



OUTDOORS

Guarding the Rappahannock

Friends of the Rappahannock lead the way in protecting “our” river

It’s a very big part of your summer. You plan family outings around it, take a dip in it when temperatures reach the boiling point and have picnics by it. Some people even visit to watch birds, kayak or go tubing. It’s the Rappahannock River, a regional hotspot and one of the state’s most historic waterways. While many embrace the river’s refreshing benefits, few understand what it takes to keep it clean. It’s a full-time job that demands passion for the environment and a dedication for community involvement. That’s where Friends of the Rappahannock (FOR) steps in.

standing and protecting the river’s unique natural, scenic and historic resources.

“I think most people are surprised to learn the scope and depth of our programs,” said Rebecca Kurylo, Development Director for the organization. “We really do a lot to ensure the community is environmentally protected and everyone can enjoy the river. We focus on three main programs: advocacy, restoration and education.”

When it comes to advocacy, FOR is behind the scenes of many precedent-setting policy work in both the Fredericksburg area and at the state level. For example, they recently led the coalition that put 60 miles of river into conservation easement. They also work with area developers, builders and local governments to enact polluted urban runoff codes. With all the concrete in the area, rainwater washes off sidewalks and roads, carrying harmful chemicals into the river. This is the fastest-growing source of harmful nutrients in the river, says Kurylo. Thankfully, that’s changing.

“The City of Fredericksburg is poised to become a model for the nation by enacting a code that will require a set volume of the runoff to be infiltrated into the soil,” said Kurylo. “FOR was invited to spearhead this code revision, and we worked with the Fredericksburg Builders Association and city staff to negotiate codes that everyone agreed on.”

“Most folks have heard about our successful effort to remove the Embrey Dam. It opened up more than 600 miles of historical spawning ground for fish,” said Kurylo. “We also keep trash out of the river through our annual river clean up. More than 600 volunteers help remove more than 12,000 pounds of trash each year.”

Though most of their restoration efforts occur in and around the river, a bulk of the work involves getting trees into the ground. Trees along stream banks are the single most important way to protect the river, says Kurylo. In the past few years, FOR has facilitated the restoration of



Formed in 1985 as a non-profit, grassroots conservation organization, FOR is a big reason why thousands of locals get to reap the perks of the river every year. Founded by a group of dedicated volunteers, the organization has grown to 11 staff and 1,700 members whose common goal is to maintain the water quality and scenic beauty of the Rappahannock River and its tributaries. In fact, they lead a variety of public education programs that focus on under-

44,656 feet of riverbank along streams and 200 riverside buffer acres.

To increase awareness about the Rappahannock, FOR hosts "Riverfest," a crab feast along the river, every September. The annual festival is the organization's primary fundraiser, and it's the reason FOR has the funds necessary to protect the river. The event attracts 1,300 people from all across the region and includes live bands, an open bar, steamed crabs and live and silent auctions.

To further get the word out, FOR frequently involves local students in restoration projects. Through field trips and demonstrations, the organization takes students out of the classroom to learn science and nature first-hand. Recently, they taught Colonial Forge High School students about the importance of forest buffers. The students planted more than 1,200 trees along 416 feet of degraded stream.

According to Kurylo, the two primary problems with the Rappahannock are sediments and nutrients. The issue with sediments is visible every time it rains, as the water turns muddy very quickly. Nutrients, however, are more of a problem as they flow downstream.

"Every summer, the Rappahannock has a dead zone from Tappahannock all the way down to the Bay. Nothing can grow in these dead zones, especially crabs and oysters," said Kurylo, "It is devastating the waterman way of life downstream, but it is not all doom and gloom."

The good thing about water quality in the Rappahannock is that groups like FOR know exactly what the issues are and they can fix them. Most of the issues occur from the individual decisions made by thousands of homeowners every day. Everything from lawn fertilizers to pet refuse can directly impact the health of the river. Thankfully, the programs FOR have in place work to address these problems one step at a time.

"Unlike many of the nation's rivers, the Rappahannock doesn't have any big industrial centers. We cannot point to a pipe flowing into the river and simply say, 'Aha! There's the source of the problem!'" said Kurylo. "The good news is that since we are a source of the problem, we can also be a source of the solution."

This summer, as you swim, canoe and fish in the Rappahannock, keep in mind just how much effort is put into the upkeep of the river. Were it not for Friends of the Rappahannock and their community volunteers, that lazy day at the river wouldn't be an option. That's something to think about the next time you take a dip in the region's most precious resource.

To learn what you can do to keep the river clean, or to buy a ticket to Riverfest, visit www.RiverFriends.com.

— Nicholas Addison Thomas



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