

Westport News

Kayaking for a cause

By Larissa Lytwyn

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About twenty kayakers glided down the Five Mile River in Norwalk last week to raise awareness of the area's often-overlooked marine treasures. "The non-invasive nature of kayaking was perfect for [the cause]," said Kim Beaumont, owner of Downunder Kayaking, the kayak shop that sponsored the event. Proceeds benefited Harbor Watch, a Norwalk Harbor water-monitoring program operated through Westport nature center Earthplace.

It was the first fundraiser of its kind. During a Downunder Kayaking event last year, Earthplace board member Mary Meany thought an evening of "sunset paddling" supporting Harbor Watch "might be an interesting thing to do." Longtime Earthplace supporter Beaumont has also volunteered her time testing water on behalf of the program.

Since its inception in 1986, Harbor Watch has become a useful tool for town conservation boards and area fishermen alike. "We do our best to work together with town officials on environmental issues," Director Dick Harris said. A range of volunteers from high school students to senior citizens test waters for dangerously high bacteria levels. "We're focusing a lot on fecal coliform," said Harbor Watch Associate Director Pete Fraboni. Harbor Watch also measures salt content, temperature. "Over the years we've accumulated a great body of data," Fraboni said.

In June, Harbor Watch opened a second lab at Norm Bloom & Son, an oyster harvesting company in South Norwalk. "Having a second facility right near our research vessel, Annie, has been a tremendous asset," Harris said. By monitoring the river pollutants, Harris continued, Harbor Watch can help the oyster company track the best times to farm the oyster and clam beds.

"Some of what we encounter can have relatively easy fixes," said Harbor Watch coastal water technician Eric Sroka. Currently, Sroka is monitoring storm drains with unusually high pollutant levels. "Sometimes damage to the pipes themselves is an issue," he said. "By fixing the pipes, you can fix the problem."

Education can also build awareness. "People don't always think about what goes into those storm drains," Beaumont said. "You could be walking your dog and throw their droppings down the drain. Those droppings can eventually go right into Long Island Sound and raise the bacteria levels to unsafe numbers."

Another issue is the concern of illegal storm drain hookups connected to older homes. This year the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Aquaculture awarded Harbor Watch \$50,000 to clean up those drains and replace hookups, as well as hire Sroka. "We have a lot of resources," Harris said. "I feel fortunate for what we've been able to build."

Earthplace Assistant Development Director Frank Grzynski said Harbor Watch was just one of the center's many programs. Established in 1958, Grzynski said Earthplace's continuous goal is to connect families with nature in a "fun and responsible" way. In addition to its state-licensed nursery school and summer camp programs, Earthplace houses various critters including snakes, bats and guinea pigs.

Families can also meet "Animal Ambassadors" including a pair of bald eagles, turkey vultures and a rare kestrel, a small breed of hawk. "These animals have sustained various injuries preventing them from returning to the wild," Grayznski said. "But they provide great educational value to us here."

Earthplace also has a number of nature trails, including an asphalt walk designed for people with special needs. On Sept. 27 Earthplace will hold its first annual "Walk for Wildlife," a two-mile dog walk for pets and their owners. "There will be many activities for the dogs to enjoy, including obstacle courses," said Senior Naturalist Linda Roberts. "It's going to be a great day for the whole family."

After an hour atop the Filve Mile River, the Harbor Watch supporters convened for a sunset dinner on the dock adjacent to the Rowayton Market. The newly opened Darien Liquor Shop provided select wines while Earthplace board members provided sandwiches, crackers, fruit and cheese.

"We were happy to have this event be a success," Beaumont said. Reflecting on kayaking's growing popularity, Beaumont said kayaks are narrower and easier to maneuver than canoes and other boats. "They can operate in as little as five inches of water," she said. "They don't produce any fumes or noise from engines. You can really get up close to see what you want to. It's a perfect way to enjoy wildlife."

For more information on Earthplace, visit <http://www.earthplace.org>.

For more information on area kayaking, visit <http://www.downunderkayaking.com>