

Float Fest and respect for the river

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EYES OF THE SAN MARCOS RIVER

The Eyes of the San Marcos River is a river activist group that was created in 2014 in response to the many issues related to the rapid increasing of traffic on the river and land use issues in the watershed. The group was started by three Texas State University Alumni and now includes over 2,600 members on their Facebook page. The following is a post regarding Float Festival 2016 on the San Marcos River in Martindale.

Sometimes progress is one step forward two steps back. I have been contacted for the last three years by at least one person working for Float Fest to discuss how they can do good job "respecting the river." The first year of the festival, 2014, they insisted that they were not a float-oriented festival and that the focus was on the music festival. They promised that they would do their best to try to reduce the impact of their event on the river and the neighbors. We volunteered on the busy day of the 2014 festival, the first year, and observed that they were NOT doing their best to reduce their impact. We set up that day and collected over 10,000 beer cans from tubers. Floaters did not have mesh trash bags or coolers with latches on them to prevent loss of trash. People drank too much and there were a couple of river rescues. The impact of the festival and our volunteer efforts were well covered by the media and pressure was put onto the organizers from all around.

Float Fest 2015 was expanded from a one-day event to a three-day event and was scheduled the weekend before Labor Day. Once again, we were contacted by festival organizers and we provided a list of policy changes that they could implement to help with the

littering and behavior. We volunteered on the last day of the event and the crowd was minimal. I can't remember what the river count was, but I don't remember it being over the average count for that summer. That year, almost every tube had a bag on it and the people were tame. We saw Float Fest employees diving for trash during the day, something we did not see this year.

This year, was a very busy Float Fest weekend. The festival has now reduced the number of days to two and moved it to mid July to avoid conflicting with other events and holidays. July is already a busy month on this section of river, River Watch counted over 10,000 tubers the Saturday of Float Fest and this was the record count for this section of the San Marcos River. With counts this high, during the peak of the day, the slow parts of the river become tube to tube.

We started our day around 10 a.m. and were set up at Pecan Park RV and River Retreat. These were the same locations that we set up for at previous Float Fest events but due to last October's flood the landscape had changed drastically from previous years. There was a new gravel bank where there wasn't, and deep water where there had been gravel. Access was tricky at Pecan Park due to swift currents, loose rock, and slick exposed clay. Working at both River Retreat and Pecan Park is ideal. It gives us a chance to take trash and warn people about the upcoming fast water and rapids at River Retreat, and also gives us a chance at Pecan Park to capture the trash that they lose if they ignore the warning.

The day started off calmly with mainly groups of families with children going down in the morning hours. By 1 p.m. the crowds changed and the rate of people started to speed up. It

was very hectic work, but most people were grateful of our work and some even said that we were "doing the Lord's work" and that we were "the real MVPs of the river." The hours flew by and as people were getting drunker the work started to become more challenging.

One of the quickest and most effective ways to collect cans from floaters is to use a bucket to catch the cans thrown from the tubers. It makes a game out of it for them. Once people are drunk though, they stop using their brains. I had a group throw two beer bottles at me from their tubes. I caught both of them, but it was a good reminder of what we are dealing with.

A better system was using a kayak on the end of a good length of rope to send out to the floaters for them to deposit any unsecured trash into. The kayak is then pulled back to unload or to be sent out to the next group. This worked very well and did not involve flying objects coming at your head or having to swim amongst the sea of floaters.

I'm not certain of how many of the people on this stretch of river were there for the Float Fest, but it seemed like at least half were on the river for the festival. I would estimate that maybe only half of the people on the river had trash bags. I saw many groups drinking glass bottles of beer and liquor, and there were hundreds of Jello shot containers floating down the river during the day.

We stayed for the entirety of the day on Saturday and collected several hundred pounds of litter and recyclables, including several flat and/or abandoned tubes. We'll be back at it for Labor Day weekend for another cleanup and until then, keep your eyes open and respect the river.

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