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Take the Clean Waters Challenge

Contributed

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The following guest commentary was submitted by Jennifer DeMoss, communications director at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

This year marks Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council's second annual Clean Waters Challenge. Here are the basics: Aug. 7-14, join our challenge by picking up trash from around a water body near you. All you need to do is register at www.watershedcouncil.org/clean-waters-challenge or at Bearcub Outfitters for the option of entering an additional prize drawing. Take pictures of your cleanup adventure, tag Bearcub Outfitters and the watershed council on social media, add the tag #cleanwaterschallenge2021, and check our social media for regular prize raffles for registered participants. We'll be highlighting your efforts throughout the week.

The challenge was born from our inability to hold the annual in-person Bear River Cleanup last year. Our Healing the Bear event has drawn thousands of volunteers over the years to clean stretches of our beautiful Bear River. Staff brainstormed to find a safe way to carry on that tradition in the midst of COVID-19 and came up with the Clean Waters Challenge. We partnered with long-time supporters at Bearcub Outfitters and held our first virtual cleanup in which people chose bodies of water to clean with family and friends. The challenge was a hit — people safely collected and disposed of trash clogging our streams and polluting our rivers and shorelines.

It's easy to register and participate in our cleanup. And, it's great to share supporters' enthusiasm for our waters and to reward them with prizes, thanks to Bearcub Outfitter's generosity. However, the real reward lies in spending time in and around what could be argued is our most valuable resource: our waters.

We spend a lot of time caretaking and protecting water quality at the Watershed Council. Our work preserves the resources that wildlife need to survive. It prevents shoreline destruction and ensures that development projects are performed with water quality in mind. It protects property values — studies show that shoreline protection and restoration efforts can increase the value of homeowners' investments. It preserves recreation opportunities and safeguards precious drinking water supplies.

However, protecting our waters is about more than resources. It's also about time and connection. We want supporters in our service area and beyond to enjoy quality time with nature and our waters. Researchers estimate that the average North American spends around 90% of their time inside a building. At the same time, numerous studies have shown that time in nature is good for human health. Spending time in green spaces has been positively associated with mental health and vitality. Some of the evidence-based health benefits of exposure to nature have included lower blood pressure, improved pain control, improved immune functioning, and more. The Clean Waters Challenge is a good way to get outside and redeem these health benefits.

Your presence in nature is also good for the environment. First, it's known that a strong connection to nature forged by positive experiences outdoors is connected to pro-environmental behavior. It's also connected to a love for landscapes. Taking part in our Clean Waters Challenge, whether by yourself or with friends and family, can help develop a sense of place and emotional connection to your local watershed. While exploring the bend of a creek you may, as Keith Basso wrote, find yourself embracing the countryside and being embraced back.

Here at the Watershed Council, we encourage you to spend time outdoors. We want you to know the small animals hiding under stones in creek beds. We love to hear about your canoe and kayak adventures and what you find along the way. We're happy to receive pictures of your thriving rain gardens and shorelines covered in native plants. We hope you take the opportunity to cherish Northern Michigan waters during our Clean Waters Challenge and deepen your connection to this landscape.

Visit www.watershedcouncil.org/clean-waters-challenge to learn more about our event. We look forward to seeing all your adventures as you post about them.

Even if you can't join our challenge, you can have your own cleanup any time you head outside, with a healthy environment as its own reward. Thanks for getting to know the waters you love.