

With Great Falls 'turned off,' teamwork tackles cleanup



The Passaic River was diverted as hundreds of volunteers cleared trash and debris from historic natural wonder.



(Photo: Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com)



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PATERSON — At least for one morning, the Great Falls weren't so great.

The usual mighty flow was reduced to a trickle for three hours on Thursday to allow for a cleanup by the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission with help from the New Jersey Youth Corps. Visitors who

came to marvel were left to wonder what happened to the water that normally roars down the 77-foot crevice.

"That's OK. We need people who care," said Richard Figueroa of Wayne, who was visiting the falls with his fiancée, Jenny Sandoval. "It's good to see them taking away all this garbage. We're enjoying the right now."

Stopping the falls is a nifty engineering feat, accomplished by closing the dam at the top of the falls and diverting the flow to the Eagle Creek hydroelectric plant, on the southern bank of the river just past the Wayne Avenue bridge. The cleanup coincided with Eagle Creek's periodic inspection of the dam.

"They're turning their turbines on full power and pulling the entire flow of the Passaic River through the plant," said Brian Davenport, the superintendent in charge of the PVSC's river restoration program. "It gives us a few hours to clean up out here. We try to get as many people together, because we only have a three-hour window to do this."

Diverting the flow of the river is not a new process. It's been going on since just after 1792, when Alexander Hamilton established the Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufacturers in the city that would come to be known as Paterson.

Hamilton knew that America's future depended on its establishing its own manufacturing base, and recognized the need to harness the power of nature to do the heavy work of industry.

For three hours on Thursday, nature took a break and all the work was done by humans sweating it out on the first full day of summer. The New Jersey Youth Corps arrived in their yellow T-shirts around 10 a.m. and climbed down the steep bank to the river, where PVSC workers were already chopping logs and removing debris.

A human chain was formed, and soon, all sorts of junk and gunk were being handed up the line. "The plastics and the Styrofoam are the big evils," Davenport said.

Davenport said there's a reason for the cleanup, beyond aesthetics. Logs can do lots of damage as they flow downstream, snarling on banks, slamming into bridge abutments and changing the flow of the river.

Pedestrians paused atop the Wayne Avenue bridge to watch the cleanup, and many recognized right away that the water that normally plunges down the falls was missing — as was the cooling mist that comes with it. Instead, the air was heavy with the sweet stink of petroleum.

The New Jersey Youth Corps is a program for teenagers who did not graduate from high school and are working toward gaining a General Equivalency Diploma, or GED. Susan Ronga, the program director, said community service is part of the program because it teaches teamwork and "learning the importance of hard work."

That message was not lost on the youths as they gathered under a shady tree when the cleanup was done. "This is helping me to become a better person," said Ashley Ramos, 16, of Haledon. "Giving something back and helping the environment."

Sitting beside her was Omar Gonzalez, 17, who has dubbed himself "The Undignified Poet." Gonzalez, who is from Garfield, spends much of his time scribbling his ideas into notebooks, which he carried with him in his backpack.

Asked why he calls himself The Undignified Poet, Gonzalez thought for a moment, and then said he was searching for a dignity in a life that often delivers just the opposite. He was asked what he thought about the cleanup.

"There's dignity in this moment," he said. "I think it's our birthright to preserve the world. We have choices to make, and they can be good or bad, yin or yang."