

River's potential 'unlimited'

By Neal Haldane
staff writer

IN THE not-too-distant future, a family in metropolitan Detroit may hop into their car during a warm summer day, travel a few minutes to a recreation site and enjoy an afternoon of fishing, canoeing or maybe even swimming.

These families will not be traveling to Metro Beach, Kensington, Stony Creek, Lower Huron Metropark or any of the other traditional parks.

Their destination will be the Rouge River.

Preposterous? Not if efforts to clean the Rouge River are successful.

The Rouge River — sometimes described as an open sewer in certain areas — could become an important recreational area for the more than 1.5 million people who live in its watershed.

"Why should people drive 50 miles to have the recreational uses of a river when they have one within 10 minutes," asked James Murray, chairman of the Michigan Water Resources Commission.

"The main reason to care about cleaning up the river is the potential of the Rouge," according to Jim Bredin, acting coordinator for the Rouge River Strategy for the Department of Natural Resources.

"We feel the Rouge has some of the greatest potential of any river in the state. When you take a look at the number of people within a short distance of one of the branches of the Rouge — it's amazing."

THE ROUGE, with its four branches, makes a 126-mile trek through 42 communities in three counties. From its starting point at the Troy/Rochester Hills border the river flows through upscale neighborhoods, middle class subdivisions, sparkling office corridors and gritty industrial areas before emptying into the Detroit River.

A total of 50 miles of parkland is found along the Rouge, a large percentage in Wayne County.

Making the Rouge a more attractive recreational destination is important to Wayne County residents because the river is one of the few water-related recreational sites in the area, according to Erik Reickel, Wayne County Parks administrator.

The county has 17½ miles of developed parkland along the Middle Rouge River — adjacent to the Edward Hines Parkway — and a similar amount of undeveloped property along the Lower Rouge.

"The recreational potential in Wayne County is basically unlimited because the Rouge is under-utilized, under-maintained and under-developed," Reickel said.

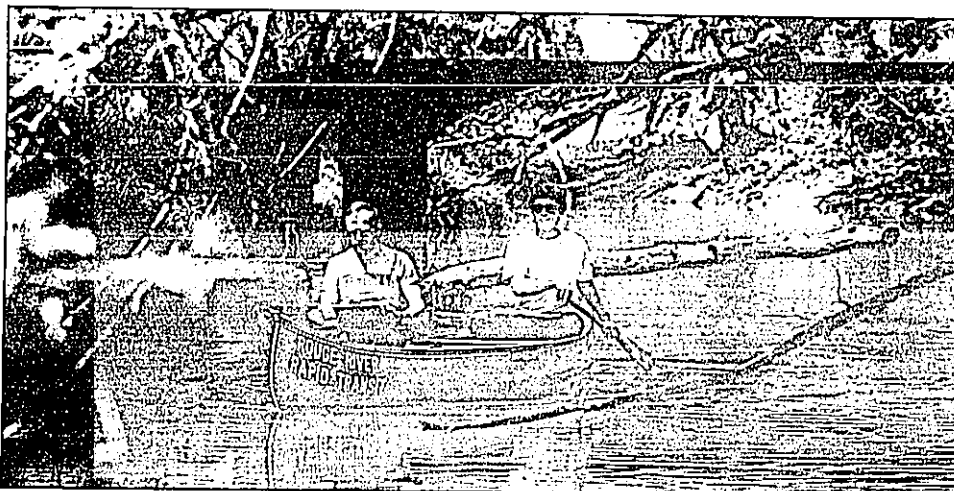
The parks director would like to see the Rouge return to its heyday, which occurred back in the 1920s, '30s and '40s when the river was used for a large variety of recreational activities.

Today, the river is still used as a recreational site even though the water is not as clean as it should be and the equipment needs repairs, he said.

"IT'S NOT like it's a ghost town," Reickel said. "I don't condone the condition the river is in, but I can show you an awful lot of people who enjoy the river in the condition it is."

But if the cleanup is successful and money can be found to upgrade the tennis courts, play equipment and picnic areas along the Rouge, Reickel sees the river enjoying the popularity it once had.

Another parks director who sees tremendous potential for the river is William



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Steve Marshall, forester for the city of Southfield, and Bruce Monson, director of the Rouge River Watershed Council, travel the Rouge through Southfield in preparation for an upcoming river cleanup day.

Junior varsity baseball players at Wayne Memorial High School pick their way across a massive logjam that clogs the river near their ball field. Players and other students routinely use the logjam as a shortcut to and from school.

Walenczak of Southfield. The city owns 155 acres of land along the river in a two-mile stretch south of 12 Mile.

"We're using it, but it's being used minimally," Walenczak said. "It's primarily a nature preserve area."

But Walenczak sees a day, not too far in the future, when the parks along the river will be used for canoeing, fishing, hiking and picnics.

The city has sponsored a fishing derby along the river for the past two years and Walenczak said similar activities could be scheduled in the future.

The Department of Natural Resources has set a goal to reclaim the Rouge by the year 2005. When that happens, the Rouge River could become one of the major recreational areas in the metropolitan area.

The increased popularity will create a different kind of problem for recreational users along the Rouge, Reickel said.

"The dilemma we're going to run into is the tremendous demand that's going to be created after the cleanup."

On the cover

Carla Worsham of Westland, Jack Smiley of Detroit, vice president of Friends of the Rouge, and Jonn Jacobson of Detroit clean up debris at Merriman Hollow in Westland.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer