

Drowning in stupidity

By Yvonne Abraham, Globe Columnist | May 20, 2009

LOWELL - A gentle rain is falling on a gray spring morning as a couple walks hand in hand along the Merrimack River. This should be the perfect place for a romantic stroll, what with the water and the handsome historic buildings and such.

Instead, it's a dump - a soupy, tangled monument to sloth and stupidity.

Fallen trees just below the Aiken Street Bridge have netted a shameful catch. In the shallow water are masses of plastic bottles, wood scraps, propane canisters, bits of boat, tires, and a couple of metal drums full of lord-knows-what.

Fortunately, the pair is so entranced with each other they barely notice the garbage piled up against the shore. Not so lucky, I am balancing on a log in the middle of said pile. Trying hard not to fall off, I am gobsmacked at the obscene mess all around me.

"You wouldn't know if there were bodies under there," says Rocky Morrison, a contractor who has spent so much of his own time and money clearing garbage out of the Merrimack over the last four years that he thinks his wife might dump him.

A burly guy, Rocky looks like he could break you in two, but he's as big a chicken as I am when it comes to stepping off the log. He's seen enough to know there may be hypodermic needles lurking among the trash.

Much of this stuff was deliberately dumped in the river by blockheads between here and Franklin, N.H., the river's origin.

No doubt some of these fools thought it would be killingly funny to roll tires down an embankment. Others may have thought it too taxing to dispose of their gas canisters the way a fully functioning human would.

Some might not have been capable of thinking at all as they dropped engine parts into the drink. Splosh, splosh, splosh.

It has been 37 years since the Clean Water Act. We've been chasing down polluting corporations for more than a generation. You'd have to be a hermit living in a box in a cave on another planet to be unaware of the damage this kind of dumping can do.

And yet, there are idiots all over the state throwing things into waterways like it's 1971. They pitch shopping carts into the Mystic, tires into the Ipswich, and their ridiculous plastic water bottles into the Charles. But the Merrimack tops them all.

Morrison and his volunteers pulled 584 freshly-dumped tires out of the river in a single weekend a couple of years ago. He tried placing stone barriers to block one of the spots where losers were rolling stolen cars into the water, but thieves moved them out again.

But for these fallen trees, this trash collecting within view of the Tsongas Arena would have floated miles downriver by now and been sucked into the sea. A lot of this garbage is deemed too dangerous for landfills, but there it is.

These are the same waters, by the way, in which families ski and boat in Methuen and Dracut. Worse, about 300,000 residents in towns on the river actually drink this water.

Morrison has been trying to persuade somebody with more authority and a lot more money than him to bring in cranes and get rid of this mess. Officials come in and see it and are outraged, then nothing happens. It's been here for over a year. Cleaning up trash in rivers is nobody's official responsibility. The government, amazingly enough, relies on volunteers.

On Monday, Bud Caulfield, Lowell's mayor, told me he wants to find a way to clean up the trash using federal stimulus money.

That would be great. But it won't do anything about the real problem, which is that a lot of people are just pigs.

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