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Watauga Riverkeeper installs Trash Trout in Winkler Creek

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George Santucci and Andy Hill pose with the Trash Trout Jr. in Winkler Creek.

Photo submitted

Update

This story was updated June 11 to reflect the correct cost of the Trash Trout, \$3,500, and Boone's contribution, \$2,500.

HIGH COUNTRY — MountainTrue, an environmental organization based in the Southern Blue Ridge, announced June 2 that their Watauga Riverkeeper installed Boone's first Trash Trout in Winkler Creek along the Greenway in partnership with the town of Boone.

The Trash Trout Jr. is a passive litter collection device that catches debris floating down a waterway for removal. A large cage with a wide mouth that floats on pontoons, the Trash Trout is installed in creeks and streams where it prevents trash from entering main waterways. MountainTrue says that large pieces of trash and plastic are trapped inside the Trash Trout, while smaller organic matter passes through and other aquatic wildlife pass below the device.

An Asheville-based environmental nonprofit named GreenWorks designed the trapper and partners with other environmental organizations to target tributaries near areas that may have more trash introduced into the waterway.

Watauga Riverkeeper Andy Hill oversaw the installation, adding that the team at MountainTrue are "very grateful for GreenWorks' partnership," as well as the town of Boone and longtime river advocate and Sustainability and Special Projects Manager for the town of Boone, George Santucci.

The Winkler Creek Trout Trap Jr. was funded by Boone as part of its sustainability initiatives, according to Hill. He explained that "the property where (the trap) sits is owned by the town, which made it an easy place to install it." The Winkler Creek Trout Trap Jr. was funded by the town of Boone as part of its sustainability initiatives, according to Hill. The trap costs \$3,500, and the expenditure came from Boone's general budget, according to Santucci. Santucci added that the town of Boone is funding \$2,500 annually to cover the costs of monthly maintenance for the device.

Hill says that volunteers will collect the accumulated trash each two weeks as well as after every rain event. MountainTrue's water quality monitoring program, which regularly collects water samples for quality testing, and Appalachian State University student volunteers will aid in the collection of trash.

Tributaries, says Hill, are the ideal location for the Trash Trout as these waterways carry most of the trash. Hill said, "A lot of this trash is overflowing from trash cans in parking lots and things people drop" on land. Rain can also affect how this trash runs off into creeks and streams. Additionally, Hill explains that since larger rivers are popular for "recreation, tubing, boating," and other activities, placing the Trash Trout Jr. in a tributary avoids creating a hazard for navigation.



The waste the Trash Trout collects poses a large threat to aquatic ecosystems since much of it is plastics, which after entering the water will begin the process of photodegradation in which petroleum-based products such as plastics begin to break into smaller pieces known as microplastics. Hill said that this year “has been an explosion of waste,” including a large increase in single-use plastic, personal protective equipment and plastic bags in waterways.

Not only are volunteers collecting trash, Hill said, but they are also sorting trash by type and itemizing the items to have an idea of what the trash is and where it may be coming from. Hoping to locate where trash is coming from on land, Hill looks to develop plans to reduce wastes before it enters waterways. Ultimately, he states, “We are trying to use a scientific approach to interrupt the waste stream and come up with strategies as a community to address the plastic crisis.”

MountainTrue members and volunteers work to ensure that development does not come at the expense of environment and quality of life. The group partners with communities throughout Western North Carolina to support smart planning, sensible land use and multi-modal transportation initiatives, including work within the Elk and Watauga river basins.

Marisa Mecke is a Report For America corps member for Mountain Times Publications. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.