

VOICE OF THE RIVER

Newsletter of the Anacostia Watershed Society

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ANACOSTIA
WATERSHED
SOCIETY

A Safe Earth Day for All!

By Maureen Farrington, Marketing Manager

Not even a world-wide pandemic can stop our community members from protecting our favorite river!

Despite a six month delay, Earth Day in October brought out hundreds of eager volunteers to do their part for a cleaner Anacostia River. The Anacostia Watershed Society was excited to celebrate 50 years of Earth Day in 2020, and our hearts broke at the idea of cancelling the area's premier cleanup in April. By moving the event to the fall, we were still able to get out in our neighborhood parks and streams while keeping COVID safety measures in place!

The weather was perfect to beautify our watershed on Saturday, October 3, with the sun out and the sky clear. We had 400 volunteers spread out at 23 different sites throughout the watershed who cleaned up a whopping 11,000 lbs of trash, recycling, and debris and kept it out of the Anacostia River!

This year we welcomed a new site at Fairmount Heights, where the town government gave their full support to the community members and the Fall 2020 Watershed Stewards who participated there. AWS has long-wanted to host a site in that part of Prince George's County and the watershed, and it was a treat to bring them into the Earth Day family. Among our other programs, Saturday Environmental Academy students pitched in at River Terrace not far from

one of our Trash Traps along the Anacostia River.

None of this would happen without the tireless effort of our Earth Day site leaders! From first-timers to our experienced site leaders (some with more than 20 years working with us!), this group of super volunteers attended trainings, performed site visits, and ran the day for so many in our community. We are so grateful for their commitment to a cleaner Anacostia River.

We'd like to give a huge thank you to Pepco, our Gold Sponsor! Also, Earth Day would not be possible without the support of our local municipal governments and agencies including the National Park Service, Mayor's Office of the Clean City, DC Department of Energy and Environment, DC Department of Public Works, Prince George's Department of the Environment, and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

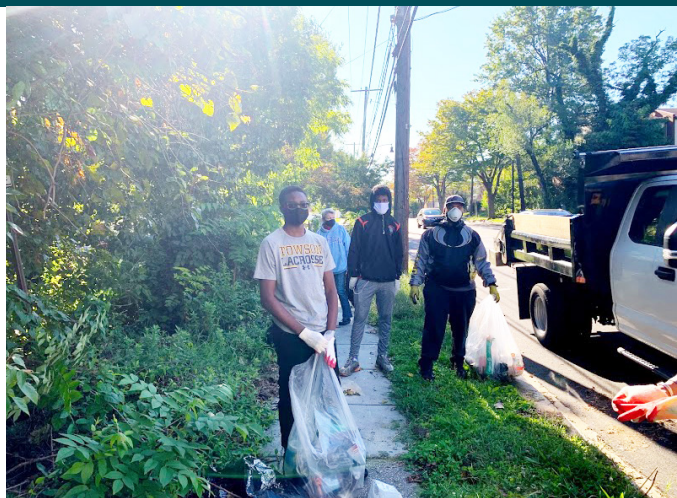


Photo credit: Jonathan Stepanoff

Photos from top: Volunteers at Fairmount Heights; Volunteers at Kingman Island; Volunteer by NW Branch

President's Corner

By Jim Foster, President

Greetings from the lonely deck of the USS AWS! I miss you all terribly. We have been busy with projects this fall and taking care of our existing babies – you know, mussels, trees, wild rice – and each other. I hope you are well and perhaps thriving in your own way.



The Interim Record of Decision (ROD) for remediating toxic sediments in the river was released at the end of September by the District Department of Energy & Environment. This plan focuses on cleaning up 11 “hot spots” in the river that have been identified during the many investigations of contamination and is part of a multi-pronged strategy to make the Anacostia River “fishable” by addressing legacy contamination that poses risks to human health and wildlife.

In other good news for the River, Congress passed the America’s Conservation Enhancement (ACE) Act, a piece of landmark legislation protecting clean water in the Bay. ACE reauthorizes and increases funding for the EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program, creates a new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service habitat protection program for the Bay called Chesapeake WILD, and reauthorizes the National Park Service’s Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails program, which has supported our boat tours program and mussel restoration efforts (see a note on that below). As a member organization of the Choose Clean Water Coalition, we celebrate this historic win for the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers!

Lastly, we are always looking for new talent to join our Board of Directors and help provide “Super Vision” to the organization. If you have passion for the mighty Anacostia, then we want to talk to you!

For the River,

We found one of our mussel babies in the wild! Read about Mussel a224 here: anacostiaws.org/blog/running-into-our-musselpower-mussels-all-grown-up.html



Anacostia Watershed Society

AWS is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to protect and restore the Anacostia River by bringing partners and communities together to achieve a clean and safe Anacostia River for the benefit of all living in its watershed and for future generations.

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Treating and Teaching: Building Community Through Outdoor Classrooms



By Ariel Trahan, Director of River Restoration

New outdoor classroom installed by AWS at John Bayne Elementary

Now, more than ever, we are seeing the importance of outdoor education. AWS has always focused on getting kids out to the river itself and equipping teachers with the knowledge and tools that they need to utilize their own schoolyards as outdoor classrooms.

Through the Treating and Teaching program, a partnership of several different local organizations funded by the Clean Water Partnership and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, we have been able to work with eight schools this year in Prince George's County Public Schools to build custom outdoor classrooms on their schoolyards.

While there were COVID-related delays, all eight outdoor learning areas will be ready when students eventually return to in-person learning. These outdoor learning areas will not only add resources and capacity for in-person learning and allow for social distancing, but will also provide the additional benefits of fresh air, hands on learning opportunities, and increased access to nature.

While PGCPs is starting the 2020-21 school year with virtual learning, we are working closely with the school system to provide professional development opportunities for teachers and beginning work with a new cohort of schools on the design plans for the next round of outdoor classrooms.



New outdoor classroom and rain garden installed at Waldon Woods Elementary School in Prince George's County.



#GIVINGTUESDAY™

Get ready for
#GivingTuesday
on December 1!

The day to show the power of giving locally is back!

This year on #GivingTuesday, the Anacostia Watershed Society is asking you to help us reach even more people! On this special day of giving, we're asking our members and supporters to reach out to their friends to give them the opportunity to give to a local non-profit that gets results.

Make your gift go further by supporting us on this day through the Catalogue for Philanthropy! The Anacostia Watershed Society is eligible for special #GivingTuesday prizes, such as most donors in an hour! Stay tuned on our email list and website for more information.



THANK YOU TO
OUR DONORS!





Left: Wild Rice patch at RFK at August 2020; Right: The same patch after overgrazing.

The Year of Wild Rice

By Jorge Bogantes Montero, Program Specialist: Natural Resources

Zizania aquatica, two Latin words that bring joy to this dreadful Anno Domini 2020, and the scientific name of our beloved wild rice, a tall native wetland grass that once carpeted the Anacostia River.

If you have ever been to Jug Bay in the Patuxent River, you can get an idea of how our favorite river used to look: hugged by a vast expanse of wild rice with its graceful yellow-green inflorescences, a flag of the summer in the Anacostia River. Once a keystone species in the Anacostia marshes, Wild Rice creates prime habitat for the Sora

rail, making it a famous Sora hunting destination in the 19th century.

Wild rice suffered a sharp decline in the last century due to a relentless campaign of wetland destruction through sedimentation, dredging, and filling of the so called “malarial swamps.” More recently, the resident population of Canada geese, a non-migratory and introduced subspecies of the goose, was brought to the area from the Midwest and wreaked havoc on the river’s wild rice. The geese find the plant very palatable. Having become overabundant in the river, they decimated the annual native grass by

That’s when the Anacostia Watershed Society came to the rescue! In 2004, we started a wild rice revegetation effort that has lasted to this day. With advice from wetland experts, we started the propagation of wild rice from a local source, the Jug Bay wetlands at the Patuxent River. Jug Bay became a true reference ecosystem for our restoration efforts in the River, our model wetland. The Patuxent River wetlands endured the same vegetation grazing problems caused by an overabundant geese population. Unsurprisingly, the wild rice was widely decimated by the feathered honkers. Every year, we have been collecting wild rice seed at Jug Bay with our partner Greg Kearns, the legendary naturalist at the Jug Bay Natural Area.

The seed of wild rice must be refrigerated over the winter, and then either mudballed into the marsh or grown in a nursery come early spring and be planted by early summer. Mudballing is exactly what it sounds like: mixing the seeds with mud, rolling into a ball, then hurling them into the Anacostia River marshes. This is a popular

A Tale of

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Flourishing Wild Rice at Kingman Lake



restoration activity among 4th graders.

With a geese overpopulation in the Anacostia River, any revegetation endeavor had to be protected from the birds. The only way to protect our wild rice plantings was by creating 800-900 square foot corrals. An area small

enough to de-

ter geese due to the fact that the birds need ample areas to land and take off, just like airplanes. Fencing on wetland real estate is a very different thing from fencing in terra firma. Add waders and the travails of DC weather into the mix, and you've got a pretty physically taxing marsh work out. Thank you volunteers! for all the hours of back

breaking wetland work in cold and hot weather.

And, thank you students, for all the thousands of wetland plants planted over the years through our Rice Rangers environmental education program.

Through our wetland revegetation, we have also propagated many other native wetland plants such as arrow arum, pickerelweed, rushes, American Lotus and other species. But our focus has been to enhance wild rice populations because of its importance for the river's wetlands. Sixteen years of wetland restoration, and the recent goose population management efforts, have culminated in what we consider a 2020 wild rice bonanza, particularly at Kingman marsh, the stronghold of the species in the tidal Anacostia. We did a comparison of recent aerial photos taken by helicopter flights,



Mudballing at Kingman and Heritage Islands

by the National Park Service and the District Department of Energy and the Environment, with Google Earth satellite imagery. We roughly estimated a total area of 7 acres of dense wild rice growth at Kingman marsh north of Benning Road NE, and the north fringe wetland --right north of the East Capitol Street bridge. In the past decade, the dense wild rice acreage has normally been 3 acres or less. Until now most of the growth has been rather scattered. This is great news for fish and wildlife! Will we see more Sora rails? So far they are a relatively rare visitor to these wetlands...Time will tell.

le of a Wild Rice Tattoo by Former AWS Intern Julia Keane

my favorite experiences as a student at University of Maryland was working at AWS. The Anacostia River is the lifeblood for DC and surrounding areas, but it is becoming increasingly polluted. One of the main goals of the internship was to restore wetland species, including wild rice. I have a lot of great memories from my time in the marshes, but one that will always stick with me is when I helped collect seeds off the wild rice plants. It was a tedious task but one that I enjoyed immersing myself head first in the environment.

Surrounded by butterflies, red-winged blackbirds, herons and every other animal that relied on these plants. I loved how you could hear the rustle through the stems and smell the essential scent of marshland. But the plants weren't just aesthetically pleasing. As we boated from section to

section my intern advisors told me how wild rice, a once prolific plant in this area, was now declining at a scary pace. This impacted the water quality, the ability of the wetlands to protect the coast from flooding, and the local biodiversity. Throughout my internship I fell in love with this plant and what it meant to the health of the Anacostia River.

A couple years later, right before graduation, a group of friends and I decided to go on a road trip and get tattoos together. I was in the midst of applying for jobs in California so I wanted a tattoo that would remind me of Maryland and the beautiful wetlands I had spent most of my college career studying. My internship with AWS played a large role in my life, so I thought wild rice would be a perfect way to commemorate that.



I live in California now, but on a recent visit back to Kingman Island I was shocked by the lush landscape of wetland plants. In just a few years, fish populations have bounced back, water quality is at healthier levels, and wild rice is on the rise. I know that all of this is due to the hard work of the people at Anacostia Watershed Society and I'm happy this tattoo can always serve as a reminder of my time with them.

Meet our Meadows

By Robinne Gray, Gifts Officer

When we think of rivers and streams, it's common to consider them as only the water in the channel. But bringing a river like the Anacostia back to life involves more than working directly with the water in the riverbed. Because any healthy river ecosystem depends on the relationship between the water and the surrounding land, what's on and near the riverbank is important, too.

In their natural environments, rivers are surrounded by all kinds of habitats, including wetlands, forests, and meadows. Distinct from forests and wetlands, meadows are "dry land" covered by herbaceous plants and having few or no trees. Meadows – also called grasslands – are a shifting and regular part of the landscape, occurring when forest openings are created by storm blow-downs or fires.

In our urban and suburban communities of the DC region, meadows typically need to be intentionally created and maintained. If they are present at all, meadows may be devalued as empty spaces or seen as neglected areas that are ripe for development, since they are already cleared of trees. Yet these "vacant" lots



These signs mark Anacostia Watershed Society meadow restoration sites throughout the region.

are full of life, and they contribute many of the same benefits as forested areas: the wildflowers and grasses that live in meadow environments can have deep roots that prevent soil erosion. These plant communities filter stormwater and create stream buffer, sequester carbon, and create habitat essential for pollinators and other wildlife.

As part of our holistic effort to restore the Anacostia River watershed, AWS is currently stewarding five meadow sites covering about nine acres with the help of community volunteers and school kids. We created our first site along the Northwest Branch south of Magruder Park in Hyattsville around 2007. Another, larger meadow site is nearby at the confluence of the Northwest and Northeast Branches, not far from our headquarters in Bladensburg. These sites are located in the river's floodplain, near levees constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Our early efforts required negotiation with the Army Corps, whose regulations specified that the floodplains were to be kept mowed and clear of trees so they would not collect debris if there was a flood. This policy also meant that the large areas of riverside land were essentially biologically sterile and required frequent mowing along with regular application of herbicides to keep the areas covered in a "lawn" of non-native, low grasses. With the help of partners and advocates from the local community, AWS got permission to establish meadow areas with native and naturalized plant species such as black-eyed Susan, common milkweed, boneset, switchgrass, Indian



Meadow at RFK stadium with butterflies

Continued on page 7

Environmental Education at Any Age

By Reyna Askew, Manager of Community-based Restoration, and Chris Lemieux, Manager of Environmental Education

Undeterred by obvious challenges, our Maryland Master Naturalist program continues to thrive in a new remote format. With four classes completed, we are already a quarter of the way through the year-long program!

The most recent class focused on the mycological world (that's fungus!) and our mind's have been blown! Did you know that there are several types of bioluminescent fungus species right here in the watershed? Did you know that our watershed is also home to a fungus that can turn flies into zombies!? Well, you would have if you were in this class! We've also been able to

use our new-found fungal knowledge immediately as recent rains have turned the area into a mushroom hunter's paradise.

While we're busy foraging away, we're looking forward to our upcoming classes featuring birds as well as amphibians of Maryland.

Our Watershed Stewards Academy has adapted and continued to grow in 2020. Our spring cohort has just completed their coursework and is beginning to create their capstone projects while our fall cohort begins classes. Through our virtual classes we learned how to find macroinvertebrates in our local streams, how to reduce stormwater runoff pollution with plants, and how to organize our communities for environmental change.

Most recently, we were able to get together (in small groups and physically distant) to explore some of the wonders at Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens and Nash Run. At the Nash Run Trash Trap, we discovered that roughly 70% of the trash in our waterways doesn't float! Meaning that even once we have tackled the plastic bottles and cans floating on the river's surface, we will still need to work to reduce pollution at the source to make sure that it doesn't



Watershed Stewards on a physically-distant boat tour

Meadows, continued from page 6

grass, beebalm, and partridge pea. No herbicides are applied, and the meadows only need to be mowed once in late winter. We are establishing another small demonstration meadow plot in University Park near the Hyattsville Library.

One prominent meadow is in the District near RFK Stadium. In an ongoing effort, volunteer groups are helping us clear the area of invasive woody plants, like red mulberry, bush honeysuckle and Japanese honeysuckle, that had taken over the unused areas near Parking Lot 6 where the Metro line passes overhead. Elementary school students then help us plant the prepared sites with native plants they've grown as part

of the Saving Our Native Grasslands (SONG) program, funded by the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, and the Chesapeake Bay Trust. Our newest and smallest meadow is at Marvin Gaye Park next to a community garden, created in partnership with DC Parks and Recreation and DC Natives.

Meadows and gardens can have a mutually beneficial relationship, with the native plants helping to attract pollinators needed by the garden plants. More broadly, meadows lush with native plants support a variety of insect life. Invertebrates such as snails, mantises, caterpillars, grasshoppers, katydids, true bugs, spiders and beetles are important not only as pollinators but as food for other animals. Caterpillars are protein-packed



end up in our river. We also had the opportunity to get out onto the river in some small groups and we learned that like our communities, the river is resilient and continues to heal, rebound, and teem with life.

food for some baby birds! A robust insect population will also feed small mammals such as mice, voles, moles, and rabbits, which in turn will attract larger predators such as owls, hawks, and foxes.

Meadows are a foundational part of a food web that is essential to a healthy, naturally functioning ecosystem. As we learn how bird and insect populations are dwindling across the United States and the world, it's clear that meadow habitats have an important role to play in sustaining biodiversity for local and migratory species. Imagine the potential if other currently lifeless areas such as road medians and power line cuts were transformed into meadow habitats!



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