

# Ripple Effect

## Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful group protects river watershed

By Sara Diamond Patterson

Do you know what the most prevalent plastic pollution in our waterways is?

Disposable water bottles? Good guess, but no.

Grocery bags? They're annoyingly everywhere but are not the most common.

Give up? It's cigarette butts. Each year, Americans toss 9.7 billion tightly wound, single-use plastic-filled filters, according to the latest Keep America Beautiful figures. Studies have found that once in the water, a discarded butt contains enough toxins to kill aquatic life within two surrounding gallons.

It's estimated that 75% of cigarettes purchased end up on the ground, but the effort of a local conservation group is starting to make inroads before they wash into our precious waterways. The Tennessee Recycling Coalition recognized Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful as the

2023 Nonprofit Recycler of the Year for its cigarette litter prevention collaboration with Dollywood. Since the program's launch in 2021, educational and attractive cigarette receptacles set up by KTNRB at the theme park have led to the recycling of more than 350,000 cigarette butts.

"We're so proud of this honor, more than anything, because of the commitment from Dollywood and the other supporting partners who worked to ensure that this trailblazing collaboration would protect the Tennessee River watershed from the harmful effects of cigarette litter," KTNRB Executive Director Kathleen Gibi says.

Protecting the watershed from trash is the primary function of KTNRB, the nation's only water-focused Keep America Beautiful affiliate. Since 2016, approximately 4,000 volunteers have helped remove 620,696 pounds of trash along the 652-mile Tennessee River and its tributaries during group-sponsored cleanup events.

KTNRB has overseen the adoption of more than 200 river miles, with adoptees removing more than 100,000 pounds of garbage on their own.

"Our mission is to educate and inspire people to take action to create a healthy, beautiful Tennessee River for generations to come," Kathleen says.

She sees her group filling a transitional and educational role as more people become aware of the harmful effects of aquatic pollution. Her focus is to eradicate legacy litter—the long-term piles upon piles of trash accumulated over the years by everything from dumping to careless butt-tossing.

### A Shared Vision

Thanks to partners such as Tennessee Valley Authority, the group bought two 26-foot work boats and a truck for hauling the seemingly endless bags of trash volunteers gather.



Volunteers celebrate a successful day cleaning up the Tennessee River watershed. PHOTOS BY KEEP THE TENNESSEE RIVER BEAUTIFUL



Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful Executive Director Kathleen Gibi brings in another boatful of trash gathered along the banks of the river.

“We wouldn’t exist if not for TVA,” Kathleen says. “They helped us to start up and are the main reason we have been able to buy our two boats.”

Helping out groups such as KTNRB is a win-win for TVA, says Melinda A. Watson, partnerships and strategic integration manager for the utility.

“Creating partnerships and involving others in the care of the Valley’s natural resources is a goal for TVA,” she says. “TVA is proud to have been an important part of helping KTNRB get on their feet, and we see ourselves continuing to be involved at some level into the future. We are aligned in our goals of a clean and beautiful Tennessee River system.”

Kathleen was heartened this past October during a Keep the Tennessee River Watershed Beautiful Month revisit to a boat ramp where the group held an extensive legacy-litter cleanup four years earlier. Because it is at a popular campground, Kathleen said she expected to see piles of litter upon their return.

“It was so exciting to see it was spotless in the area we had been before,” she says. “This means people are cleaning up litter as they’re seeing it.”

Reinforcing this mindset—clean up as you go along—is the ultimate goal of her group, which encourages the adoption and maintenance of mile-long sections of the river.

“That’s the end game,” she says. “We come into the major sites with our crews

and get rid of the legacy litter. Then the adopters take over monitoring their mile and reporting any issues to us.”

That’s where the education component of KTNRB flows. Changing habits takes time.

“Cigarette smoking is second nature to some cultures around the world, and some people don’t think of tossing a butt as littering,” Kathleen says. “We’re trying to help change that.”

Melinda agrees people can alter their habits.

“Bringing awareness to the results of one’s actions is the first step in changing behavior,” she says. “In addition to education, it is also important to make it easy to not litter.”

As Dollywood prepares for its opening season, the receptacles will be ready for another record-breaking round of recycling. And KTNRB will continue scheduling cleanups until the group finds itself obsolete.

“We’re not river custodians,” Kathleen says. “We’d love to see such a reduction in litter that we work ourselves out of the business of larger river cleanup efforts, and then we can focus on something like planting trees.” ■

*To volunteer for one of KTNRB’s spring cleanup events, you only need a willing attitude and a good pair of shoes. For the schedule of upcoming cleanups, visit [keepthriverbeautiful.org/upcomingcleanups](http://keepthriverbeautiful.org/upcomingcleanups).*



Cleaning up decades’ worth of “legacy litter” remains the group’s focus.

## Riverfront Property Adoption Available

Can’t make it to one of the Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful cleanup events? They have made it possible to adopt and maintain individual portions of the 652 miles of shoreline on your own time.

Families, organizations and individuals can claim 1 mile or more—on one or both sides of the river—and oversee its ongoing preservation. Any shoreline you adopt is yours to maintain. The Adopt-a-River Mile program provides free supplies to keep your area clean, incentives—such as T-shirts and water bottles—and recognition.

Visit [www.keepthetennesseebeautiful.org/adopt](http://www.keepthetennesseebeautiful.org/adopt) for a list of available miles.

## KTNRB by the Numbers

Since 2016, volunteers have removed 600,000 pounds of trash from the Tennessee River system.

Multiple records were broken in 2023:

- ▶ Most trash removed in one year: 218,719 pounds.
- ▶ Most volunteers in one year: 994.
- ▶ Most trash removed in one hour: 31,115 pounds, achieved by 172 employees of Clayton Homes.

Other 2023 milestones:

- ▶ Received state award for cigarette butt recycling partnership with Dollywood.
- ▶ Surpassed 210 river-mile adoptions.
- ▶ River-mile adopters removed 107,317 pounds of trash.
- ▶ Placed 1,000 cigarette receptacles in a seven-state watershed.
- ▶ Won four state awards from the Tennessee Recycling Coalition and three state awards from the Tennessee Department of Transportation.
- ▶ Established first permanent headquarters at the Duncan Boat Dock in Knoxville.
- ▶ Expanded fleet to two boats and one truck.



Celebrating the enormous bottom-dwelling river monsters

**By Sara Diamond Patterson**

Once a year, along the banks of the French Broad River, a window to prehistoric times opens.

Enter the mighty sturgeon—giant fish that can stretch up to 9 feet long and tip the scales at a whopping 300 pounds—that have made their home along Tennessee’s river bottoms for 120 million years. They have changed little since they shared the Earth with the dinosaurs, but in the 1960s,

their numbers began dwindling as dam construction, commercial fishing for their caviar and pollution took a toll.

Governmental and private groups rallied, initiating one of the country’s most extensive conservation projects. Since 2000, more than 250,000 young sturgeons have been stocked in the Holston, French Broad and upper Tennessee rivers.

With help from the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Administration launched

Sturgeonfest in 2014 to celebrate the next generation of sturgeons. The most recent version brought out hundreds to Seven Islands State Birding Park in Kodak for the opportunity to scoop up a squirming baby fish and gently release it into the sparkling French Broad River.

“From the get-go, this event has been so beloved,” says Park Manager Justine Cucchiara. “It just has such a light touch and the best vibe. Maybe it’s because the baby sturgeons are just so dang cute, but it always

feels more like a neighborhood party.”

Attendees were fascinated with and respectful of their tiny charges, and the day flowed naturally. Justine says the secret is to keep the event manageable.

“We put out a limited word through the Facebook page and other social media,” she says. “We offered time-designated 1,000 sign-up slots to release a baby fish, and they all went in just a few days.”

The beauty of the surrounding area and the cleanliness of the French Broad makes Seven Islands an ideal location to interact with such a unique species, Justine says. Vendors, food trucks and demonstrations by raptors visiting from the nearby American Eagle Foundation contributed to the block party atmosphere.

Even though there was no fee to release a baby, fin fans supplied more than \$800 in donations toward next year’s Sturgeonfest

and ongoing conservation efforts.

As a protected species, sturgeon must be released and reported if caught. TWRA agents use the information gathered and an extensive tagging program to keep tabs on the population in Tennessee’s rivers.

Knoxville’s Kristin Majni, attending Sturgeonfest with her husband and 2-year-old son, eagerly anticipated meeting a much smaller version of a fish she encountered a few years ago.

“I was fortunate enough to join a TWRA-tagging trip one time, and I caught a 5-foot sturgeon,” she says. “I’m so excited to see what a 5-inch one looks like.”

The females begin breeding at 24 to 26 years of age, so the sturgeon released in 2000 might be having their own babies soon. With a 150-year lifespan, it’s possible these babies will help hold their numbers for another several million years. ■



**Seven Islands State Birding Park Manager Justine Cucchiara enjoys Sturgeonfest as a ranger and as a mom with her son, Luca.**



**This tiny sturgeon could grow to be 9 feet long and weigh up to 300 pounds.** PHOTOS BY SARA DIAMOND PATTERSON



**Crowds remained steady all day for the opportunity to release a baby sturgeon into the French Broad River.**