

Paddlers to take part in the Great Muskoka Paddling Experience

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Hundreds of small watercraft filling the basin of Bracebridge Bay is a sight to behold and as one of Bracebridge's most popular events expands that picture becomes more magnificent.

On Saturday, Oct. 8 they will be out there again, some in canoes, other in kayaks, some on stand-up paddleboards but all there for one purpose to participate in the

Great Muskoka Paddling Experience. And, judging by the way the paddle has grown, it truly is a great paddling experience in Muskoka.

It has been "an uphill slope," according to race organizers Sandy and Pat Schofield.

The race began in 2011 with 52 boats, in 2014 there were 164 participants, and last year there were 211.

"There has been tremendous growth," said Sandy.

In fact, according to Pat, there has been so much growth that it is now one of the biggest races in Ontario under the Ontario Marathon Canoe and Kayak Racing Association.

"When you have 200 boats in an event it makes it a huge event," said Pat, noting that some races cap participants at 80.

She said looking out over Bracebridge Bay on race morning brought one of their volunteers to tears - moved by the breathtaking beauty.

There are more than 40 categories for entrance so fast-paced sprint competitors in ultra-streamlined vessels are not facing off against the recreational paddler.

"You don't have Grandpa's heavy canoe going against a light racing boat," said Pat.

Sandy is hopeful the autumn leaves will turn in time for the paddle, which would be sure to impress the 85 per cent of participants who come from out of area, some travelling great distances.

The Schofields hope to encourage members of paddle clubs from southern Ontario to make the journey as well, as individual racers, now that their racing season is over.

"They can come up here for Muskoka paddling fun and get out one last time

before hanging up their paddle for winter," said Sandy.

They say there is camaraderie at the Bracebridge event as people stay and visit with other paddlers after their race is done and Sandy even relays the thanks of a world-class paddler who, toward the end of 20-kilometres, met up with the five- and 10-kilometre paddlers.

"He said it was such a novelty to have all these other paddlers around him," said Sandy.

There is also a chance to win one of two stand-up paddleboards on silent auction at the event and anyone, including spectators, is eligible to win. And the Lions Club of Bracebridge will once again be serving up breakfast and lunch.

Perhaps one of the biggest incentives for participating in the Great Muskoka Paddling Experience is the reason why it was brought into existence in the first place. The paddle is a fundraiser for the Muskoka Watershed Council and has brought in a total of \$16,500 to date. And what better benefactor than one who strives to keep the water they paddle on clean.

For more information visit muskokapaddlingexperience.com.

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