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\*Paddle Creek Outfitters expands fleet for family fun; Facility has kayaks for Blueway\*

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Paddle Creek Outfitters, located on the Marinatown Yacht Harbor off Hancock Creek Parkway, recently added to its fleet. Besides kayaks for rent, the shop now offers a pontoon boat for family fun and a Center Console fishing boat.

The pontoon boat and the Center Console fishing boat both seat eight, with room for families and visitors. The shop also carries a full line of kayaks, from fishing to recreational. The Feelfree brand of kayaks includes the Gemini, Nomad and Moken models. Some are better for paddling, some for fishing.

John Socha is owner of the combination bait and tackle shop and kayak sales and rental center and enjoys being part of the growing Marinatown area.

"We have all kinds of canal systems locally that go from here to Pine Island," he said of his access to the Great Calusa Blueways Paddling Trail. "We're on Hancock Creek, which feeds directly into the Caloosahatchee."

"Hancock Creek is a fabulous place to paddle, regardless of whether you're an experienced kayaker or a newcomer to paddling," said Betsy Clayton, waterways coordinator for Lee County Parks & Recreation. "Paddle Creek Outfitters is among a growing number of kayak outfitters in Lee County who support the Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail. John is helping people explore the newest leg of the blueway and helping garner interest in everything from kayak fishing and bird watching to nature touring and kayak regattas."

For those who aren't familiar with The Great Calusa Blueway, it stretches 190 miles and can be paddled year-round. It comprises three legs that encompass Lee County's coastal waters, from Cayo Costa State Park and Charlotte Harbor south through Pine Island Sound and the Sanibel-Captiva area. It continues through Estero Bay to the Imperial River in Bonita Springs. The newest segment takes paddlers up the Caloosahatchee River through Fort Myers.

One of the things Socha likes about his location is that people can come by land or sea to his shop.

"There are well over 130 slips in the our marina, which is formally known as Marinatown Yacht Harbor, and at any given time 40 or 50 are open to customers of the marina shops or restaurants."

Boaters just need to know that it's Marker 52 from the Caloosahatchee.

Socha said he welcomes beginners and the staff are happy to explain "kayak 101." He said they go over all information, including safety, with renters.

With its bait and tackle shop, Outfitters has also recently become a popular stop for area fishermen to buy bait, hang out near the water and talk fishing. (Paddle Creek Outfitters has a full service tackle shop, with live and frozen baits, lures, rods and rod rentals.)

"I've always been a fisherman, and always wanted to open a bait and tackle shop," said Socha. "I get up early and come to the shop, and fishermen are buying bait and I get to talk fishing with them. It makes it nice to get up in the morning."

Socha said he grew up in New Hampshire.

"I've always been an outdoorsman, I like fishing and camping," he said. He came to Florida 10 years ago by boat. "It took a little over a month. I had friends here at this marina from North Fort Myers, I came here and never left."

Southwest Florida is known for some of the finest fishing in the world, with a wide variety of fish. Species include tarpon, snook, redfish, spotted sea trout and many more.

"I personally enjoy catching snook, redfish and sea trout," he said. "Within 10 minutes you can be catching all of these fish."

He opened Paddle Creek Outfitters in the fall of 2007.

"I think this is a nice commerce center with growth potential," he said of the marina, which now houses three waterfront restaurants: Coconuts, Mike Daly's Boathouse Grill and Harbourside Grill & Tiki Bar. His shop is directly across from the main entrance to Coconuts, on the water.

Paddle Creek Outfitters is located at 3444 Marintown Lane. For information, call 997-2248.