

PART ONE: BIG SWIM GETS PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT THE BOISE RIVER (AGAIN)

New Yorker swims from headwaters to the Snake to elevate discussion about Boise River water quality

By Steve Stuebner

Christopher Swain thinks big.

When he was in his late 20s, he decided to walk across his home state of Massachusetts to raise awareness about a local cause. But that was a long, hot summer. So he thought about maybe swimming a river to raise awareness about water quality. His first project was the lower Connecticut River.

On that trip, people had questions, “What kind of water was I swimming in? What’s in the water?” “People wanted to know,” Swain said in a recent discussion with the City Club of Boise.

Since that time, Swain has swum the entire Columba River, all 1,243 miles of it, from British Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. It took him 165 days. He’s also swum the Hudson River, Lake Champlain and many other rivers – all to raise awareness about water quality and generate a conversation with local residents.

During his swims, Swain has survived collisions with boats, 12-foot waves, lightning storms, class IV+ rapids,



Swain swam the length of the Boise River to inspire learning and discussion about Boise River water quality.

waterfalls, log jams, toxic blue-green algae, blood-sucking Lamprey Eels, oil slicks, raw sewage spills, Great White Shark habitat, and water laced with arsenic, cyanide, dioxin, radioactive waste, PCBs and neuro-toxic pesticides.

In 2013, the Timberline High School TREE Club, led by now-retired environmental science teacher Dick Jordan at the time, wrote Swain and invited

him to swim the Boise River. In August and September, Swain came to Idaho at the request of the Idaho Business for the Outdoors, and swam the Boise River from its headwaters in the Sawtooth Wilderness to the Snake River near Parma, a journey of 150 miles.

Along the way, Swain talked to teachers and high school students from eight schools in Idaho City, Mountain Home, Boise, Caldwell, Eagle and

Parma, while participating in planned and impromptu community events. Students were encouraged to sample the Boise River for water quality characteristics to augment testing already being done by the Idaho Department of Water Quality and the U.S. Geological Survey.

When Swain spoke to a City Club audience of about 100 people in September, he had finished his journey. He had swum the Middle Fork Boise River as it tumbled down the mountains in the Boise National Forest, swam through Arrowrock and Lucky Peak reservoirs, and swam the main Boise River through the urban zone of Boise and continued through the farm country downstream to the Snake River.

“The whole experience deepened my affection for the Boise River,” the fit, 40-something man said. “I didn’t realize that Idaho had so much wilderness.”

All along the river, he met and spoke to many people. “I saw that you can’t separate Idaho people from the land and the water,” he said. “No matter where they live, everyone loves the Boise River.”

From the urban zone of the greater Boise area to the ag lands downstream to the Snake, he saw all of the complexities of managing Boise River for a multitude of users and needs.

“You can have a swimmable and fishable Boise River,” he said. “When you’re swimming a river, you notice the choices made about the river and the many demands on the river. What’s the biggest problem? We are. We’re all part of the problem, and we all can be part of the solution.”

Along its course, the Boise River is

affected by mining runoff into the Middle Fork Boise after it leaves the Sawtooth Wilderness. All three forks of the Boise River receive sediment from recreational camping roads that line them in the Boise National Forest. In Boise, the river receives storm-water runoff from streets in the urban core. Students noticed that even dog poop is a problem affecting the Boise River in the urban zone.

By Lander Street in the City of Boise, wastewater return flows affect levels of phosphorous in the Boise River. The same is true when the Boise River Wastewater treatment plant returns treated water to the Boise River upstream of Eagle Road.

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Agricultural runoff and the impacts of farm animals and livestock affect Boise River water quality as it flows from Star to Middleton and Parma before flowing into the Snake River.

In the lower river, Swain said it was difficult to see through the water and what kinds of rocks or other obstacles he might face as he swam downriver. “It was a sediment-laden chocolate milk experience,” he said. “The water was warmer at that point, and there was livestock in the river in places, barbed wire and more.”

“There were times when I thought, what am I going to hit now? I wanted to be able to see.”

But Swain did not disparage farmers and ranchers who live on the banks of the Boise River in his City Club talk or in his discussions with school kids along the way. He saw the Boise River swim as a way to start a conversation about the river and its water quality in hopes that the conversation would continue after he left for his current home town of Brooklyn, NY.

This was the objective of Dick Jordan and the Idaho Business for the Outdoors, too. “To me, it’s all about the kids and the future,” Jordan says.

Of course, for people who have been working on Boise River water quality issues, this is a conversation that’s been going on at least since the early 1960s, when a California consultant encouraged the Boise City Council to work on cleaning up the urban section of the Boise River and build a greenbelt pathway along it. The council took that advice to heart, and last week, the City of Boise celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Boise River Greenbelt.

The Conservation Commission, the Natural Resources Conservation District, and the Ada and Canyon Conservation Districts were glad to hear a broader group of folks talking about these issues. For years, along with other partners, they’ve been helping urban residents and agricultural producers get ahead of water quality issues there. With the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and river groups like the Lower Boise River Watershed Council, the Boise River Enhancement Network (BREN), and others, they’ve been working on improving water quality through a Total Daily Maximum Load (TMDL) planning process. Current efforts focus on reducing sediment, bacteria,

phosphorous, and temperature in the lower Boise River.

Liz Paul, who is a member of the Lower Boise Watershed Council and BREN, spent time with Swain during the swimming event to help spread the word about the project.

“There’s a lot to know and understand about the Boise River as it travels through the Treasure Valley,” Paul said. “We forget how much there is to know.”

But calling attention to the river’s plight is good for everyone, she says. “I thought that was invaluable. We’re all upstream or downstream from each other. Christopher was super positive to work with. I’m not sure how he felt, but I feel like I’m a tiny little speck in terms of what’s been done on the Boise River for the last 60 years.

Paul was glad to hear the subject arise again too. “To me, this is not a one-time story, it’s an ongoing story, and the lessons about what science tells us about the river, and getting the students engaged was a great opportunity and really inspiring to keep the conversation going.”

To help with teacher and student participation about Swain’s Boise River swim, the Idaho Business for the Outdoors put together a powerpoint presentation that raised basic discussion questions about the river. They did outreach with rural and urban schools prior to Swain’s arrival.

While Rubin, an environmental science teacher in Caldwell, said the act of someone swimming the whole length of the Boise River piqued student interest in the river.

“A lot of kids didn’t really know anything about the Boise River or where it was,” she said. “And I’m like, you’ve



Students from the Riverstone School studied the Boise River’s economic and social benefits, the science of water testing, and more.

never been to the Boise River? It’s the river over by the RV park next to the freeway. And the students were like, oh, that’s the Boise River?”

They talked about varying levels of water quality in the river in different locations and talked about if they might drink the water? Would they swim in the Boise River? Would they eat fish from the river?

In the powerpoint, they learned about acute pollution issues in the 1960s and early 1970s, when portions of the Ohio River caught on fire. They learned about the history of the Clean Water Act and the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

“We learned about how we all benefit economically and socially from the river,” Rubin said.

The recent example of the daylighting of Indian Creek in downtown Caldwell and how a lot of new businesses are springing up around the downtown park and activity center was a tangible example for students to understand the value of revitalizing a stream that had been covered by asphalt and concrete.

Her students also took a trip to Eagle Island State Park and did some water quality sampling.

Seniors at Riverstone School worked on a water quality project related to Swain’s swim after meeting up with him at Discovery State Park below Lucky Peak Dam. They took multiple samples from the Boise River by Discovery Park and also from a pond in Julia Davis Park.

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"I thought it was pretty impressive that he swam the whole river – that shows a lot of dedication," said Maeve, a member of the class. "He's the kind of guy who goes the extra mile to raise awareness. I thought that was pretty cool."

"I didn't realize how crucial the Boise River is to everything in our community," added Cole, a senior at Riverstone.

"People should stop throwing trash in the river," added Maren. "There needs to be more public awareness about the importance of keeping the Boise River as clean as possible."

In testing for water quality in the Boise River, the students learned that the science of water testing is an ongoing effort, and that it needs to be done repeatedly over time to show meaningful results.

Officials with the Idaho Business for the Outdoors (IBO) said the overall goal is to keep the conversation going, and to work toward a fishable and swimmable river from source to mouth. They created a special App that students and teachers can use to report water quality sampling and share other things they want to do to improve the Boise River.

There are 13-15 data points along the Boise River where teachers and students are testing water quality between Spangle Lake and Parma, Jordan said. That will complement data points already established by USGS.

"Together, we will raise water quality and quantity awareness, celebrate the resource we all share, and help sustain prosperous and healthy communities along the Boise River watershed for years to come," IBO officials said.

"The key is to monitor these sites over time and keep the conversation going," Jordan says. "The kids can take it from here."

Swain thinks the Boise River has enormous potential because everyone loves the river, and it's clean enough for 10,000 people to float the urban section of the river on a daily basis during the hot summer months, while the stream also supports brown and rainbow trout fishing and diverse aquatic life.

"That river belongs to you; it belongs to all the people of Idaho," he told City Club. "If you care about the Boise River, get engaged in a way that works for you. Make your voice heard. Everyone here is inextricably tied to the Boise River. It could become a national model for how to sustain a beautiful river from the source to the mouth."

"The Boise River needs us to take care of it," adds Paul. "The challenge is sharing the valley with the river, having it help us, and us helping it. We are in the 21st Century, we're growing fast, and



Swain on the banks of the Boise River with Idaho Business for the Outdoors members Dick Jordan and Heather Parkinson Dermott.

more people are coming here. That's going to be the challenge – taking care of the river while we continue to put more demands on the river with all of that growth."

For more information about the IBO project "Boise River: Source to Snake" go to www.idahobo.org. To see Christopher Swain's web site, go to swimwithswain.org. Lower Boise River Watershed Council: <https://www.lowerboisewatershedcouncil.org> and Boise River Enhancement Network BREN: <https://www.boise-riverenhancement.org/>.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis. In Part Two: a Boise River Success Story in Parma, Steve will cover the Farmer's Cooperative Ditch Company's Sediment Basin in Parma where partners are cleaning up Ag return water on a 33 mile stretch of the Lower Boise River. □

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