

# REPORTER



E. Vance

Join us for some beautiful river mornings on the Potomac River Ramble, June 24-28. Details inside.

## More grades for Waterways

# Bay, Potomac, Taken to Woodshed

In what are described as politicized, polarized times, agreement throughout society on any issue should be cause for celebration. Not this time. Recent reports show that environmental groups, scientists, and government agencies all agree that the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River basin, its second-largest tributary are in poor shape, and that restoration efforts will need to be increased drastically if the situation is to improve. The ICPRB directly contributed to two of the assessments.

In March, the Chesapeake Bay Program, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-led cooperative that with the bay states oversees bay

restoration, issued its annual report, "Bay Barometer: A Health and Restoration Assessment of the Chesapeake Bay and Watershed 2008," noting that current bay health is only about 38 percent of the way toward full restoration. "Despite small successes in certain parts of the ecosystem and specific geographic areas, the overall health of the Chesapeake Bay did not improve in 2008. The bay continues to have poor water quality, degraded habitats, and low populations of many species of fish and shellfish," the report notes.

The report focused on unacceptable nutrient and sediment loads as primary factors, and cited continued population growth and development as the greatest

***Our mission is to enhance, protect and conserve the water and associated land resources of the Potomac River and its tributaries through regional and interstate cooperation.***

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challenge to a healthier bay watershed. The report also assessed restoration efforts, which averaged 61 percent of all measures needed to restore the bay.

The report details the many parameters considered in determining a grade for the bay, including water quality, habitat status, fish and shellfish populations, and sections on how various restoration efforts have fared. The report, available on [www.chesapeakebay.net](http://www.chesapeakebay.net), also includes a section on what citizens can do right now to help improve the bay. The ICPRB efforts in restoring the Potomac and bay includes both citizen outreach activities, such as use of rain barrels and environmentally sensitive landscaping, such as rain gardens, and promotion of assistance to citizen watershed groups. These efforts complement ICPRB's technical efforts that include fisheries restoration, water resources management, planning, and conservation, total maximum daily load plans, drinking water source protection, and other initiatives.

The University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science followed with its bay report card in April. Produced by the university's Integration and Application Network, the Chesapeake Bay Report Card additionally assesses the bay's major tributaries. In basic agreement with the Bay Program report, the report card gave both the bay overall and the Potomac a "C-." The grades describe "moderate-poor ecosystem health." The report card grades are based on three water quality parameters (chlorophyll a, dissolved oxygen, and water clarity) and three biotic indicators (aquatic grasses, phytoplankton community, and benthic community).

For the bay overall, the report noted that the bay has recovered little since a sharp decline in 2003, an extremely wet year when precipitation washed massive amounts of nutrients and sediments into the bay. The 2008 numerical assessment of 43 percent is still much lower than the 55 percent scored in 2002. The report also notes that there have been areas of improvement, such as increased aquatic grasses in some areas, while other regions have degraded. The Potomac's "C-," while poor, was on the upper end of the main tributaries. While not greatly changed, the Potomac's score did improve to its highest in the last five years due to improved water clarity and phytoplankton and benthic community condition, the report noted. The report is available at <http://www.ca.umces.edu/reportcard2008.html>.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation weighed in with their own report card in April, giving the bay a 28 out of one hundred, a grade of "D" for the tenth consecutive year. Under the foundation's scoring system, which examines a range of water quality and ecological factors, a score of 40 would represent a greatly improved

bay, 70 a restored bay, and 100, the bay as it reportedly existed in pre-colonial time.

The report highlights an improvement in bay grasses but declines in dissolved oxygen, a lack of improvement in nutrient levels, water clarity, and toxic substances. Fish species health also declined slightly, according to the report, available at [www.cbf.org](http://www.cbf.org).

In January, the foundation filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in federal court for failing to clean up the bay under the federal Clean Water Act. The foundation is asking that EPA set a pollution budget to cap pollution sources and enforce infractions. The lawsuit is unresolved.

The Chesapeake Bay Program partners have been working toward such a pollution budget with a Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) plan. Details of the plan currently are being worked out.

While a TMDL can provide a guide map for restoring the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac, it is only a plan. Greater, stronger public involvement in preserving natural resources will be required for the region's residents to keep the bay and its tributaries from getting worse. People who recognize the need to restore the Potomac and Bay will need to engage their neighbors and empower elected officials to take the steps needed to reach goals for the Potomac and the bay.

## Aquatic Grasses Increase In Bay, Parts of Potomac in 2008

Aquatic plant coverage, a key indicator for waterway health, increased by 18 percent in the Chesapeake Bay and its tidal rivers, according to a report by the Chesapeake Bay Program. Aquatic vegetation filters pollutants, produces oxygen, prevents erosion, and provides habitat and food for fish, crabs, and other waterway residents.

Total coverage was estimated to be about 76,861 acres, about 42 percent of the program goal of 185,000 acres. The report notes that about 60 percent of the grass beds are considered "high density," established beds whose water quality improvements are more pronounced.

Most of the bay-wide increase was in the Susquehanna flats at the head of the bay, and in rebound of eelgrass and widgeon grass. For the first time since 2001, grasses increased in all three regions of the bay. Eelgrass lives only in the saltier parts of the bay, and suffered a drastic decline in 2005.

The tidal Potomac River is a part of the middle bay region, which saw a 15 percent increase. The middle bay now meets 30 percent of the goal. For the Potomac itself, 2008 was a mixed year. The upper Potomac (above the U.S. 301 bridge) is doing very well. With more than 6,500 acres, the area is at 141 percent of its goal. The lower segment of the Potomac, which has always lagged, decreased by 282 acres, or 42 percent, in 2008. Luckily, the increases in upper Potomac aquatic vegetation did not include water lettuce, an invasive plant common in the pond and aquarium industry that was found growing strongly in the river in 2007. The plant cannot withstand cold winter temperatures, but seeds might under some circumstances. No water lettuce was found in the river in 2008.

The report notes that annual bay grass



They may foul boat props, but aquatic grasses are a sign of a healthy ecology with good water quality.

acreage estimates help indicate the success of pollution control efforts that include agricultural and urban best management practices, improvements to wastewater treatment, stormwater controls, and the many public actions such as environmentally friendly lawn care and green landscaping.

## Watershed-Wide Spring Cleaning Part of Year-Round Efforts

After 21 years, the annual Potomac River Watershed Cleanup has become one of the region's rites of spring. Yet it is one that the organizers and thousands of volunteers would like to see end, perhaps replaced by celebratory picnics along a clean shoreline. The Alice Ferguson Foundation, which began the cleanups, uses the event as one of a suite of efforts to promote its Potomac Watershed Trash Free Initiative, with the goal of a trash free Potomac by 2013. As a partner in both efforts, ICPRB helps identify

and organize new cleanup sites and publicizes the effort, and participates in the trash free initiative. While a worthy goal that ICPRB and many government and nonprofit groups share, it also is an ambitious one, based on the haul taken on the main day of the cleanup.

The cleanup set records again this year, with many of the 442 registered sites being cleaned on the April 4 date, and others tackled on Earth Day or later in the month. Reports to date from 224 of the sites reveal the breadth of the problem and the commitment. Trash from those sites totaled more than 150 tons, collected by almost 5,700 volunteers across the watershed.

Included in the haul were 1,080 tires, 144,350 recyclable beverage containers, with many of the most popular beers, sodas, and waters represented. The tally also included more than 24,000 each of cigarette filters and the ubiquitous plastic bags.

The bags were a particular focus of one volunteer helping to clean along the Anacostia River at the Heritage and Kingman islands site in Washington, D.C.



SCA volunteers, including students from area schools, stand with their haul.

C. Dalpra

to help make the District cleaner,” Wells said. The goal is to get people to bring their reusable or even the purchased bags back to use again.

While optimistic about the bill’s passage, Wells noted the huge benefit in bringing the bill to a vote. “The process has been a tough one, but I have met a lot of dedicated people along the way, and the network that has been created can go on to greater things whether the bill passes this time or not,” Wells said. Deciding whether to propose an outright ban on plastic bags is one example. While a ban makes sense to many, Wells looked at similar efforts and the group moved toward a fee structure that would incite less resistance than a ban. Wells’ efforts to clean up the District also has come with a personal cost. “Ever since I got involved in the legislation, I see plastic bags everywhere!” Wells said with a grin.

Wells was one of more than 100 volunteers at the site, which was sponsored by the Student Conservation Association (SCA), a nonprofit group that has sponsored the site for several years. The site attracted volunteers from a number of schools and other organizations, who collected 1.5 tons of trash, with more than half of it recyclable, noted Amtchat Edwards, an SCA coordinator. Toward the end of the morning, the students gathered to assess the large pile of bags filled with trash, throw frisbee, and pedal the exercise bike that had been hauled from a nearby thicket. One young student wondered aloud whether one of the old mattresses that had been removed would force someone to sleep on the ground that night. “I think maybe some people live here,” he said. The volunteers also took time to marvel at one enlistee to the cleanup, a black rat snake that fell from the bottom of a sofa as it was being carried to the pile.

Some of the sites that have been cleaned for years did look better this time around. Volunteers at the Monocacy River Aqueduct found trash, but in lesser quantities. “There doesn’t seem to be as much trash this year. Remember? It took us hours to get this far last year,” one student said to another. Bryan Seipp of the Potomac Conservancy, the site’s sponsor said that



SCA volunteer students take a break using items they collected at Heritage and Kingman Islands.

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As he stooped to pick up trash, including the occasional bag, D.C. Ward 6 Councilman Tommy Wells discussed his efforts to require stores, restaurants, and food vendors to charge a nickel for each bag used by customers as a trash reduction effort.

If passed, Wells noted, the Anacostia River Cleanup and Protection Act of 2009 would be an important first step in helping rid the river of trash. As Wells picked up a plastic water bottle from under a bush, he shook his head. “I’m just trying to do things

the annual cleanup is now mostly upkeep. Many of the sites also have benefitted from a growing number of volunteers.

A site at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, W.Va., attracted 20 volunteers compared with four the previous year, and there was not much “new trash,” according to volunteers.

The Friends of Rock Creek’s Environment (FORCE), turned out hundreds of volunteers along an eight-mile stretch of the creek from Garrett Park, Md., to the DC line, volunteers pulled out more than 300 bags of trash, dozens of tires, a grocery cart, highway construction material, and more. The 50 sites along the creek were nearly triple last year’s number.

While a number of the sites seem to be getting cleaner due to increased attention, the story is different on private property where few of the cleanups occur. The cleanup sites are targeted for problem areas, but they also are mostly public areas that provide access and a reasonable level of safety. There are many stretches of water inaccessible to volunteers that remain trash hot spots.

Some of those areas are being surveyed by ICPRB and Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments staff as part of the development of a total maximum daily load (TMDL) trash reduction plan for the Anacostia watershed. The first of its kind on the East Coast, the plan will assess types and sources of trash despoiling the river

and devise a plan to address it. Of course, any plan will be only as good as the commitment (from both government and the public) to implement it.

The trash free initiative also is addressing enforcement of anti-litter laws, an issue noted by some opponents of the District’s bag bill. Again this year, the week before the cleanup was designated “Litter Enforcement Week,” with events that brought the trash focus to the region’s police departments. This year, 115 police officers from Prince Georges and Montgomery counties in Maryland, the District, and Alexandria, Va., were trained in issues such as illegal dumping.

The trash free initiative also is working to make it easier for the region’s residents to clean up. The Alice Ferguson Foundation will soon issue a Trash Free Facilities Guidebook. The guide will help businesses, schools and homeowners learn about how to divert their trash waste stream into recycling, composting, and re-use, noted Foundation Executive Director Tracy Bowen.

The cleanup, the TMDL, efforts to increase enforcement of anti-litter laws, provide education and outreach, and promote greater recycling are all integral parts of the Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative. The foundation plans to hold its annual trash summit meeting in the fall, again at the World Bank. More information on the cleanup and initiative is available at [www.potomaccleanup.org](http://www.potomaccleanup.org).

**Calling All River Lovers! June 24th - 28th**

## **Paddle With ICPRB on the Potomac River Ramble**

The 2009 River Ramble is only two months away and this is not a year to miss. We are exploring Maryland’s first Scenic River—the Monocacy, and will also paddle part of the adjacent Potomac River. On top of scenic paddling, meeting new friends, and riverside camping, participants will experience the best line-up of programs of any Ramble.

The paddle on the Monocacy and Potomac will be pleasant, flat-water cruises punctuated by a wealth of programs. During the trip, Ramblers will:

- ◆ Examine the inter-sex smallmouth bass condition and other measures of fish health with scientists from USGS;
- ◆ Capture and learn about the rusty crayfish and other invasive species with Md. DNR and Hood College biologists;
- ◆ Tour the Monocacy National Battlefield;
- ◆ Learn how local planning and zoning is protecting the Monocacy’s resources;



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**Longtime Rambler Rick Schumaker meets a new friend on the river. Crayfish are one of the topics of this year’s trip.**

- ◆ Join with members of the Middle and Upper Potomac Tributary Teams for a wade-in;
- ◆ Sample water quality along our way downstream;
- ◆ Explore the historic C&O Canal and the

- restored Monocacy Aqueduct;
- ◆ Visit the Mirant-Dickerson Power Plant and whitewater park;
  - ◆ Meet with county and state elected officials;
  - ◆ Conduct amphibian, wetland, and freshwater mussel surveys;
  - ◆ Visit the Reston Stream Restoration Project; and
  - ◆ MORE!

Come for the whole trip or just a day! The trip features daytime paddles and evenings camping out and meeting your fellow Ramblers. Meals are provided and gear is shuttled to camping areas along the river.



## Watching the River Flow

A continuing extended dry period was reflected in extremely low flows of the Potomac River measured near Washington, D.C., in February and March, according to provisional data from the U.S. Geological Survey. Provisional data has not been reviewed for accuracy. February 2009 was the driest on record for the month. More regular showers in late March and April are allowing river flows to recover.

The February average flow of the Potomac was about 4.7 billion gallons per day (bgd), about 57.3 percent less than the long-term average of 11.1 bgd. Daily extremes during the month ranged from a high of about 7.5 bgd on February 14, and dropping to a low of about 3.4 bgd on February 27. Water taken from the river for metropolitan water supply averaged about 300 million gallons per day (mgd).

March flows averaged about 3.2 bgd, or about 78.8 percent less than the long-term average of about 15.3 bgd. The river's flow ranged from a low of about 2.6 bgd on March 16, and rising with rainfall to a high of about 7.8 bgd on March 31. Water taken for municipal supply averaged about 300 mgd. Many Potomac monitoring sites reached their lowest March mean flows on record, including the Point of Rocks, Md., gage, which has operated since 1895.

We want you to focus on the environment you are traveling through while we worry about the logistics. The Ramble is led by professional river guides. Read more and register at [www.potomacriver.org](http://www.potomacriver.org).

Contact Adam Griggs at [agriggs@icprb.org](mailto:agriggs@icprb.org) or 301-984-1908 x103 for more information.

## Monocacy Group Issues Report

The Monocacy River, which runs through Frederick and Carroll counties in Maryland and its headwaters in Pennsylvania, is a beautiful and popular river. The Monocacy became Maryland's first "Scenic River" and was the subject of a river study and management plan in 1990.



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Although it is still a beautiful, lazy river to paddle, the river has been subjected to many of the impacts that the rapidly growing region has experienced. While land use remains overwhelmingly agricultural, eight percent of the watershed is now deemed urban. And while the scenic river designation has helped to focus attention on the river, it has not stopped the mounting threats to its health.

A group created by the designation, the Monocacy Scenic River Citizens' Advisory Board recently published a report on the watershed and some of the threats facing it. In the report, available on the board's website, the board notes several categories of impacts.

Conversion of farmland to commercial and residential use increases the amount of paved or roofed land, increasing stormwater pollution and decreasing the amount of water that soaks into the groundwater table and supports the river. Poorly managed agricultural land has similar effects, producing sediment, nutrient, and bacterial loads that can degrade water quality.

"Human activity has changed and continues to affect the Monocacy River

Basin. Historic deforestation has greatly reduced bird, mammal and insect habitats,” the report notes. It also notes that those activities affect more than the Monocacy watershed. “The impact of development in the Monocacy watershed is not confined to that basin. The Washington metropolitan

area draws its drinking water from the Potomac downstream from the Monocacy.”

The report is a good primer for those planning to paddle the river during this year’s Potomac River Ramble (see related story). The group is planning a report card for the watershed in the near future.

## Commissioners Also Are Authors

Two ICPRB commissioners recently have added to the history and lore of the watershed through new publications.

“Anacostia: the Death and Life of an American River,” documents the history and examines cultural issues of one of the most important and troubled Potomac tributaries. District of Columbia Alternate Commissioner John R. Wennersten has focused his research skills on the river and its political and cultural environment, and residents now have a book that captures a great wealth of information in a single book. The effort comes after books on the Chesapeake Bay, and “Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay,” a fascinating read about the lawless commercial fishing heritage that came to an end in the early 1960s and resulted in the creation of the Potomac River Fisheries Commission.

At the same time, the book is an environmental history of the watershed, and delves into the many-faceted issues of economics, development, race, and environmental justice. The book explores these issues and often illustrates the various sides of the discussion through a number of longtime Anacostia residents and activists.

Throughout the book, Wennersten meticulously documents the forces that brought the river to its low, and holds out hope that recent and future generations reinvigorated to the importance of rivers will lead to a brighter future for the Anacostia. “Anacostia: the Death and Life of an

American River,” is published by Chesapeake Book Company and is widely available.

“The Striped Bass Chronicles: The Saga of America’s Great Game Fish” by Federal Commissioner George Reiger was originally written in 1997, but has been updated. Reiger is no stranger to the angling crowd, having written several other angling and ecology books and as conservation editor of *Field and Stream Magazine*.

Reiger takes readers on a trip through time, history, and to both American coasts to explore the heritage of what many feel is the country’s preeminent sport fish. He paints a mural-sized picture of the fish and those who pursue it through the musings of many historical figures, as well as his own extensive experience.

Particularly interesting are accounts of his striped bass fishing on the metropolitan Potomac near Fletcher’s Boat House as well as the exploits of earlier anglers, such as statesman Daniel Webster, who used a fly to catch stripers in the District in the early 1800s.

Reiger brings the book up to the present with discussions about the benefits of catch-and-release fishing and the recurring population collapses that being the nation’s most popular sport (and commercially harvested) fish have bestowed. “The Striped Bass Chronicles: The Saga of America’s Great Game Fish” is published by Globe Pequot (The Lyons Press), and is widely available.

## A Spring Celebration of American Shad



The Jim Range National Casting Call, April 26-27, at Fletcher’s Boat House in Washington was a time to celebrate the return of the American shad. The ICPRB-led restoration project honored waterman Louis Harley, a key person working in the restoration, with a Potomac Steward Award. Harley passed away in March. Students from schools that raise shad for the project attended as well. In the photo, ICPRB’s Jim Cummins explains the historic tradition of shad planking, while fish roast on a fire nearby. Joining the group is former Va. Senator John Warner, who told the group how he fished with his father for shad at Fletcher’s. Warner is a great fan of shad, both in the river and on the plate.

# Preparing for Shenandoah Spring Fish Kills, Officials Ask for Help

As the region greets a new spring, researchers examining the recurring seasonal fish kills on the Shenandoah River are watching the waterway closely and preparing further investigations.

This spring, investigations will focus on weekly observations, continued fish health evaluations, and in-depth study of possible bacterial causes, reports the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), which with the state's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, leads the multi-agency Shenandoah River Fish Kill Task Force. Most of the kills, which began in 2004, and in recent years have been seen in the James and Cowpasture rivers, occur in April and May, and cease when water temperatures warm.

The fish, mostly adult smallmouth bass and sunfish, develop sores on their bodies that often lead to death. Some fish have

died without contracting the lesions. Intensive research has found multiple stressors in the fish's environment, but no conclusive reasons for the deaths have been found. The fish examined contain bacterial and fungal infections, and parasites, and have damaged skin, gills and organs. Scientists will continue to sample the water and fish this spring.

The task force relies on an active, engaged public to help the effort by reporting observations of diseased or dead fish. The information needed includes types and numbers of fish, location, and any unusual circumstances, and digital photographs are very helpful. Observations can be given to the DEQ Harrisonburg office at (540) 574-7800, or toll free at 1 (800) 592-5482, or emailed to [fishreports@deq.virginia.gov](mailto:fishreports@deq.virginia.gov).



Potomac Basin

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Published six times a year by the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, 51 Monroe St., Suite PE-08, Rockville, MD 20850. (301) 984-1908.

(ISSN 1072-8627)

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This publication does not necessarily reflect official Commission policies. Funds for the *Reporter* are provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the signatory bodies to ICPRB: District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Rockville, MD  
Permit No. 800

Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin  
51 Monroe St., Suite PE-08  
Rockville, MD 20850

Address Service Requested

Printed on recycled paper with soy-based ink

March/April 2009