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Monday, December 4, 2017

“Rabbit Hash, We’re Gonna Get Some Trash”

Joe Chandler, 2019 Cohort

Sophomore River Steward, Joe Chandler, recounts his experience volunteering with Living Lands and Waters, a nonprofit dedicated to cleaning America's rivers. This October, 12 River Stewards spent the night on the LLW Barge and volunteered at a river clean-up in Rabbit Hash, KY.

“Where’d they all go?”

We’re here... I think... We sit in the car wondering if we have in fact made it. We’re on what is basically a one lane road in between houses and the Ohio River, with no streetlights, and cars parked on either side of the road in Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. Very confused on if we were where we were supposed to be; to meet the rest of our group and to meet our hosts for the night, we walk down the dark one lane road. At the end we see a group of people who look like they might be our group. It was indeed our group; we made it! We were introduced to one of the crew mates of Living Lands and Waters barge! After brief introductions and a run-down of our plan for the night we headed back to the car to get our gear and move the car to the parking lot near the General Store where we found our group. However, after parking the car, there was nobody around. Our group had vanished! Well, I got to thinking, and figured we are supposed to go to a barge, barges float on water, the Ohio River is right next to us, that seems like a good place to go looking for our group! As I walk towards where I think is a path to get to the river I look around and put my arms out to say “Where’d they go!?” I then see a man and a woman with headlamps and hear the familiar voice of Chad Pregracke. I can’t believe it, the founder of Living Lands and Waters is the first one I make acquaintances with; what an exciting moment! He led us down to the barge and in the mean time we had a short conversation. I did not know it as this point, but this introduction would turn into a good relationship the following day during our river cleanup.

That Night

After a tour of the barge and a run-down of what the next day had in store for us, we were free to hang out and relax. The Living Lands and Waters crew were so inviting and made us feel right at home. I grilled them with questions about how a few of them got started and about any opportunities there might be for me to possibly join the team, or at least volunteer during the spring. I felt like a kid again, asking tons of questions to learn about something I knew nothing about!

The Next Day

The next day, Saturday, consisted of a river cleanup. This was the main reason for our visit to Rabbit Hash, KY. I had no idea what was in store for us, but the crew told us we will pull trash out by the boat loads, we will get muddy, and our shoes will never look the same after today. That sounded pretty intimidating. How much trash can there be? Boat loads? Seriously!? ...

Seriously... There was fog on the river so we had to stay put until that cleared. The garbage barge needed to be sorted through. The shore near where the barge was docked also needed to be cleaned up, so we had things to do in the meantime. After volunteering for a team of three to dig out a truck bed liner that was buried on shore and pick up trash on the shore near the barge, I think Chad knew none of us were afraid of mud and we all wanted to get this area as clean as possible in the short amount of time we were there. After the fog cleared and we could safely travel down the river, we began to clean up the shore a couple of miles away from the barge. I could see from the river that there were garbage cans, 5-gallon buckets, bottles, trash bags, and plastic barrels among other various items that shouldn't be on the shoreline of a river.

Growing up fishing on lakes and playing along streams myself, I always picked up trash that I saw wherever I was. I had no idea how dirty our rivers actually are. The rest of the day consisted of me going for the largest objects that were buried in the mud. I wanted to get the big things out because that's what everybody can see from the water and that's also what took the most work to get out. I teamed up with a few different people throughout the day to get these larger objects out, and frankly the whole team that was out there did an absolutely incredible job! It was amazing to see. Everybody just wanted to get as much trash as possible out of that area. But going back to me being drawn to the large objects, it seemed like Chad knew I could be called upon to help him pick up a plastic barrel full of mud if there was one. And there were many. We made a good team! I continued to grill him and the crew with questions about different work they do, their experiences, hobbies, etc. It was a great day doing some great things with some great people! I hope to volunteer with Living Lands and Waters more, not only throughout my time at UD but throughout my lifetime. It was a truly amazing experience that I will never forget!