

Revitalizing Brooklyn's

by James E. Held

"There," Owen Foote points from the stern, "see those mussels growing on that bulkhead?" Our paddle strokes stir schools of tiny killifish, but blue crabs locked in crustacean lust ignore the passage of this canoe that flushes a pair of graceful white egrets. Such avian and aquatic spectacles are hardly exceptional on your typical tidal watercourse, but this is the Gowanus Canal. Until recently, these 1.8 miles of water in South Brooklyn formed a biological desert, and the inky-black water concealed not only vanished mobsters, but heavy metal contaminants, mercury, lead, PCBs and sewage overflows bearing cholera and typhus strains. Even today, capsizing is no healthy option, but the members of the Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club are on the water, hosting events and monitoring environmental changes of a canal and its surrounding neighborhood.

When the 17th century Dutch founded New Amsterdam, Gowanus was chief of the local Carnarsie tribe, and oysters harvested from this winding creek were exported to Europe. As Brooklyn industrialized, however, the marshes were drained, and the bucolic stream transformed into a hard-working canal. By the late 1800s, factories lined the banks and the nearby brownstone neighborhoods of Carroll Gardens and Park Slope flushed their toilets into America's busiest waterway. Oil sheens prompted the moniker Lavender Lake. Foote, an architect and founding member of the club, observes, "You can see the entire history of the Industrial Revolution on these banks." It's also clear, he points out, to see its triumphs, the environmental costs and, by the 1960s, its decline.

Historically, humans have valued urban waterways as dumping sites, but organizations inspired by Cleveland's Cuyahoga River and San Antonio's Riverwalk have championed the canal's restoration for decades. "The Gowanus has been a dirty secret," says John Muir of the Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment. But the popular boat tours he helped organize attracted vital attention to this neglected channel. Buddy Scotto, of the Carroll Gardens Neighborhood Association, notes that 250,000 people live within walking distance. "And if we had clean water here," he says, "this would go from the least desirable area to live in to the most, almost overnight."

While water quality has improved, the potential of promenades, bike paths, restaurants and housing amid empty industrial buildings remains the stuff of dreams as we paddle past half-sunken barges

docked along crumbling embankments. An F train pulls into Smith Street Station over the canal while razor-wire fences guard scrap yards, idle factories and trucks parked in littered lots. Passing Bayside Fuel, the only business using the canal, we dead-end at Butler Street, revealing the inherent construction flaw—the one-way waterway lacks the current to oxygenate the water and disperse pollutants. But Scotto and other activists helped reactivate the idle flushing tunnel built in 1911. Since March 1999, 12-foot propeller blades have drawn 200 million gallons of clean water daily into an otherwise stagnant ditch, and results have been dramatic.

Still, by paddling here, the Dredgers Canoe Club forms a catalyst of continuing progress on the waterway. "After downing some pints of Guinness one evening in 1999, 12 of us emptied our wallets onto the table and found enough to purchase paddles, life jackets and two canoes," Foote remembers. "We decided to call ourselves the Gowanus Dredgers because by metaphorically stirring up the muck, we offer a visual image for people to grasp about our mission of 'environmental recreation.'"

"The Dredgers love paddling," he continues, "but the club has dual purposes because by being on the water we provide justification for allocating federal funding that New York City needs for restoration. Contaminants remain in the mud, and after heavy rainfalls, storm sewage overflows still pollute the canal that deserves the same protection as America's most scenic waterways."

The club annually logs 1,000 trips, with over 2,000 people participating in events

CANOE CLUB HELPS BRING THE ONCE-VILE GOWANUS



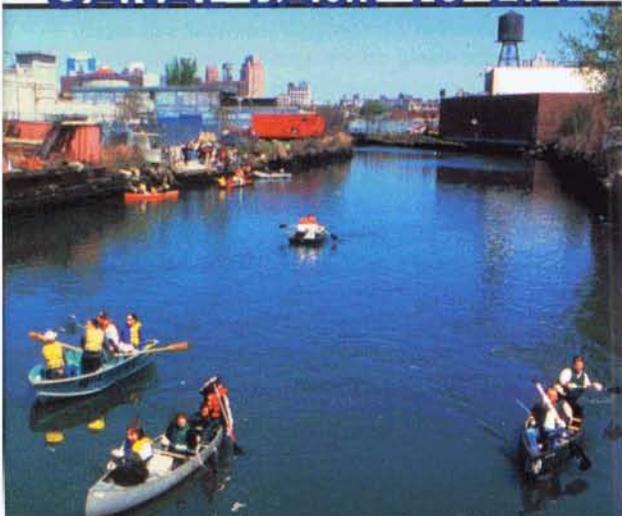
Gowanus

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ranging from quiet evening tours to hundreds turning out for the spring and fall Canal Cleanup. Odors alone once drove people from these environs, but the Dredgers have made the neighborhood a destination with bicycle rides, tours of local artist studios, block parties, boat races during the Gowanus Oktoberfest and the Lighten Up Brooklyn with a Canoe Ride, an event complete with paddling lessons.

Water is a tremendous asset, especially in an urban environment, and future plans include expanding events and programs, constructing a boathouse with environmental and historical exhibitions as well as a restaurant/cafe overlooking the canal. "This is a wonderful estuary full of life," Foote says. "We're not waiting another 40 years to restore this waterway." True, Chief Gowanus would never recognize this modern incarnation of his tranquil, tidy creek, but results are proving that the best way to revive this waterway is by dipping a paddle and getting wet.

CANAL BACK TO LIFE



photos by Etienne Frossard