

Littered lake gets a cleanup

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MONCURE -- On the shore and on the water, a small army of volunteers fanned out along the southern tip of Jordan Lake on Saturday to try to clean it up.

They filled a 30-foot-long Dumpster with trash. They filled another one with plastic bottles. They stacked tires upon tires.

But they acknowledged it was barely a dent.

The event was the first organized by a new organization, Clean Jordan Lake, which has a singular mission of ridding the Triangle's largest lake of litter. A federal agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, owns Jordan, and the state controls much of the land around it, but little government money goes toward litter cleanup at the lake.

"What we're doing is a fraction of what's needed," said Fred Royal, the Chatham County director of environmental resources, who took part in Saturday's cleanup.

Jordan Lake has a big litter problem, and not just from the million people a year who boat and fish along the reservoir, which is also a major source of drinking water.

The lake sits below 110 miles of the Haw River and the hundreds of creeks and streams that feed into it. When storms blow through, the rush of water carries debris from front yards and driveways, from parking lots and highways.

Eventually, the litter wedges into the fingerlike coves and along the shores of Jordan Lake, like dirt caught in the web of your hand.

Grabbing trash

On Saturday, Ian Thomson was hanging off the front of a boat in a small bay near Jordan Dam, which stops most everything from going farther downstream. Thomson, 27, of Durham was one of more than 150 volunteers collecting the litter. He grabbed bottles and other objects floating in a thick blanket of algae.

Sarah Bruce, 33, of Durham and the executive director of a group that monitors Falls Lake north of Raleigh, stood in the water in hip waders. She grabbed a refrigerator door, then a water-logged orange construction barrel, yanking both from the lake and into Thomson's hands.

Find out more

The new group Clean Jordan Lake has a website with lots of information about its goals and video of efforts to clean up the lake. Find it at www.cleanjordanlake.org.

Want to help?

Various groups aim to clean up litter across the state. One of the biggest in the state is called N.C. Big Sweep, which coordinates statewide litter cleanup efforts. The next Big Sweep is scheduled for Oct. 2. Clean Jordan Lake plans to have a cleanup across the entire lake that day and is hoping for more than 1,000 volunteers. For information on Big Sweep, visit www.ncbigssweep.org.

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There were baby dolls, all kinds of bottles and cans, tennis balls, basketballs, soccer balls, truck tires, car tires, Big Wheel tires, a teeter totter, a stereo speaker, propane tanks and 55-gallon drums.

Tom Colson of Raleigh surveyed a wide swath of the litter in one spot.

"This is pretty much a 'brownfield' site," he said, referring to what land planners call polluted sites.

Colson has hunted around the lake and fished on it for years. Once, as he trolled for a secluded spot, he parked his boat and walked inland to discover a startling sight: a wide band of debris where the lake had risen following big rains. It stretches for miles around the lake, he said, but is barely visible even from the shore.

Plants, animals hurt

Colson helped organize a cleanup of the lake in 2008 but wanted to do more. He eventually connected with a retired UNC professor and avid kayaker, Fran DiGiano, and the two formed Clean Jordan Lake.

Colson, who specializes in water quality for an environmental engineering firm in Raleigh, said the litter hurts the lake by smothering vegetation at the shore. Animals can get tangled in the litter, too.

Elaine Chiosso, executive director of the Haw River Assembly, an advocacy group, said it's astounding how much litter there is.

"You can stand on the bridge at Bynum in a big rain and just watch the tires float by," said Chiosso, who helped out Saturday.

Colson said he agrees that the cleanup was a small gesture but thinks attacking the problem is worth a try. He hopes to start raising money soon.

And he says he has big plans in mind: He wants to eventually rent barges and cranes that will remove far more than the flotilla of canoes and ski boats could on Saturday.

"A barge," he said, waving his arm across the horizon. "I want one here."

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