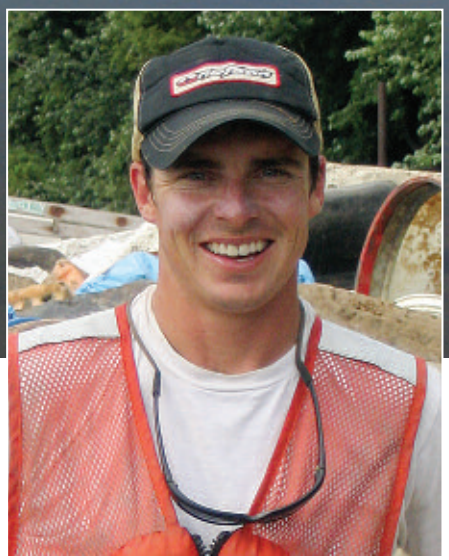
Chad Pregracke couldn't ignore the trash littering Illinois rivers, and so he decided to pick it up by himself. But he's not alone anymore.

A Clean Conscience



Chad Pregracke's environmental record is spotless. The Illinois native has collected tons of trash from America's rivers, and was a major part of the group cleanup last fall at Starved Rock's Plum Island.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

For years, sightseeing visitors to Starved Rock State Park would stand on the ancient bluffs above the Illinois River and look out to a place called Plum Island. It was there onlookers could spot great blue herons assembled to fish, stilt-legged, waiting for the catch of the day.

More recently, federally protected bald eagles arrived at Plum Island, filling the trees during late winter, taking flight to pull fish from the unfrozen water upstream.

Plum Island might've been a picture-perfect scene, this riverine pocket of wildlife habitat, if it weren't for, well, if it weren't for the actual view. To the dismay of many sightseers, Plum Island really wasn't much to look at. An abandoned houseboat had been slouched along the muddy shoreline for more than

No other barge in America looks quite like the Living Lands and Waters floating headquarters. What began as Chad Pregracke's one-man war on river trash is now a major, nonprofit environmental operation capable of hauling massive amounts of river debris.

a decade. Old appliances and broken-down heavy equipment were heaped on the island. Derelict buildings and an old shuttle car loomed above the weedy grasses. Visitors would raise a camera, survey the river, and wince.

Nonetheless, onlookers realized the privately owned property still represented important habitat for wildlife. And when rumors of a possible housing development surfaced a couple of years ago, anxious citizens decided to make their move to prevent a total loss.

Working with a private land acquisition group known as the Trust for Public Lands, as well as the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the Illinois Audubon Society (IAS) received a grant for $350,000 to buy the majority of the 52-acre island. On March 24, 2004, IAS inked the deal to secure the future of this important—if littered—Illinois River roost.

Yet a daunting obstacle remained. Plum Island was still the same river eyesore it had been for ages.

And that's where a young man named Chad Pregracke comes in.

Pregracke does something amazingly simple. This Illinois native picks up trash along rivers and hauls it away. And while it's not his trash, and it's technically not his responsibility, this self-appointed river vacuum picks up what others dump along our rivers because that's what this 29-year-old does.

And he's done it so well and with such intensity and conviction, Pregracke's river beautification mission (now a non-profit environmental organization called Living Lands and Waters), has evolved into a national example of what one individual can accomplish. Enlisting the sponsorship of corporations and donors across the country, Pregracke now rides his mural-splashed riverboat up and down America's rivers with a crew of trash collectors, stopping here and there to rally volunteers and wash America's rivers clean.

Back at Plum Island, it wasn't long before word spread about the island's needy condition, and so, in the fall of

Years after they made their final run, these transportation relics littered Plum Island. The Living Lands and Waters crew dismantled the eyesores last fall.

The view from Plum Island had been obscured for years by abandoned structures.

2004, the Living Lands and Waters barge came chugging up the Illinois River.

Within a few weeks, Pregracke and a spirited crew of workers dismantled the various eyesores, recycled tons of lumber and metal and basically scoured the island until it was a model of environmental cleanliness. Before a dedication ceremony in late October, more than 150 volunteers whisked trash bags over the island, making certain not a single bit of debris remained.

"Enough cannot be said about Living Lands and Waters," proclaimed Starved Rock State Park Site Superintendent Tom Levy, whose initial meeting with Pregracke amazed the park superintendent. Although the state owned a relative sliver of Plum Island, Levy had glum news regarding assistance for Pregracke's cleanup mission.

"He told us all of the things he wanted to do at Plum Island, and I said, 'Wait a minute, Chad—we don't have any money for this.' And he said, 'I don't care. I'm going to clean it up anyway.' He just took this project and ran with it."

IAS helped raise a portion of the estimated $52,000 needed for trash hauling. And when it was finished, IAS Vice President Don Goerne said he was optimistic future ecological restoration work will have plenty of participants.

"Probably the best thing that's come out of this, in addition to the preservation of the island," Goerne said, "are the partnerships that have been formed."

The Starved Rock Chapter of the IAS acts as a steward of Plum Island. But thousands of visitors standing atop the hills of Starved Rock State Park are indirect beneficiaries of the transformed landscape.

As for Pregracke, there will always be more rivers to clean, more partnerships to establish, and more environmental issues to confront around the next bend in the river.

But a loss of spirit never afflicts his enthusiasm.

"I look at all of the trash that's been collected, opposed to how much trash is still left to pick up," Pregracke explained. "When I had a smaller boat, I used to measure success by the boatload. Now I measure it by the ton."

Today Plum Island is a litter-free wildlife sanctuary managed by the Starved Rock Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society.