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# Protecting South Yuba River proves challenging amidst COVID-19

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**Rebecca O'Neil**  
Staff Writer

## GET INVOLVED

What: Yuba River Cleanup 2020

When: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesday to Sept. 27

Where: Yuba and Bear river watersheds

How: Volunteers can register at <http://www.yubarivercleanup.org>; gloves and trash bags available at office, 313 Railroad Ave. Suite 101, Nevada City

Who: Daniel Belshe, [daniel@yubariver.org](mailto:daniel@yubariver.org) or 530-615-8686

Every September for the last 22 years, the South Yuba River Citizens League has hosted a Yuba River Cleanup with the help of the California Coastal Commission. This year, the river's need for some tender, loving care has only grown as the region reckons with more visitors, more single-use plastics and less accountability amidst the pandemic.

SYRCL's community manager Daniel Belshe said the Yuba's wild and scenic status prevents any commercial or real estate development. Although it is owned by over five different entities — the Tahoe National Forest, the Bear Yuba Forest, land trusts and private property owners — the community is charged with stewarding the land.

"Nothing can ever be developed there," Belshe explained.

Belshe said the Yuba River sees roughly 800,000 visitors a year. This year, Belshe said, the number of visitors was well over the average as city dwellers fled the pandemic-imposed confines of their homes.

"We've had an extreme amount of folks down there," Belshe said. "Usually we get hit on Memorial Day, Labor Day, Fourth of July — this year it was everyday."

Belshe said the unprecedented number of visitors to the Yuba caused issues with traffic and trash, along with human and dog waste.

"Majority of people are first-time visitors, all coming from out of county," Belshe said. "They really don't have any information except for they saw a river on Instagram. They think it will be tranquil and open, and it's not when they come down here."

## SOCIALLY-DISTANCED CLEAN UP

In 2020, the year of the pandemic, Belshe said he spread the clean-up opportunity over the span of 12 days from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at different locations along the river.

"We're trying to formulate a new way to get people out there and protect our happy place," Belshe said.

This year, volunteers will self-direct. Self-determined clean-up groups can pick up materials for cleaning at the SYRCL office — 313 Railroad Ave. Suite 101, Nevada City — at the beginning of the day, and drop the collected trash at the end of the day in the 30-foot dumpster donated by Waste Management, Belshe said.

Spokesperson for Waste Management, Paul Rosymsky, said SYRCL will also be handing out vouchers so volunteers can dump their collected trash directly at the McCourtney Road Transfer Station.

"We understand the importance of having a clean community, so we advocate for that and whenever we can, we try to help keep the area clean," Rosymsky said.

Like past clean-ups, Belshe is looking forward to sharing treasure.

"We've got contests throughout the week, to see who finds the most historical, the most useful or the most fashionable item," Belshe said. "I'm always encouraging people to find some riverwear."

## PAUSING PREVENTATIVE CARE

Belshe said in the past, his team of volunteers addressed the environmental information gap by acting as river ambassadors.

"They talk to people, and encourage them to pick up trash, say 'no pets, no alcohol,'" Belshe said. "We're super friendly, we're not there to push rules, just to let people know about the rules."

The ambassadors are volunteers, Belshe said, which is why, when the pandemic hit, the hands on educational outreach component of SYRCL took a hit.

“This year, because of COVID, we weren’t able to be down there,” Belshe said. “There’s so much trash accumulating.”

Ironically, lack of disposable income makes it harder for people to dispose of their waste responsibly, Belshe said.

Josie Crawford is a botanist and the new executive director for the Wolf Creek Community Alliance. Crawford will be leading groups in clean-ups separate from SYRCL’s along the river’s homeless encampments.

Crawford said water quality is important to her alliance, as well as human dignity.

“We don’t go into any active camps,” Crawford said. “We’re not going to go take someone’s possessions. We go into abandoned camps.”

Crawford said her main priority is to get people involved in increased conscientiousness in the community.

“As long as we have a homeless population in town and we’re not addressing housing, we’re going to have a water quality problem and a hygiene problem because these people camp near water because they need access,” Crawford said.

Aaron Zettler-Mann, SYRCL’s river restoration project manager, said everyone needs access to clean water.

“A cleaner river and a cleaner watershed has very clear tangible benefits,” Zettler-Mann said. “It’s nicer to swim, nicer to hangout, nicer to camp.”

Zettler-Mann said the deeper benefit is “sweat equity.” In other words, community engagement in the water shed.

Zettler-Mann said, like kinesthetic learning, once you’ve hauled out trash, you might think twice before abandoning a crushed water bottle on a park bench, or you might talk to your friends or family about their role in a shared ecological stewardship.

“This kind of change is incremental,” Zettler-Mann said.

Zettler-Mann said the Yuba is the blood of the region, not only giving life, but healing amidst crises like rising carbon emissions from car exhausts or fires.

“All living things require fresh water to live,” Zettler-Mann said. “Healthy rivers and lakes provide us with drinking water and produce food. Healthy river ecosystems help to clean pollution from cars’ exhausts and from wildfires.”

Belshe said regardless of the fires’ statuses on Wednesday, clean-up resources will be available in his office.

“We want volunteers to stay safe and protect themselves from COVID and now poor air quality from the wildfires. If air quality is bad, postpone your shift until later in the day when conditions improve. If conditions fail to improve, volunteers can cancel their shifts and sign up for another shift later in the week. Volunteer safety is our number one priority.”

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