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'Clean 13' report highlights water cleanup efforts in Georgia

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Like everyone else who woke up on the morning of Sept. 8, 2019, to the news that a giant cargo ship was laying on its side in the St. Simons Sound, Andy Jones had little idea what would come next.

Jones jumped quickly into action, though, in order to observe and document the cleanup effort as it began. He followed the work for two years as the ship was cut into eight pieces, which were then removed one by one from the waterway.

Jones collaborated closely with local environmental organizations as he documented the stages of cleanup from his boat, which he took out daily for photos and videos that were shared with an international online audience.



Jones was honored Wednesday for that work when he was named among this year's award winners in the Georgia Water Coalition's annual "Clean 13" report.

The report highlights individuals, businesses, industries, nonprofits and governmental agencies whose efforts led to cleaner rivers and promoted sustainability in the state.

“It’s always an exciting day when we got to talk about the Clean 13 and hear some of the great stories that I had the pleasure of learning about during the process of creating the report,” said Joe Cook, coordinator of Paddle Georgia and author of this year’s report.

The Clean Water Report award celebrated Jones for his work as a citizen journalist.

“I would like to thank the coalition for my recognition for the work that went on with the Golden Ray,” Jones said. “While I’m here, I’d like to thank some other organizations that I’ve developed some pretty close relationships with, those being the Glynn Environmental Coalition, the Altamaha Riverkeeper, as well as One Hundred Miles. We all began to network together when this colossal event happened here in our backyard.”

Jones took his boat, The Minorcan Mullet, out into the sound daily to document what’s now known to be the most expensive shipwreck recovery in U.S. history. He shared his work through a YouTube channel that amassed more than 11,000 followers.

The 656-foot ship had around 4,000 cars on board that also had to be removed, and the risk of oil and other contaminants spilling out and impacting wildlife was a major concern.



“I had no idea what I was getting into when this thing got started down here on the Georgia coast, and I don’t think really anybody who was there and watched the whole event unfold had any idea what was in the future when things got started,” Jones said.

He said he hopes his work can contribute to improving the response if this kind of situation occurs again somewhere.

“It was quite an event,” Jones said. “We’re still feeling some of the effects from that. We’re still having debris wash up on our beaches and in our creeks and our rivers, and we still don’t know the long-term effects from what we experienced here with the Golden Ray accident.”

Camden County is also highlighted in the report for a public-private partnership that restored the health of swimming holes in Horsepen Creek.

The county and the St. Marys Riverkeeper worked together to have 44 residential septic systems replaced, which led to a 92% reduction in fecal bacteria in the creek.

Other award recipients this year include the Ball Corporation for its efforts to use recycled materials to create aluminum cups, Rep. Darlene Taylor, R-Thomasville, for her leadership to protect the Okefenokee Swamp from mining, Harold Habert for his long career with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division and his work to grow citizen water monitoring and cleanup program.

The Georgia Water Coalition, a consortium of 285 organizations, businesses, and faith-based groups that work to promote policies that ensure clean waters in Georgia, also releases the annual Dirty Dozen report, which highlights some of the worst offenses against the state's waters.

Both reports are a call to action, said Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman, executive director with the Rome-based Coosa River Basin Initiative.

“Our goal is what it’s always been – for the ideas and the goodwill and the partnerships that are wrapped up in this report to be duplicated, to be put out into the state of Georgia as best practices,” he said.

To see the full report, visit www.gawater.org/clean-13-reports.



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