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California river cleanup amasses trash

By Gina Kim
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Linda Schlegel of Auburn was one of the 70 volunteers who picked up trash along the American River in the area near the Foresthill Bridge on Saturday. The volunteers' haul included fast-food take-out bags, boxer shorts, tires, sneakers, and rusted metal packing strips.

Kelly Gaines picked up cigarette butts. She collected empty soda and beer bottles. And, as the 7-year-old piled other bits of trash into a plastic bag, she recognized two types of people in the world – those who litter and those who tidy up after them.

"There are litterbugs: They don't pick up their trash so other people have to clean up the mess," the second-grader explained.

Gaines joined tens of thousands of people Saturday on waterways throughout California in an effort to wipe out the most visible of human stains – garbage.

Volunteers have been cleaning beaches for the past 24 years on California Coastal Cleanup Day. This year the garbage collection

extended into the mountains with the Great Sierra River Cleanup, in which 3,000 volunteers scoured 25 rivers, according to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

As the American River swirled through the canyon below the Foresthill Bridge, Gaines kept at least one bag full of trash from being swept downstream.

"We should be good stewards of the earth," said her father, Assemblyman Ted Gaines, R-Roseville.

The 70 volunteers in the canyon that separates Auburn from Foresthill rounded up McDonald's take-out bags, a pair of gray boxer shorts, tires, a rope dog toy, a lone black sneaker and rusted metal packing strips. A California Highway Patrol

helicopter picked up nets full of the larger debris gathered from beneath the bridge – some believed to have been purposefully thrown over – and hauled it closer to the roadway.

There were six orange traffic cones, a comforter, large metal pipes, a bowling ball, the remnants of a television, and the rusted, warped shell of a stereo.

"It's mostly just mindlessness," said Brittany Juergenson, program analyst for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. "If people knew the impacts of what they leave behind, they wouldn't do it."

Electrical appliances create the most disturbing trash, Juergenson said. Most contain toxic chemicals that leach into the river, which becomes

drinking water for people downstream and irrigation for Central Valley farmers. About 65 percent of California's water comes from the Sierra Nevada, she said.

"What we do here matters to people down below," she said.

Although the cleanup was coordinated throughout California for the first time Saturday, the Protect American River Canyons group has been hosting cleanups twice a year in

the Auburn area since the mid-1990s, said the organization's President Tim Woodall.

"People go to beautiful natural places to enjoy the scenery and enjoy a place untouched by human hands," he said. "When you see garbage, it jars the natural senses."

Patty Keogh, 49, of Auburn, chased her 18-month-old twins around the rocky shores of the American River. Keogh makes family outings from such

activities, hoping to instill a spirit of volunteerism in her children.

Her older son Sammy Tetrault has been attending river cleanups since he was 2. On Saturday, he collected candy wrappers, duct tape, even a pink flip-flop.

"It's fun because we're picking up trash for the Earth," the 7-year-old said. "Trash isn't healthy for the Earth."