

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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FACES IN THE CROWD

## Cypress resident moved to protect waterways

Eric Ruckstuhl developed affinity for Houston bayous

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Eric Ruckstuhl is a man with a mission. For the last eight years, the Cypress resident has been slowly working his way down White Oak Bayou, ridding the forested areas along the bayou of trash and non-native plants, making tangled patches of undergrowth into beautiful areas.

Drawing from his childhood traipses around Buffalo Bayou and swimming in creeks in Austin, Eric Ruckstuhl developed a love for the sinewy bayou waterways and a passion for keeping them pristine and free from non-native plants.

"When I was a kid in the '70s I lived in West University and we would drive over to Memorial to see an aunt who lived on Buffalo Bayou," said

Ruckstuhl, who lives in Cypress. "There was nothing like that in West U."

Years later as a teen he moved with his family to the Texas capital where he quickly took a liking to the city's outdoor offerings.

"I was astounded to come home and walk down a hill and go swimming in a creek," said Ruckstuhl. "The whole Austin thing of the '80s was incredible."

After his father passed away, Ruckstuhl moved back to Houston and quickly sought out the waterway of his youth.

"The only place that would satisfy my curiosities was Buffalo Bayou, but there was so much litter in it," he said.

Those early influences shaped Ruckstuhl's future interest in environmentalism, in particular, keeping Houston bayous clean.

Now, as an adult with two children of his own, he divides his time between his jobs as a computer parts salesman and landscaper and his work with the Bayou Preservation Association, with which he has been affiliated for 15 years.

He began with the association after it absorbed the Buffalo Bayou Coalition, of which he was a part. Dealing mainly in litter removal initially, Ruckstuhl has for the past eight years worked to rid wild areas along bayous of exotic non-native species, which migrate from other areas.

While the reason for removing litter is obvious,

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Ruckstuhl said cleaning out non-native plants is important for protecting marine life in the bayous. He said fish and other animals feed off of the plant life indigenous to the waterways, but if non-native plants are invading they might be poisonous to the local fish and other animals, which call Houston bayous home.

"If we don't take these plants out we're looking at extinctions of other native plant species that have the food for the (local) animals. What we're trying to do is get these areas back to a museum quality," said Ruckstuhl, who has worked in seven bayou-side parks around the city, including those along White Oak Bayou, and has plans to tackle more.

"We have about 30 to 50 more on the radar screen," he said.

To assist in the monumental task, Ruckstuhl has secured the help of Lamar High School students to remove non-native plants from Memorial Park and regularly enlists inmates as well as part of the Harris County Waterway Assessment and Restoration Project.

"These guys are non-sexual, non-violent offenders," he said. "(When they get out to the bayous) it's like taking a group of school kids. They're wide-eyed, and they can't believe what they see. They really get into it, and they feel like they're making a contribution to society and the environment."

In addition to his work with litter and non-native plant removal, Ruckstuhl put together the Paddle Trails Guide on the BPA Web site. The guide

identifies places to canoe or kayak in and around Houston.

Mary Ellen Whitworth, executive director of the BPA, said Ruckstuhl is indispensable to her organization.

"What Eric does is very hard work," she said. "There are not a lot of people who are willing to be outside in August when it's burning up."

Whitworth said Houston residents can benefit from Ruckstuhl's work simply by enjoying the city's more than 2,500 miles of bayous.

"He's a totally dedicated individual," she said. "Eric's been in love with bayous all his life, and he truly wants to make our waterways a wonderful place to be."

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