



Summer on Belle Isle

For five weeks this summer, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice had groups of Detroit youth monitor the Belle Isle beach for water quality, develop media projects on environmental justice, restore a picnic shelter and learn about brownfields and conservation. To round out their experience, the youth also received computer training and counseling.



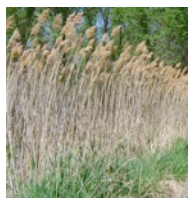
supervisor Charles Stokes. “My hope for the youth is that they realize that just one individual can make a difference.”

Environmental justice is all about building the capacity in people to be able to make their communities a safer, healthier, more beautiful place to live.

“We wanted the youth of the city to learn how they could participate in

“I didn’t have this type of thing growing up, and would’ve jumped at a chance like this,” said youth

making Detroit a better place,” said program coordinator Domiana Carter.



Invasion of the Phragmites!

You may not know its name, but you’ve definitely seen it - on the sides of the highway, by lakes and ponds. Tall and dense, phragmites is a common sight. One of DWEJ’s youth groups helped clear the phragmites from the native garden at the Detroit Belle Isle Nature Zoo. “Since the phragmites were taken down, people can now see the garden’s true beauty,” said one participant.

Why do people expend so much energy trying to get rid of this plant? Why does the state Department of Environmental Quality devote an entire page on its website to phragmites control?

Michigan is home to a native species of phragmites, but in the late 1800s, a European species was introduced. This foreign phragmites is darker, denser and more aggressive. The fast-growing plant crowds out native plants and animals, reduces shoreline access for recreational activities,

and creates a fire hazard by providing dry fuel with its presence. According to a recent study by the University of Delaware, the plant emits a chemical to knock out neighboring plants. The poison of the chemical is intensified by the sun’s UV rays (meaning climate change will make phragmites even more powerful). The only way to manage phragmites is through an integrated approach, combining herbicides with cutting and mowing, flooding, and controlled burning.

Interestingly, although considered a nuisance here, phragmites is seen as a resource in other countries. It is used to make thatched roofs, baskets, jewelry, paper, and even boats. Last summer’s youth thought that one way of disposing of the pulled up phragmites - which must otherwise be burned - would be to use the plant material to make thatched roofs for Belle Isle picnic shelters or kiosks that need a new roof.

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KEEPING BELLE ISLE BEACH SAFE FOR THE PUBLIC

DWEJ organized a group of youth to monitor water quality at the Belle Isle beach this summer, through the Alliance for Great Lakes' Adopt-a-beach program. Although the Detroit Health Department takes water samples at the beach, the results are not made public. The youth checked for coliform bacteria, *E. coli* and shoreline currents – three factors used to determine whether bacteria levels are safe for swimming. The goal was to push the city health department to publish their water testing results, and to expose youth to career paths that combine science with public health.

Coliform is a bacteria that is commonly found in our environment, and its presence in swimming water will not necessarily make you ill. However, fecal coliform are an indicator for other disease-causing organisms such as *E. coli*. (Note that coliform should not be found in drinking water.)

E. coli bacteria can be harmful. Most strains will not hurt you, but some pose a serious health threat if swallowed. Various strains of *E. coli* can cause diarrhea, kidney failure, pneumonia, urinary tract infections, and so on. Also, as an indicator of fecal contamination, high levels of *E. coli* mean there could be really harmful pathogens like *Salmonella* and *Giardia* present as well. Groups

at higher risk of serious disease from *E. coli* are children under five, the elderly, and those with long-term illnesses such as cancer or AIDS.

Shoreline currents – the speed and direction of the river water – are crucial in controlling bacteria spread, determining whether bacteria will multiply or be dispersed. Bacteria levels often increase after large rainfalls, when fecal bacteria wash into the water or overloaded city water systems release raw sewage into the river. In Detroit, temporary storage facilities hold overflow sewage and stormwater, screening and disinfecting before releasing it into the river (DWSD).

A main source of *E. coli* at the Belle Isle beach is bird feces. However, if boats discharge raw sewage into the river (which is illegal), that becomes a source of very harmful *E. coli*.

The Michigan Public Health standards for public beaches recommend a limit of 300 colonies per 100 mL (MDEQ) – on a 3M petrifilm water test (see photo to right), that's 3 blue dots. Any higher, and the beach should be closed for health risks. DWEJ youth took three 1 mL samples twice a week for five weeks, and found that *E. coli* levels exceeded the recommended limit at least twice (geometric averages of 493 and 509 colonies). However, the

beach was never closed. Any other public beach in Wayne County would have public notification in order to protect the public from potential harm.

The public should be aware that *E. coli* levels at the Belle Isle beach are not always safe for swimming. It may be inconvenient to have the public beach closed, but wouldn't you rather be safe? We deserve the same standards of public health and safety at our only public beach.



Above: A 1 mL sample of Detroit River water from the Belle Isle beach is pipetted onto petrifilm.

Below: The sample taken August 4, 2009 showed 15 *E. coli* colonies.



Measuring Longshore Current

The longshore current helps indicate the likelihood of bacteria being present. If the current is fast, bacteria is less likely to stick around to multiply. Longshore current is measured by timing how long it takes for a piece of driftwood to float 10 meters along the shore.

Here, interns Whitney Smith, 19, and Noelle Frye, 18, help the group measure out 10 meters on the Belle Isle beach.



THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

Friday, Aug 21 was another great day for Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. Our youth program (YOPAP) and community education program (CHATS) collaborated with the Detroit branch of the Sierra Club, the office of State Rep Rashida Tlaib, community activists from Southwest Detroit, The Friends of the Detroit River and Canadian environmental organizations Polaris Institute and Sierra Youth Coalition for an international exchange.

Thirteen people have died of cancer on a single block.

The Canadian groups visited Detroit to learn about our environmental justice issues, as well as to share their own. This exchange helped youth realize that both countries have to deal with the consequences of heavy industry along the Detroit River.

The activities included a bus tour of Detroit's southwest side, where various community leaders explained that their heavily industrialized community suffers from an extremely high rate of cancer-related deaths. This is a direct result of corporate (cont.) industrial irresponsibility and neglect. For example, sediment emitted from the Marathon oil refinery and DTE's coal-burning plant coats the community and settles into the soil, killing trees. Smokestacks on Zug Island release air pollutants.

Because there are so many different industries and air pollution is hard to track, it's hard to say what is coming from where. But roofs, which are supposed to average 20-30 years, only last about 10 years in this community, and there is often a filmy residue left on the cars. On a single block, 13 people have died of cancer.

There is no shelter where the residents of 48217 can escape the constant bombardment of air, water, soil and noise pollution. For decades, this community has also had to live with shaking and vibrating homes, a result of salt mine drilling, which takes place hundreds of feet beneath its polluted soil.

This almost-forgotten part of Detroit doesn't even have a Homeland Security evacuation plan – in the case of an oil spill at Marathon, for example - like other surrounding communities, such as Dearborn and Melvindale. The petroleum, auto, salt, gypsum and commercial energy industries are deeply entrenched in this mostly Latino and African American community.

Marathon Oil's expansion will take another entire city block to refine tar sands imported from Canada, increasing land, water and air pollution in both countries, while only creating six new jobs, none of which will go to the surrounding community.

After the bus tour, the group was honored to meet with Detroit City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson. Councilwoman Watson is the only city council member with her own environmental justice task force. Each member of the group was personally welcomed, thanked, and

presented with a Spirit of Detroit Award. The award recognizes "exceptional achievement, outstanding leadership, and dedication to improving the quality of life."

The day was topped off with a meet, greet, all-you-can-eat-pizza and salad buffet at Pizzeria Venti located on Wayne State campus. The Canadian group brought a movie called *Toxic Trespass*, which described the health impacts of environmental pollutants on children. A particularly interesting fact learned from the video is that air and water pollution from Zug Island is affecting health in Canada.

This event has generated interest in learning more about environmental issues beyond their own communities. Suggestions included the Polaris Institute and the Sierra Youth Coalition hosting similar events for Detroit groups in Canada, and DWEJ visiting a Nigerian environmental organization attempting to shed more light on environmental issues in Africa.

Air and water pollution from Zug Island is affecting health in Canada.

The successful exchange of ideals and information has laid the foundation for future international collaboration.



YOUTH RENOVATE PICNIC SHELTER BY FISHING DOCK



Youth interns replaces the benches at picnic shelter No. 20.

DWEJ youth partnered with the Detroit Belle Isle Nature Zoo and the City Dept. of Parks and Rec. to restore picnic shelter No. 20 at the fishing dock on Belle Isle. Phillip Cooley, co-owner of Slows BarBQ, donated time, expertise, materials, equipment and the use of his shop to the project.

The shelter group worked together to renovate a rundown picnic shelter at the fishing dock by the Yacht Club. They did a lot of hard work such as hammering, welding, sanding, and painting the sheds. Many people go out by the shelter to fish and picnic and they are enjoying the shelter's new look.

Andy Stadts, 75, from Hamtramck, comes to the dock five or six times a year. He said the shelter was very messy before, but looks great now.

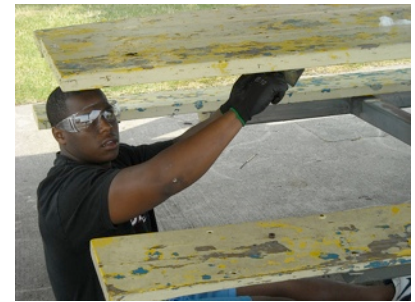
After all the hard work the youth put into restoring the shelter, they do not want people trashing and messing up the sheds. The youth were upset to find that someone had already carved a name into the brand new table. They have a message to the Detroit community: We do not want you to destroy what we have built, so let's keep the sheds up together!

Leonard Langston, 58, from Roseville, says that any conservation or cleaning up is an improvement. He'd like to see more piers on Belle Isle, and holes in the railing so you can put the pole in it, like they have at the suburban piers. "It's pretty rugged here, and we need some coverings so you don't bake."

Shantel Norwood, 18, who worked on the shelter as an intern this summer, plans to continue to volunteer with DWEJ to finish the project. After the shelter renovation, they will put in a native garden with a rainwater catchment system.



Andy Stadts, 75, of Hamtramck, Richard Stevenson, 76, and William Myles 42, both of Detroit, relax at the newly restored picnic shelter.



Above: Intern Damian Chatman 21, works on an old picnic table.

Below: A brand new picnic table.



MEDIA GROUP WORKS ON A TV SHOW

Siwatu Salama-Ra, 18, has been working with DWEJ youth to create a television show about environmental justice in Detroit.

With the help of Ed Gardiner from Motor City Movie House, the youth learned how to do on-camera interviews. The media group visited each of the other YOPAP sites to take footage of the work and interview students about what they were doing.

The project will be a great way for youth to learn about the work that is being done for Detroit's environment, while developing the skills to spread that message through media.

A special thanks to all of our sponsors, volunteers, and partners:

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