

Introduction

The Huron River is vital to the quality of living in Lower Michigan. The river is a classroom, practice facility, and “playground” for paddle sports; the river provides opportunities for people of all skill levels to enjoy kayaking, canoeing, and rowing. There may be potential to expand the whitewater kayaking resources on the Huron River. New whitewater in Lower Michigan will make Ann Arbor an even more attractive destination for paddle sports enthusiasts.

Background

Raw Strength & Courage Kayakers—a formal club of whitewater paddlers—was founded as part of the University of Michigan’s Recreational Sports Program in 1967. Three manmade whitewater features have existed on the Huron River since the turn of the century: a rock dam upstream of Zeeb Road, Delhi Rapids, and a rock dam upstream of the intersection of Tubbs Road and Huron River Drive. While the club introduces 150 – 200 people to the sport of whitewater kayaking each year, the condition of Ann Arbor’s manmade whitewater sites continues to decline.

In a basic survey, 72.8 % of 92 local paddlers indicated that they were “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied” with the number of whitewater features on the Huron River. 68% of 91 paddlers responded likewise to the quality of the Huron’s existing whitewater features. Out of 91 survey-takers, 98.9% responded positively to a proposed installation of new whitewater features in the vicinity of Argo Dam.

Whitewater paddling conditions on the Huron River typically occur in conjunction with spring runoff, storm events, and upstream dam releases. Under these circumstances, water levels rise and create water features that whitewater kayakers enjoy. The most popular months for whitewater kayaking on the Huron River are April and May. Runoff conditions sometimes create hazards, such as obstacles in the river (i.e. fallen trees, debris) or “strainers.” Runoff can also contain hazardous biological and chemical pollution.

Solution

On July 28, 2008, the Ann Arbor News ran a story with the following headline: “Removal of Ann Arbor’s Argo Dam could bring white water rafting to Huron River.” The story alluded to consideration for removing Argo Dam, and cited the success of the East Race Waterway, an artificial whitewater course used by kayakers and recreational rafters in South Bend, Indiana. The thought of a close-to-home, professionally-designed whitewater park in Ann Arbor is intriguing. Many Huron River paddlers train briefly during high water conditions in the spring and spend the summer and fall driving to rivers in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and beyond. A local whitewater park would provide a year-round opportunity to train, practice, teach, and “play,” while keeping travel costs at a minimum.

Conclusion

The whitewater kayaking community—consisting of clubs and organizations from Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Lansing, Flint, Toledo, and Windsor—would benefit from the addition of new, maintained whitewater features on the Huron River. If an opportunity exists to improve water quality, habitat, and whitewater paddling conditions on the Huron River, then the whitewater kayaking community supports such a change.