

## Bristol man cleans up river, makes money



Donald Wodtkey, 41, talks about collecting scrap metal from the St. Joseph river in Bristol, Ind. on Friday, July 13, 2012. Wodtkey has been collecting metal from the river since last Tuesday when he was laid off from his job. (Truth Photo By Evey Wilson)

**A Bristol man is turning trash into treasure.**

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BRISTOL — Wearing rubber waders and padded gloves, Donald Wodtkey plunges his hands into the St. Joseph River.

“This is a heavy one,” he says, lifting a large, muddy tire from the water and rolling it onto shore.

He’s not exactly looking for sunken treasure — just scrap metal.

Recently let go from his part-time job, Wodtkey decided to go fishing Tuesday near the Division Street bridge in Bristol. But instead of seeing bass and catfish in the water, he found

car parts, bicycles, old dock posts and metal pipes.

“The water is usually at least waist-deep or more, but now it’s just to my knees in some spots,” Wodtkey said. “It’s crazy how much you can see in the water now. All of this stuff can’t be good for the river.”

Wodtkey filled the bed of his truck with 1,400 pounds of metal and drove to a scrapyard. When all was said and done, he made \$130 for five and half hours of removing trash from the river.

“Everybody’s out there thieving metal from factories when they can just go down the river and collect metal and make money,” Wodtkey said. “It also cleans up the river, so we can fish and take our boats out without hitting our motors on stuff in the water.”

Wodtkey said he never noticed how much garbage has been dumped into the river until recently because the water level is lower than usual. In June, the St. Joseph River was more than two feet lower than normal, and the Elkhart River’s water level was down roughly one foot, according to the U.S. Geological Survey’s gauge stations.

“There’s definitely stuff in the river that you can see now that you can’t see any other time of the year, and it’s because of the drought and the lack of water,” said Matt Meersman, president of the Friends of the St. Joe River Association.

Meersman said cleanup volunteers have found car parts, televisions, motorcycles and shopping carts among other trash dumped into the St. Joseph River.

“When people are doing that kind of stuff, they’re not thinking about the river,” he said. “It’s hard to imagine that anyone thinks that’s OK.”

The Friends of the St. Joe River Association helps organize cleanup events that Meersman said are about more than the river’s health.

“It’s important because it builds a sense of ownership,” he explained. “When people come out to volunteer their time trying to make the river more beautiful, it’s a human thing to make it more pleasing to our eyes.”

The kind of cleanups that we're doing aren't necessarily environmental cleanups as much as they are aesthetic cleanups, but I think it makes people realize that it's important and the river is worth protecting on other levels."

## STATE AGENCY WARNS BOATERS ABOUT LOW WATER LEVELS

Shallow water can create problems for boaters who float along the rivers, according to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Because of the drought, some public ramps are becoming unsafe for launching boats. Low water levels increase the risk that boat operators will drive their trailers over the ends of boat ramps, especially in muddy sections of rivers. Trailers could become stuck or damaged.

"Use common sense," DNR fisheries staff specialist Jamie Smyth said in a news release. "Don't push it too far. If you decide to launch a trailered boat, go nice and slow."

The DNR's Division of Fish and Wildlife maintains hundreds of boat ramps in Indiana but does not monitor water levels at each one.

## UPCOMING EVENT HIGHLIGHTS WETLANDS

The Christiana Creek Coalition will host Wet n' Wild at the Wellfield from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Aug. 16 at the Wellfield Botanic Gardens, 921 N. Main St. in Elkhart.

The event will give insight into the importance of the area's wetlands, including parts of the St. Joseph River Basin.