

Going Out on the River: What to Know

1. Know why this is worth doing

Faith Identity: Our biblical foundations teach us that our role on earth is to “tend and keep” the rest of creation. Jesus taught us to love our neighbors, whether we know them or not and whether they are part of our in-group or not. This is a chance to be a neighbor to both our local river and the humans who live along it. See [Every Creature Singing, unit 1, session 4.](#)

Furthermore, rivers play an important role in the Bible, from Genesis 2 to Revelation 22. The Bible begins and ends with a river flowing from God. The river in the New Jerusalem is filled with the water of life, watering trees for the healing of the nations. In cleaning a river, we are participating in God's vision for rivers that bring vitality and beauty to our communities.

Beauty: Some of the trash you will find is not hazardous to the river, but it's ugly. People are more inclined to take care of places that look beautiful. They are also more likely to spend time in beautiful places. By removing trash, you can protect the river from further trashing and enable more people to have nature experiences.

Water quality: Some of the trash found in rivers is releasing hazardous materials. River crews report finding things such as car batteries and old cans of paint.

Witness: When others see people having fun working together for the sake of the broader community, it speaks well of your group and provides an example to others.

Community: Wading or paddling a river on a warm day can be a lot of fun, and working together on a shared task is a good way to get to know people. You will see beauty as well as ugliness. There may be moments of humor: “How did that toilet get in the river?”

2. Know your river

Talk to a local river organization about regional hazards. Here at the Mennonite Creation Care Network headquarters in Northern Indiana, we know very little about flash flooding in canyons, estuarial tides or quicksand. Please talk to water-savvy locals about your particular river.

Scout your river: It is important to try out your route in advance. This can help you spot any snags or unique trash. It will also give you an idea of timing. Remember that it will take much longer to pick up trash than to just canoe the stretch.

Consult with the relevant local government office: The Department of Natural Resources (U.S.) can advise you on matters such as a good site for a river clean up, best date in your region and can warn you of any hazards. They may ask you to call them if you find certain

kinds of trash such as a submerged vehicle. Without professional expertise, moving some toxic trash will do more harm than good. In Canada, it might be the Ministry of Environment.

Water levels are usually higher in the early summer than in August. The advantage of later summer is that more trash is exposed and accessible. The disadvantage is that more snags are exposed. High water levels after a heavy rain can also be unsafe. Seek local advice.

3. Know your participants

It is particularly important to know your workers' abilities if you are leading a youth group. Consider:

Maturity level: when in doubt, make your river clean up a mentor-mentee or family activity rather than just youth.

Swimming ability: If you are going out on a river that is deeper than your participants' height, you need to know what kind of swimmers they are. Having a pool party in advance or polling parents is one way to assess this.

Canoeing experience: You need at least one person per canoe who can steer reasonably well.

Health considerations: Ask about allergies, bee stings, expired tetanus shots. Are there elderly people with poor balance or limited mobility?

4. Know your trash

Know what you might encounter because you will have to figure out what to do with it when it comes ashore. You could ask a local trash/recycling company if they are willing to provide dumpsters. If not, plan how you can sort trash versus recyclables and how you will haul it.

Tires: You are likely to encounter many of these, and most trash services won't accept them. Check with a local auto repair business or tire company for advice. Note that Bridgestone has a [Tires4ward program](#) for recycling tires.

Sharp things: Provide a container in each canoe to keep these things out of the way.

Vehicle parts or other items that may contain fuel or other toxics. Call the DNR for advice on whether you should try to remove the hazard or leave it to their expertise.

Questionable substances: One river leader described encountering plastic bottles with a white substance inside that may have been meth. If this happens, do not open the bottle and call your local police department immediately.

5. Know your safety rules

Not everything our Anabaptist forbearers did for the sake of their faith was 100% safe. Neither is a river clean-up. No one I interviewed reported a serious mishap even after multiple river clean ups. **HOWEVER**, here are some things that *could* go wrong:

- Stepping on something sharp
- Getting cut from handling something sharp
- Exposure to toxins in mud or water
- Getting a canoe pinned parallel to a log. At best, this is hard to undo. At worst, it is dangerous.
- Falling on slippery rocks
- Capsizing
- Hypothermia
- Bumps, bruises and strains from trying to lift heavy items out of the water.
- Hostility from a mistrustful person living along the river.

Imagine which of these circumstances are possible in your situation and how you would handle them if they happened. Know whom you would call for help and where all of your takeout options are.

Suggested rules include:

- Each person in a canoe must have a flotation device with them.
- Portage around log barriers rather than going over them.
- Agree on a distress hand signal in case the group is spread out.
- Never ever approach the base of a dam. Dams are deadly.
- The river is public space, but the riverbank is not. Avoid trespassing too far up the bank.

6. Know what to wear and bring

Everyone needs:

- Old clothes that can get wet.
- Close-toed old shoes that can get wet or river shoes. No flip flops.
- Rubber gloves
- A water bottle. Snacks are also a good idea.
- Sun screen
- Trash bags (Some people report it is easier to just throw the trash in the bottom of the canoe and sort it on land.)

The leader also needs:

- A phone (Keep in a Ziploc bag. Store emergency numbers such as the DNR, local police department, friends backing you up)
- A first aid kit.
- Some people report that grabbers are helpful.

7. Know how you're moving canoes, trash and people

This will vary depending on your location, but getting boats and passengers back home without a long wait can be tricky if you don't plan ahead well.

Identify all possible take out sites along your route because you may pick up more trash than you think. It is convenient to drop some along the way. Make sure you have enough vehicles with hitches if you need to tow canoe trailers.

8. Neighborhood etiquette

It is a courtesy to let those nearby know what you are doing. Some river crews go door-to-door with a handout for the people living along the stretch of river they plan to clean. This is great PR for your group. If you are canoeing through a park or public lands, let your park department know.