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Michigan Environment Watch

Over 31,000 pounds of trash collected from Michigan rivers, streams in '23



Volunteers from organizations in 11 municipalities and conservation districts collected trash from waterways across the state. (Courtesy of the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy)

 February 27, 2024

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Over 31,000 pounds of trash collected fr...



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- **Volunteers removed over 31,000 pounds of trash from streams and rivers across the state last year**
- **The amount of trash collected in bodies of water in Michigan has increased significantly since 2022.**
- **EGLE provides communities with grants to host cleanups of local waterways.**

Electric scooters, an unopened safe and a recliner are just some of the 31,200 pounds of trash that volunteers pulled from Michigan's rivers and streams in 2023, according to the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy

Nearly a dozen organizations across the state received funding from EGLE to collect garbage from rivers and streams last year. Over [1,600 volunteers worked a collective of 3,699 hours](#) to clean various bodies of water in the state.

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[Michigan Waterways Stewards](#), a Lansing-based organization that works to keep waterways clean, hosted two sets of cleanup days in June and September when volunteers cleaned the Grand River and the Red Cedar River in Lansing. Volunteers collected more than eight tons of trash and found grocery carts, tires, highway barrels, MSU police barricades and an unopened safe, according to a [report by Michigan Clean Water Corps](#).

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“We were definitely surprised to find so much (trash) but because we have removed so much, our rivers are obviously that much cleaner, healthier and safer,” said Mike Stout, president of Michigan Waterways Stewards.

During the cleanup, 225 electric scooters and 160 bicycles were retrieved from the Red Cedar River, according to Stout. He believes that part of the reason the river was filled with so much trash is it's surrounded by Michigan State University, which he described as an urban area with high density residential spaces.

“Now that we have removed so much, now we shift from the heavy cleanup to more of the sustainability to maintain the gains that we've achieved,” Stout said.

Volunteers with the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Cheboygan collected 1,623 pieces of trash, weighing a total of 181 pounds, last August. The most interesting piece of trash was a sign post, said Anna Watson, water resources specialist for the [Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council](#).

“We pulled out anything that could be recycled and recycled it but most of the items that we found were pretty bogged down with water or were no longer recyclable,” she said.

The organization hosts a community cleanup each year but during the pandemic it did so virtually, giving volunteers supplies and allowing them to choose their own body of water to clean.

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"When people do litter, our water bodies carry that litter all over the watershed, so that's really causing bigger issues than I think a lot of people understand," Watson said. "One thing that we try to do at the Watershed Council is just reduce first ... if you can reduce your waste up front, then that really just helps the issue altogether."

[More than half the trash collected](#) from rivers and streams last year, roughly 16,000 pounds, came from the Red Cedar River alone. Even if there wasn't a trash cleanup of that river, trash collected from the state's waterways nearly tripled in the last two years. In 2021, 637 volunteers collected 6,698 pounds of trash. The following year, 378 volunteers collected 5,200 pounds of trash.

"People just throw things over the side of the bridge and it's gone and they don't have to deal with it anymore. Maybe they don't particularly think about the impact it has on water quality," said Tamara Lipsey, aquatic biologist and MiCorps program lead.

Who received cleanup funds:

Benzie Conservation District - \$1098.09

Branch Conservation District- \$1,323

City of Ann Arbor- \$3,491

City of Cheboygan- \$4,999.27

City of Lansing- \$4,944

Grand Traverse Conservation District- \$2,866.36

Muskegon Conservation District- \$3,112.14

Newaygo Conservation District- \$4,820.55

St. Joseph Conservation District- \$1,865

VanBuren Conservation District- \$1,493.51

Berrien Conservation District- \$2,050.95*

**Berrien Conservation District received its grant in 2022 but completed its cleanup in 2023.*

In Michigan, littering as much as one cubic feet of trash [can result in fines](#) up to \$800.

"Fish and other organisms will eat trash and it will get into their digestive tract. Sometimes it'll make them feel full but they're not getting any nutrients, so it can impact the health of different fish and wildlife that live in our streams and lakes," Lipsey said. "It also can be used as "like" habitat that wouldn't be natural and maybe not healthy for some kind of wildlife."

The department says 10 communities completed projects in 2023 and an 11th, Berrien Conservation District, also completed its cleanup last year, using funds allocated in 2022.

The grants were funded by sales of the water quality protection license plates. When motorists buy the Michigan license plate featuring the sailboat, \$25 of the \$35 cost of the license [plate goes toward the program](#).

MiCorps says \$25,000 in grants are available for communities to host cleanups this year. Applications [are due by 5 p.m.](#) on March 8. The program requires a 25% local match.

The funds are used to purchase trash bags, boats and other cleanup equipment. Grant money can also be used to cover dumpster costs and volunteer appreciation like food and T-shirts.

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