

Kent County News

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CRA hires a marine biologist as riverkeeper

By Peter Heck
Staff writer

CHESTERTOWN — After a four-month search, the Chester River Association has named Tom Leigh its new riverkeeper.

Leigh brings local roots to the position as well as a scientific background. The tall, soft-spoken 37-year-old grew up in Queenstown near the mouth of the river and attended Queen Anne's County High School. He graduated from Washington College in 1992.

Leigh went on to earn a master's degree in marine biology from Hofstra University on Long Island. His thesis was on sandbar sharks in the waters off Chincoteague. His previous work history includes stints as resident director of the Hofstra Marine Lab in Jamaica, as aquarist at the New Jersey State Aquarium, and as an instructor and researcher at the Marine Science Consortium on Wallops Island, Va.

Most recently, he was a project manager with Environmental Concern, a St. Michaels firm that constructs and restores wetlands.

He said on Friday that he was looking forward to "putting my degrees and my background

toward a bigger cause that can make a difference in the watershed." He began work Jan. 16.

"It's exciting to actually be part of a common goal that's so important to the area locally," he said. "It's my backyard. I'd like to watch out for it."

Leigh will begin his new job meeting with policy makers and local officials, working out of the Cross Street offices of CRA. But as soon as weather permits, he expects to be out on the river in a boat or canoe, getting a firsthand look at his "backyard." He said he also looks forward to learning from, and sharing his own expertise with, local biologists.



LEIGH

CRA Executive Director Bob Parks said of Leigh, "Tom is perfect for this position. He's got the biology degrees and the work experience to bring real expertise to river issues. He's a real muddy boots scientist."

"The search took longer than expected, but we wanted to find the right person for the job," Parks added. Leigh replaces Tony Prochaska, who resigned as riverkeeper in August to join the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

Parks said that among Leigh's immediate responsibilities will be working toward upgrading septic systems in the watershed. Leigh will also be "taking over the Velsicol suit," Parks said.

CRA has filed an action against Velsicol Chemical Company's Worton plant, claiming the plant discharged phosphorus into Morgan Creek, a tributary of the river. CRA also has petitioned to be added to a Maryland Department of the Environment suit against Velsicol, claiming a number of harmful chemicals were discharged into the local ground water.

Leigh will also be responsible for site-specific advocacy, the detection of "point-source" contamination of the river. Much of that work is based on the findings of Chester Testers, volunteers who sample water in different tributaries to help identify the exact sources of pollutants in the watershed. Parks said on Friday that Chester Testers deserved the credit for detecting the discharges by Velsicol.

As the CRA says on its Web site, the riverkeeper serves as "a vigilant presence on the Chester, a guardian for its living resources, and an outspoken advocate for restoring what has been lost." The site goes on to describe the riverkeeper's task as "insisting on the enforcement of all laws that protect the Chester and empowering citizens to hold people in authority accountable."

For information on CRA and the riverkeeper program, see the Web site www.chesterriverassociation.org.