

Kalamazoo River welcomes boaters

By Tara Marion

Although the Kalamazoo River was once an industrial waste site, joint citizen, government and industry efforts have transformed it into a recreational destination, which is excellent for boating.

The Kalamazoo River is a perfect waterway for tubes, rafts, canoes, kayaks, light pontoon boats and aluminum fishing boats. However, because the river it has narrow and shallow areas, it is not suitable for bass-fishing boats.

“Nobody on their right mind would actually take one of those out there because they’re just going to wreck it,” said Pat Adams, executive director of the Forum for Kalamazoo County, 217 Monroe St. The river’s downed logs, silt and muck are detrimental to these big boats.

No matter which watercraft you choose, Adams said the Kalamazoo River is fascinating. “It’s a place of tremendous beauty, peace and restfulness.”

Along the river, one can find the black willow, the blue heron, turtles, tributaries, dragonflies, woodchucks and raccoons. During her 12 to 15 years of experience canoeing the Kalamazoo River, Adams has also seen butterflies, ducks and newborn raccoons. “I’ve seen baby raccoons wandering around for the first time and playing—sometimes lost. They cry and cry until their mothers find them again.”

The Kalamazoo River is a popular fishing site and is safe for recreational activities such as swimming, tubing and boating.

In a brochure titled “Canoe the Kalamazoo River,” the Forum offers these advisories to boaters, specifically canoeists.

- Always pack air bags and a life jacket for all members of your party.
- Canoeing in a storm can be dangerous, so monitor local weather conditions.
- Keep away from wires. They are dangerous.
- Always tell someone where you’re going and when you expect to return.
- Don’t overload a canoe with more people than it was designed to carry.
- Don’t wear heavy boots because you cannot swim in them.
- Don’t try to change places with anyone in a canoe while floating; pull ashore.
- Rather than attempting to flip a capsized canoe, float on it.
- Observe “no-wake” guidelines along the river to protect it.

“The reason for these guidelines is to protect the banks against the tremendously degrading effect of lots and lots of high waves,” Adams explained. Wakes erode the banks and put a lot of additional silt and sediment into the river.

Adams also warned boaters to watch for a few obstacles along the way. The stretch of the Kalamazoo River between Battle Creek and Shady Bend is shallow and rapid. “It’s one of the more challenging areas,” Adams said.

In other stretches, bridge openings are covered with logs, which means paying close attention to paddle work through the openings. Natural islands pose a similar problem. Adams suggested taking the fork that looks like it has the most open water.

Near Plainwell and beyond its boundaries, there are a number of old dams that boaters don’t want to travel over, which Adams saw a family do just last summer. “Their canoe went right over the top, capsized and scared everybody, including the children, to death.”

For the most part, however, the Kalamazoo River is an open, easy river.

From its headwaters in Hillsdale County to where it empties into Lake Michigan at Saugatuck, the Kalamazoo River is a 135-mile waterway with 25 points of access and several landings.

At Verberg Park in Kalamazoo, for example, enjoy picnicking, fishing in a backwater pond or simply sitting by the river with a book. Shortly thereafter lies Parchment's Riverfront Park, which Adams said is a really attractive riverfront project with beautiful cantilevered decks and a canoe launch.

Adams said her favorite stretch of the river is from the other side of Otsego through Allegan to Lake Michigan because Allegan is a marvelous place to shop. "Allegan has turned all of its shops so that they have access to and face the river, and they're very attractively done," she said. Merchants include restaurants and great ice cream vendors, a product which Adams pointed out is available at about six places along the Kalamazoo River.

Whether you're racing down the river in a kayak or aimlessly floating in a tube, the Kalamazoo River is the perfect recreational destination. "It's just a relaxing, wonderful place to be," Adams concluded.