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Kayak trip Saturday will celebrate clean up of the Androscoggin, acknowledge work still to be done

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The lower Androscoggin River, as seen from above. (Photo by Point of View Helicopter Services)

BRUNSWICK— Fifty years ago, a miles-long kayak down the Androscoggin River would have been unthinkable.

Known as one of the most polluted rivers in America, the river was one of the inspirations for the landmark 1972 Clean Water Act. Before that, oxygen levels were so low that nearly all fish and aquatic life were killed. Valuable species like Atlantic Salmon and sturgeon were lost.

Michelle Moody, who grew up in Orr's Island, said she can't remember ever seeing an eagle there until adulthood. Acid fog rising from the river was known to peel house paint in Lewiston, according to Ed Friedman, chairman of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay steering committee.

Now, 47 years after the 1972 Clean Water Act, which made it so that people could no longer just dump waste into America's rivers, the Androscoggin looks like an entirely different body of water. Species are returning and the water is flowing clearer.

To celebrate the work so far, the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay and the Maine Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club are hosting a kayak trip down the tidewater portion of the river on Saturday. The trip is not designed for beginners, said Moody, who is leading the excursion. It will likely be six to 10 miles long, depending on the weather, and sea kayaks are recommended. Registration is required and space is limited. "We want to educate people about the importance (of conservation)," she said, remembering how poor the water quality was when she was younger. "It's great to see what happens" when land is protected, she added, noting recent trips where she has seen eagles, herons, osprey.

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"It made such a huge difference in so many rivers," she said of the legislation.

The trip will also recognize the work that still needs to be done.

According to Doug Watts of Friends of Kennebec Salmon, "The river's water quality, odor and clarity becomes noticeably poorer in the reaches below Jay and Lewiston-Auburn. The middle and lower Androscoggin's water quality and aesthetics remain significantly impaired compared with other large Maine rivers such as the Penobscot, Kennebec and Saco."

Many species have returned but fish like Atlantic Salmon are still struggling.

With new regulations that restrict which waterways are protected under the Clean Water Act, it is important not to move backward, Moody said. Education and outreach like the trip are important steps of making sure that doesn't happen.

To register for the kayak trip, contact Moody at (207) 406-5221.

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