

The Great Falls look great after volunteer cleanup

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Paterson's majestic Great Falls are a natural wonder that each year draws visitors from around the world, none of whom have come to see the piles of garbage that accumulate on the banks of the national park.

More than 300 volunteers scoured the banks of the Great Falls on Monday to participate in the annual Earth Day cleanup sponsored by the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission. Officially, Earth Day was last Monday, so the cleanup was a week late — and not a moment too soon, by the looks of the haul.

Volunteers, most of them youths from Paterson schools, plucked mountains of plastic bottles, aluminum cans and Styrofoam cups, soccer balls and logs from the water's edge and the raceway, a series of unused canals that historically powered the city's mills. Nothing too unusual was found, except the metal drum discovered near the Ivanhoe Wheelhouse off Spruce Street.



Seven Paterson schools participated in the seventh annual Earth Day Clean-Up of the Great Falls National Historic Park on Monday, April 29, 2019. Students from Paterson Academy for The Gifted and Talented collected trash along the falls. (Photo: Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com)

"There's a lot of hardworking people here," said Brian Davenport, the superintendent of river restoration and facilities for the water commission. "They're definitely motivated."

Working with Davenport on a stretch of the raceway was Jennifer Marques, the commission's laboratory director. She tests the water in the Passaic River every day, and said the cleanup is crucial to protect marine life.

"The river is not a lost cause," she said. "It has improved over time."

Davenport estimated that volunteers would remove several tons of debris by the end of the three-hour cleanup. Participants included John F. Kennedy High School, Panther Academy, Dr. Frank Napier Academy, Act Academy, the Paterson Academy for the Gifted and Talented, School 7, and the New Jersey Youth Corps.

Park Ranger Ilyse Goldman mustered the volunteers at 10 a.m. and gave them a brief pep talk. She advised them to remove surface trash only — items like hypodermic syringes, condoms, clothing and diapers were to be left on the ground.



Seven Paterson schools participated in the seventh annual Earth Day Clean-Up of the Great Falls National Historic Park on Monday, April 29, 2019. (Photo: Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com)

"And be aware of the Canada geese. They can get pretty rowdy," she said.

But on this sun-drenched morning, it appears the birds let the humans do most of the garbage picking. Some of the teens climbed down the bank to the water's edge, while others combed through the dry beds of the raceway. No one came away empty-handed.

About 2 billion gallons of water gushes over the Great Falls each day. The power of the falls is what led Alexander Hamilton to establish America's first industrial center in what would later become Paterson.

During past cleanups, the commission would temporarily "turn off" the falls by diverting water through the Eagle Creek hydroelectric plant. But on Monday, the water was running too high because of recent rain, so the falls had to remain on throughout the cleanup, commission spokesman Doug Scancarella said.

Diponkor Dey, a seventh-grade student at the Paterson Academy for the Gifted and Talented, said he was there because he wanted to "Help Earth out more." Dey said he feels a sense of urgency to address environmental issues, such as global warming.



Seven Paterson schools participated in the seventh annual Earth Day Clean-Up of the Great Falls National Historic Park on Monday, April 29, 2019. Paula Rodriguez, 19, from the ACT Academy at John F. Kennedy High School passes trash to a classmate. (Photo: Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com)

"We've got 12 years to do something," he said, to reverse the effects of global warming.

His classmate Madia Aria, 13, said her group pulled up an old air conditioner. Aria said the cleanup reminded her that it is everyone's responsibility to keep the environment clean.

"I have to be careful where I throw things," she said.