

RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac

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New Riverkeeper for CRA

After a months-long search, the Chester River Association has named Tony Prochaska as its Riverkeeper.

Prochaska, a stream ecologist, has spent his career at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources where, most recently, he served as a section leader for the nationally recognized Maryland Biological Stream Survey. He is an expert on the impact of land use on non-tidal streams and rivers.

Prochaska grew up on a small farm in Carroll County, and worked as a youth for neighboring dairy farmers. When he was a boy, he and his father often fished and crabbed on the Chester. "My parents raised me to be



Tony Prochaska

Anne Nielsen

'This river makes the community.'



Tyler Campbell

"I'm leaving a job I loved," says Prochaska, 35, who lives with his wife and two daughters just south of Still Pond. "But a part of me felt I wasn't making enough of a difference. I believe this will fill that void. This is a program that can make a difference. This river makes the community. It's the centerpiece of everything we're about here. We need to protect it."

CRA Executive Director Bob Parks, who made the appointment, said: "CRA is delighted to have as its new Riverkeeper someone with Tony's skill and experience. His knowledge of Eastern Shore streams and rivers will add great depth to our organization."

Prochaska succeeds Eileen McLellan, who served as CRA's first Riverkeeper.

In his role at DNR, Prochaska was responsible for the Eastern Shore region, monitoring its non-tidal streams for physical habitat, water chemistry and biological communities. In fact, it was Prochaska who discovered a new community of endangered dwarf wedge mussels in a Corsica River tributary last fall. [See story, page 2.] He knows the Chester River watershed intimately, having spent countless hours on projects here. At the moment, Prochaska ranks most of the "stream miles" of the Chester as in poor or fair condition.

environmentally aware, to be a good steward of the land," says Prochaska, who has a Master's of Science in wildlife/fisheries biology from Frostburg State University through Appalachian Laboratory, an environmental research facility of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences.

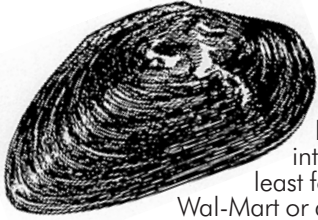
As Riverkeeper, Prochaska plans to give close attention to what he considers to be one of the Chester's foremost challenges – non-point source pollution and its contributors: nutrients, suspended sediment and fecal coliform. "The fewer contributors, the less degradation the river will suffer," he says.

Prochaska and his wife Sandy, a nurse, moved to Kent County in 2001, drawn here by the Chester River.

"I think changes can be made for the good but they're going to happen in small increments. I'm going to spend a lot of time on the river itself. My plan is to work with the community to make the river a better place. It's really going to take a community effort," adds Prochaska. "And what I hope we end up with is a model for the rest of Maryland."

–Ellen Uzelac

Dwarf Wedge Mussel *vs.* Wal-Mart?



With the decision by Church Hill to impose size limits on commercial buildings, the debate over Wal-Mart's interest in the town appears to be over, at least for now. But that debate – about Wal-Mart or any other developer – will at some point have to take into account one of the Chester River watershed's most threatened species: the little-known dwarf wedge mussel.

The prized fresh-water mussel, a so-called "indicator organism" of the relative health of our natural ecosystem, is believed to exist in only a dozen or so locations on the East Coast. Three of those sites, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, are in this watershed – Browns Branch, Three Bridges Branch and Southeast Creek. [Ecologists discovered the population at Three Bridges just this past fall.]

As has been widely reported, a 34-acre property on Pinder Hill Road in Church Hill has been the site of Wal-Mart's focus. The property abuts Southeast Creek, home to the dwarf wedge mussel, which is listed on both the federal and state lists of endangered species.

Without appropriate storm water management, a Wal-Mart-type building or any other – with acres of companion parking – could threaten the mussel's survival, according to Brent Walls, watershed coordinator for the Chester River Association.

Habitat disruption?

"Southeast Creek is important to these mussels," he added. "Any development has the potential to disrupt their habitat." In the event that the property is developed, Walls said a number of habitat conditions will require a close look, including cold water, pebble substrate and stream velocity.

"While this [mussel] has the potential to have an impact on the Wal-Mart plan here, the fact is that the endangered species acts, federal and state, were not set up to combat development. They were set up to recover species in danger of extinction," Mike Slattery, DNR's assistant secretary for forests, parks, fish and wildlife, told RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac. "We look at the animal

first. If it appears a project will adversely affect the population, we work first to avoid the impact, then to minimize the impact. If harm is going to happen to that animal, the activity can't go forward."

Over his 20-year career with DNR, Slattery said he has never seen a project stopped outright because of a threat to an endangered species. However, he noted, "I have seen significant modifications on many occasions. And, in some cases, projects haven't happened because, given the modifications, they were no longer economically viable."

DNR receives 4,000 to 5,000 requests a year for environmental reviews involving property slated for development or maintenance. Slattery said the vast majority pose no conflict. In the case of the Pinder Hill Road tract, he added, "you can be 100 percent assured" of a careful environmental review.

Striking a balance

Just why is the dwarf wedge mussel so special?

"The general public understands conservation initiatives involving charismatic animals: grizzly bears, cougars, the American eagle, the sexy stuff. Just as valid an indicator of environmental health and quality are some of these small, non-descript hard to find mussels," according to Dave Brinker, regional ecologist for the Maryland Natural Heritage Program, a DNR division that oversees rare, threatened and endangered species.

"Part of the Chester River watershed has got a species of mussel that's federally listed, up and down the East Coast. It's rare, like diamonds. In fact, it's more precious than diamonds," Brinker added. "We're only beginning to get a handle on just how bad our fresh-water ecosystems are. When you find one still in good health, you want to do all you can to balance the human population living there with managing all those things. These mussels are jewels and they are slowly disappearing."

[For more information, visit www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/dwm.asp]

–Ellen Uzelac

New Book *celebrates Chestertown – and its River*

Chestertown observes its 300th anniversary this year and Washington College has launched the celebration with a terrific new book, "Here On the Chester."

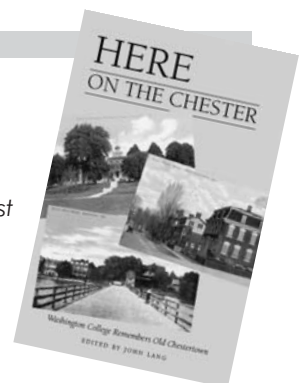
A wide-ranging collection of reminiscences, historical vignettes and poetry, the book digs deep – and delivers. A number of Chester River Association members contributed to the work, including Pat Herold Nielsen, Andrew McCown, Leslie Prince Raimond, Sheila West Austrian and Meredith Davies Hadaway, whose poem, "Here, On the Chester," inspired the title. CRA member John Lang served as editor.

An excerpt:

"I grew up there on the river, literally right on the river... There were so many crabs, my friends and I would spend half a day just going from piling to piling under the Chester River Bridge, catching crabs on the dip net. You could catch peelers all day long like that. You'd be a fool to even attempt to look nowadays 'cause they're never there. That's really one of the saddest things I know, the disappearance of crabs in the river, and now oysters, too, in the lower part of the river..."

... "If you look at Chestertown, it is just a picturesque colonial town, a beautiful waterfront town with magnificent colonial homes strung along the river... There's been a lot of renovation and restoration of older buildings and it looks terrific. But the river, it looks good, but it's worse. It seems like such a robbery. And it seems wrong to settle for less. With a really productive healthy river, this could be so much more than just a beautiful town with a lot of memories of what things really used to be like."

From a Q&A with Andrew McCown, a one-time waterman born in 1953.



CRA Advocacy Update

With the Maryland legislature now in session, Chester River Association is busy advocating at the Statehouse and on the River. Here's a brief update on a few of our top projects:

Unicorn Branch CRA is supporting a bill introduced by Del. Michael D. Smigiel that would prohibit the state from issuing a permit that would allow a rubble landfill to operate within four miles of Unicorn Lake. In testimony before lawmakers in January, CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls pulled data from a CRA research project that showed the stream is a consistently cool water habitat, ideal for brown trout. A rubble fill, he said, could degrade the water quality.

Healthy Air Act The region's waterkeepers are backing a bill that would require Maryland's coal-powered power plants to sharply reduce emissions. Waterkeepers hope to see enacted air pollution control legislation that would be tighter than the measure proposed by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich.

Farm Bill Environmental groups, including CRA, are backing the "Strong Farms for a Healthy Bay" bill that would give more money to farmers who plant winter cover crops, which reduces polluted runoff to local streams and waterways. Also proposed in the \$100 million package: improved manure management; buffer and wetlands projects; more money to grow barley and switchgrass for biofuel production; and a farm land preservation program.

New 'Giving Club' honors top donors

The Chester River Association is pleased to introduce Chester River Guardians, a category of donors who are distinguished by their contribution of \$1,000 or more annually.

"What we're trying to do is recognize those people who've made substantial contributions to CRA," said board member Terry Finn. "Without their help, it would be a lot more difficult to tackle our mission."

CRA will host a yearly special event to honor the organization's leadership donors. Executive Director Bob Parks said: "We plan to have a social event each year that is fun yet informative around our beautiful river."

Upcoming SPECIAL EVENTS

Check out our website or call the CRA office for more information on future events and opportunities.

Wednesday, March 15

River City Rambles

Join us for CRA's third annual celebration of verse and song reflecting on the Chester River. This OPEN MIC event, hosted by Cap'n Andy McCown, will begin at 7:30 p.m. at Andy's Pub, 341 High Street, Chestertown. Must be 21 to be admitted. For details, call CRA, 410-810-7556.

Saturday, April 1

Project Clean Stream

CRA, in partnership with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, is looking for volunteers to help clean up streams, shorelines and beaches during Project Clean Stream, which will take place locally from 9 a.m. to noon. Call CRA, 410-810-7556, for more information.

Volunteer Voices Veteran 'Chester Testers' *moving on*

When Herm Henschen, 81, and Ken Didier, 78, met at an organizational meeting for the Chester Tester program 13 years ago, they discovered they had a lot in common: They were both engineers, lived on the river and liked to fish.

They also cared deeply about the health of the Chester, and in the years since they have tested on a twice-monthly basis the same Kent Narrows site, just off Didier's breakwater in Grasonville.

"The biggest problem we have is whether to fish first or test first," quips Henschen. "It's great fishing there."

Their longtime readings – for dissolved oxygen, phosphorus, salinity and water clarity – tell them the river is pretty healthy at the site. "The water there either comes from around the Chesapeake Bay down around Love Point or comes up Kent Narrows from Prospect Bay. When it joins the Chester there, that site is more affected than any other part of the Chester River by what the Bay is doing," notes Henschen.

Now, Henschen and Didier are moving on. On tap for their test kit: a fresh-water feeder stream on Tilghman Neck Road in Queen Anne's County that should be a good barometer of any harmful runoff in the area.

"It's time to move on and we're glad to do it," says Didier. "The more we know, the better. The Chester River has always been about quality control and establishing baselines for the future. You can't really improve upon a river if you don't know what it was like when you started."

Henschen's sole regret? "I'm looking forward to focusing on something else," he says. "But this is a fresh-water feeder stream – no fishing."



Ken Didier, left, and Herm Henschen.

Tyler Campbell

Parting Thoughts

CRA at 20

How does it feel to look back on 20 years of CRA?
Former presidents share their reminiscences.

Tyler Campbell (1986-1991) "It was clear to us then that saving the Chester is a challenge that needs to involve everyone. George Radcliffe and his students at Centreville Middle School were a major force behind our Chester Tester program, as was the LaMotte Company, which is still highly involved. Community partnerships will always be key."

Pat Nielsen (1992-1995) "CRA was maturing as a bi-county watershed association just as the Chesapeake Bay Program began shifting its emphasis to the tributaries, and we worked hard to communicate river issues to a broader public with our publications and forums. I'm particularly proud of the role we played in the first Countryside Stewardship Exchange, which, with experts from Great Britain and around the East Coast, looked at the long-term economic benefits of preserving our natural resources."

Marsba Fritz (1996-1998) "I always felt that the river's significance doesn't stop at the shoreline – it is the point of a big upside-down pyramid that supports the rest of the community. We explored that connection in the Centreville and Chestertown charrettes, and in Chestertown, that effort still plays a part in town planning. I joined CRA in part because of a publicity piece that showed a happy little girl jumping into the river – it was joyful and celebratory, and we need that too!"

Liz Zucker (1999-2000) "The dedication of the all-volunteer Board and membership that sustained CRA for its first 12 years is what convinced me that we could "morph" into an organization with paid staff and become even more effective – so important as more and more people move to the watershed."

Andrew McCown (2001-2004) "We should never apologize for standing up and protecting the public trust. My biggest fear is that we will become complacent with what we have – that we will get too far removed from the river of yesteryear, willing to settle for preserving the current state of the river. We should set our goals high for the restoration of water quality and living resources will restore themselves."



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