The Greenbuild Greening Committee pitches in to clean up the Los Angeles River

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By *Jed Donaldson*

With Greenbuild 2016 just a few months away, it seemed appropriate that the Greenbuild 2016 Greening Committee would give back to the iconic host city by pitching in to help clean up the Los Angeles River.

In 2009, the Frogtown Artwalk had a screening of the film “Rock the Boat;” in which an environmentalist kayaks down the Los Angeles River to protest the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designation of the river as an un-navigable waterway. The fallout of the film was a paradoxical change in the attitudes towards the river. In July 2010, the EPA declared the concrete-lined Los Angeles River channel “traditional navigable waters” and forever changed how this city views one if its greatness resources. With this designation, the river is now protected under the Clean Water Act. Moreover, the declaration has catalyzed the current movement to reinstate the quality of nature in and around Los Angeles.

One of the original protectors of the LA River is Lewis McAdams, who founded the non-profit organization Friends of the Los Angeles River, also known as FoLAR. When the river was still designated a ‘channel’ FoLAR was one of the few activist groups trying to protect the river that the city had turned its back on. One of the ways to bring awareness was through volunteer events. FoLAR’s annual event – The Great LA River Cleanup – is open to the public and a perfect opportunity to help better the environment.

The Great LA River Cleanup

This year, the 27th Great LA River cleanup was held in April. This was not only an opportunity to build a relationship between USGBC and FoLAR, but it will hopefully be an initiative that can influence future Greenbuild conferences as well as future local chapter commitments.

The cleanup was divided between three river sections – upper river, mid river and lower river – and each section was designated for a weekend in April. The Greening Committee chose to participate in the Mid River section on April 23 because it has the closest proximity to downtown Los Angeles. About 30 USGBC volunteers climbed down into the river and removed trash that had collected for years. More than 9,000 volunteers in total participated in the cleanup and removed 70 tons of trash this year. At our site, there were 1,100 people who removed 8.5 tons of trash. On average, each person filled about of two bags in the span of just three hours.

The Greening Committee would like to thank FoLAR for leading the effort to revive the Los Angeles River, and would also like to thank those USGBC members who came out that day ready to work and sporting a positive mindset. Some of the volunteers shared their thoughts on the event's success and expressed the positive energy that surrounded the day:

- "The LA River Cleanup was a memorable experience. I picked up everything from an old gym bag to a $5 dollar bill that must have been Mother Nature's good karma. Coming together to help our environment left a lasting feeling of community." – Matt Harrigan, Managing Director, Pace Equity
- "The experience really helps you to appreciate how much of our trash just ends up in the environment. It's not 'out of sight, out of mind' when you throw away your trash. It's always going somewhere it shouldn't and impacting natural habitats," – Caroline Ingalls, Designer, Hirsch Bedner Associates
- "It was a great team building experience, and it was inspiring to see all of the participants together for a common goal!" – Nina Hamamura, Green Business Solutions
- "I'm proud to have helped orchestrate an event with such immediate and measurable impact on greening our own backyard in L.A." – Emily Hand, Project Manager, Verdical Group

Jed Donaldson is the Greenbuild Greening Sub-Committee Co-Chair and a senior designer at Steinberg Architects.