

Missouri River Relief: 800 Miles Cleaned Since 1991

Our rivers and streams face big problems such as toxic chemicals, sedimentation, stream-bank erosion, and polluted storm water runoff, and many people feel powerless in the face of these far-reaching, overwhelming problems. There's a lot of talk—little action.

However, most people have a genuine desire to make their world a better place and they want to do something about it. A community-based stream cleanup of trash provides people the chance to make an immediate and visible impact on the streams they love. Trash is not the biggest problem confronting our river but it's something people can take action to improve.

Missouri River Relief formed in 2001 to get people out on the river to clean the Missouri River islands and shores of litter and debris. Our first cleanup brought 400 people to the Missouri River in Boone County for a massive one day cleanup. With the help of boats and crews from the Missouri Department of Conservation to transport people on the river and a trash barge provided by Chad Pregracke of Living Lands & Waters to haul trash, these volunteers removed 30 tons of garbage.

This event was so widely popular that River Relief organized as a not-for-profit with the mission to connect people to the river through



MELANIE CHENEY

Two River Relief boats operating in formation with a full complement from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources on an experiential field trip as part of their "succession planning" program.

community-based cleanups. In 2002 River Relief received the donation of a boat, motor, and trailer from Bass Pro and conducted a second cleanup in Boone County and our first big city cleanup in St. Charles, Mo. Since then, due to the generous contributions of private and public sponsors, River Relief has expanded its fleet to four motorboats, two pickup trucks, two 15-passenger vans, and a box truck loaded with life vests, tools, equipment, and a mobile camp for up to two dozen dedicated crew members. River Relief is headquartered in Columbia, Mo., with a field office in Kansas City.

In the past nine years, this river cleanup infrastructure has traveled along 800 miles of the main stem of the Missouri River conducting cleanups from Gavins Point Dam near Yankton, SD, downstream to



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

River Relief crew members celebrate a huge haul of tires and trash from the Blue River in Kansas City.

the confluence of the Mississippi River. More than 12,000 people have hauled more than 1,000,000 pounds of litter and junk in nearly 60 cleanups organized by River Relief.

In addition to our own events, River Relief takes its boats and gear and cruises to

help other organizations conduct their river cleanups in their river communities. These include Operation Clean Stream on the Meramec River, the James River Basin Partnership in Springfield, Mo., the Blue River Rescue in Kansas City, the Confluence Partnership in St.



TIM CHENEY

High school students show off happy smiles after getting muddy at a river clean-up headquartered at the Columbia Bottom Conservation Area near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.



SCOTT HEIDBRINK

At the completion of a community-based cleanup, crew members load water jugs into River Relief's fleet of four boats tied to a barge provided by the Army Corps of Engineers for sorting and hauling trash.



MELANIE CHENEY

Volunteers at Project Blue River Rescue in Kansas City display excellent team-work by forming a human "tire chain" to roll dozens of discarded tires out of the river environment.

Louis and several stream teams. In fact, River Relief has adopted the Missouri River as Stream Team #1875.

Early on, we realized conducting cleanups merely struck at the symptoms of water-quality issues and did not address the root causes. So we embarked in 2003 on organizing learning festivals on the banks of the river where up to 600 elementary students make their way through a series of learning

stations. As many as two dozen experts from government agencies, public utilities and private companies teach about the history, science, and wildlife of the river. The kids are thrilled to handle fish, birds, and other live animals displayed at the learning festival.

In addition to young students, River Relief expanded our education program to include high school and college classes and we take

teachers, professors, and their students out on the river for experiential-based excursions.

The River Relief cleanup "season" runs from March to October and in the off-season, River Relief crew and staff members perform water quality monitoring, tree-planting, and habitat restoration.

Cleaning trash and digging out man-made debris from muddy shores may seem dis-

tasteful but it's actually incredibly satisfying, rewarding, and fun. We've discovered young people—teenagers and older—are really excited about working at a river cleanup. In an age of instant gratification and action-oriented media, young people really value the immediate physical results they see at a cleanup and they appreciate the chance to work as a community with the bonding of friendships.

Upcoming events include river cleanups in St. Charles on Saturday, Sept. 11, and Kansas City on Saturday, Oct. 3. Check our website at www.riverrelief.org for more information.

As River Relief continues to expand its reach with more and better equipment, our experience grows in bringing people together on the river to make a visible and lasting difference in their communities.

*Jeff Barrow, Director,
Missouri River Relief*