to provide new and innovative ways to provide access to the waterways for recreation. With this in mind, the Citizen Action Committee of the Illinois River Coordinating Committee has organized an annual event called "It's Our River Day" and encourages communities and organizations to celebrate rivers by promoting opportunities to experience, learn and contribute to the health of watersheds through activities held annually on the third Saturday in September.

BACKGROUND

In response to a recommendation from the Integrated Management Plan for the Illinois River, Friends of the Illinois River (FOIR) was formed in early 1999 to "increase public awareness of the history of conditions in the Illinois River, the past efforts that have been beneficial, and the need to implement the recommendations in this plan throughout the Illinois River watershed."

In 2000, the Friends of the Illinois River, began coordinating communities along the river to participate in Illinois River Sweep, a one-day cleanup to be held annually on the third Saturday of September. Every volunteer that participated received an Illinois River Sweep tshirt, plus gloves and trash bags -- all provided by Friends of the Illinois River. Illinois River Sweep is modeled after the highly successful Ohio River Sweep. Local organizers, or River Sweep Captains, located in participating communities help spread the word and recruit volunteers. Friends of the Illinois River raises funds to provide the volunteers with gloves, trash bags, and t-shirts.

By 2004, Illinois River Sweep had grown to include 27 communities and approximately 1500 volunteers annually. But it was clear that there could be more to the annual event than just cleaning up. The Citizen Action Committee of the Illinois River Coordinating Council, tasked with developing a state-wide awareness project, proposed the idea of expanding the annual event to include recreation and education as well, and initiated "It's Our River Day" statewide.

THE MAIN EVENT

The mission of It's Our River Day is *to increase awareness and appreciation of the rivers in Illinois through a series of events on education, recreation and conservation each year on the third Saturday in September.* Encouraging people to enjoy river-related recreation not only provides entertainment, it also fosters an appreciation for rivers as a natural resource. As appreciation leads to a sense of value, the end result is an increased awareness for the need to become a better steward of our valuable waterways.

Working with the Lieutenant Governor's office to develop web-based support for the event, the Citizen's Action Committee developed a plan to assist local communities in organizing and promoting their events. Resources for initiating an event are gathered and posted to the official site. Once communities have identified an event, they are encouraged to list the details on the It's Our River Day website. This year It's Our River Day website featured 58 events that offered workshops, walks, hikes, canoe rides, and opportunities to participate in many clean-up activities around the state. The website can be found at: <http://www.state.il.us/lsgov/cleanwater/iord.htm>.

It is hoped that It's Our River Day will continue to grow. Everyone is encouraged to take the It's Our River Day Pledge located on the website and join in by either helping out at an event or by participating in an event in their local community. Through education and citizen involvement, we can cultivate a desire for natural resource stewardship — not only for single events, but hopefully throughout a lifetime.

REFERENCES

Kustra, Bob. 1997. Integrated Management Plan for the Illinois River Watershed Technical Report. Springfield: State of Illinois.

