

How you can help investigate water quality

Your Turn

Caroline Keson
Guest columnist

The Little Black River is often overshadowed by its older siblings, the Lower and Upper Black Rivers; however, its miniscule size is overcome by challenges.

Two main branches — South Branch and West Branch — wend their way from Beaugrand, Hebron and Inverness Townships to Lake Huron, pouring out just north of the City of Cheboygan. The branches stretch no more than 10 miles from their headwaters in the wetlands, woods and fields of those nearby townships. Throughout the river's path, it must pass a variety of obstacles that cause it to stray from its natural course.

Four earthen dams rise like small hills on the otherwise flat landscape, creating flood control but also causing erosion and cutting off fish habitat. Road crossings introduce erosion and constrict the river's flow. A straightened area prevents natural stream dynamics from creating bends, pools, and riffles. Land use practices may be introducing excess nutrients to the stream. One way to protect the river is to collect data, and for that we need volunteers like you.

Data is limited on the Little Black River, which prevents resource managers from fully understanding the water quality. Water quality is directly related to the ability of fish, wildlife and humans to use the stream. Initial monitoring conducted by the Watershed Council, with funds provided by the Great Lakes Commission, showed the river had a higher than normal sediment load, high conductivity and high nutrients. Too much sediment in rivers can cover rocks and cobbles important for fish and macroinvertebrate (water-living bugs and insects). High conductivity, a measure of salts in the water, is a sign of human influences. Additional nutrients can cause imbalances in the stream, such as excess vegetation.

The Watershed Council collected an additional water sample this spring as part of our triennial water quality sampling, and now we need your help to perform consistent monitoring. Our volunteer stream monitoring program started in 2005, and we train volunteers each year to monitor 22 streams across Northern Michigan. We'd like to expand our efforts to the Little Black River.

Can you help us? Volunteers will get "the scoop" on river health every spring and fall. Nestled in submerged logs, tucked away beneath rocks, and clinging to pieces of pondweed, tiny macroinvertebrates (insects and non-insects) live in an underwater world until hatching into their adult forms like dragonflies and mosquitoes. Their omnipresence and sensitivity to pollution make them good candidates to indicate water quality. Collecting more data on this river about macroinvertebrates and other factors may yield improvements and restoration projects in the future.

What's your vision for the Little Black River? Can you help us promote clean, healthy water in your region? Join us to participate in this important work at 5 p.m. May 11 at the North Central State Trailhead in



Volunteer Stream Monitors net macroinvertebrates in Mullett Creek. Volunteer monitoring is a fun way to get out into streams and rivers and measure the health of local waters. TIP OF THE MITT WATERSHED COUNCIL

Cheboygan on the corner of Taylor Street and Western Avenue. Participants will spend approximately one hour learning about the importance of stream monitoring at the trailhead.

A hands-on training session will follow at 6 p.m. on the Little Black River at the crossing of Pine Hill Ave. Dress for the weather and plan to get into the water using our provided waders and equipment. Please sign up on our website at watershedcouncil.org/attend-an-event.html or call our office at 231-347-1181 for more information.

— Caroline Keson is the monitoring programs coordinator for the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.