



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation

April 2024

Forum examines Maury problems due to Boy Scout dam

“What’s Wrong with our River,” a two-hour forum organized by RC’s Maury River Alliance (MRA), attracted an audience of well over 100 to the firehouse in Rockbridge Baths on April 16. Several members of the RC board attended.

Lake Merriweather belongs to the National Capital Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America, which controls the impounding Goshen Dam, and has been responsible for many problems in the Maury over recent decades. Notably, the camp and thus the lake are available only to DC-area Scouts and not to local Scouts.

In the past, the lake was drained in fall and winter, but in 2023 its gates were opened at the height of the tourist season, and drainage continues all these months later due to legal and financial problems of the Scouts.

The MRA was formed in the fall of 2023 to educate the public and channel citizen concern about the ongoing degradation of the Maury by algae and silt originating from Lake Merriweather. The photograph here contrasts the clear waters from the Calfpasture River (on the left) to the filthy water flowing from the Goshen Dam via the Little Calfpasture; the mixing of the waters degrades the quality of the Maury, a Virginia Scenic River, for many miles downstream.



The difference in waters from the Calfpasture (left) and the Little Calfpasture as seen near the head of the Maury River (photo by Dr. Robert Brent).

RC’s Sandra Stuart presented information on the formation of the MRA and the growing concerns of downstream landowners and river-users as the Maury was made unattractive and unhealthy for recreation and tourism. Anne McClung then showed her video addressing not only the pollution but also the high risk posed by the dam: Should it ever be breached, the result could be catastrophic death and destruction for 970 property owners downstream.

The five speakers who followed included engineers and regulatory experts who addressed the technical details of controlling the dam in everyday use and preventing disaster. The problems are complex and multi-faceted: For instance, some of the silt originates from degraded and overgrazed pasturelands upstream of Lake Merriweather and could be reduced by better farming practices in that area. The dam is regulated by an “alphabet soup” of agencies that do not work well together and lack enforcement power, while the Boy Scouts have a long history of noncompliance with safety regulations and have ignored pleas to work with the downstream community.

The meeting ended with audience questions and discussion followed by a request from the organizers for the public to voice their concerns in meetings, letters to editors, and pressure on the Boy Scouts of America.

*** * * * 2024 Community Cleanup a success! * * * ***

RC’s annual Community Cleanup in late March was a great success despite some challenging weather. An estimated 440 people worked in various groups at 72 locations. The 43 groups who reported back collected 683 big bags of trash. Extrapolating from their data, the community effort netted an estimated 1144 bags for about 10 tons of trash!

Thanks to David Harbor and RC board members David Agnor and Melody Tennant for leading this effort, and our partners at VDOT and Boxerwood.

Now, if we could only convince the litterers not to trash our roadsides and waterways.

*THANK YOU to the wonderful partners and donors who supported Rockbridge Conservation in 2023!
For specific acknowledgements, please see the separate sheet included with this newsletter.*

Get help for water, septic systems

The Septic and Well Assistance Program (SWAP), managed by RC, will pay to repair or build wells and septic systems for low-income homeowners.

Applications need to be submitted soon, so anyone interested should contact Susan McLaughlin, susan.mclaughlin@rockbridgeconservation.org or (540) 458-1539, or visit rockbridgeconservation.org.

RC hosts environment reception

On April 9, during the annual Environment Virginia Symposium, Rockbridge Conservation hosted a reception sponsored by the Virginia Conservation Network. This allowed representatives from allied organizations across the state to see RC's offices and view exhibits about some of the work done there.

Of course, it was a Zero Waste event!

Bull & Oyster again goes green

At the request of the Rockbridge Area Health Center, RC again undertook waste management for the big event. Glass and cans were recycled, food scraps and paper composted, and the oyster shells (so many shells!) were collected for farm use, thus minimizing waste directed to the landfill.

This alliance, established last year, shows how good times and conservation can work together.

To borrow recycling containers for your event, email info@rockbridgeconservation.org.

Hot Links in newsletter

If you are reading this on paper but want to access included links, this QR Code will take you to the newsletter page on the RC website. Scroll down to the issue you want and tap on it. The links contained there will take you to the website or email address you want, with no further typing.



Messimer bequest benefits RC

Mollie Messimer served as Rockbridge Conservation's Executive Director for several years in the early 1990s, and afterwards remained involved as an officer and



member of the board. Mollie helped start and chaired RACC's annual Community Cleanup for 14 years. While ED, she initiated the Waste Watchers programs at Central Elementary School and obtained two federal grants for environmental projects. One of those grants provided the seed money to start Boxerwood's

environmental education program, where Mollie worked for seven years as Boxerwood's Education Steward.

Speaking of RC's importance to the community, Molly once said, "Organizations like [RC] provide a bridge between the people and their governments. It helps create a synergy with governments and the public, and the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Barbara Walsh, RC's current ED, says "Mollie was a leader, an educator, and an environmentalist who will be greatly missed on this Earth." Mollie passed away in January, 2024. Her bequest to RC will provide future support of environmental initiatives.

Celebrations of Life will be held May 17 (Caldwell, WV) and May 18 (Lexington, VA). Details [here](#).

Earth Day never really ends

You can always enjoy the many Rockbridge paths to hike, roads to bike, flowers to discover and birds to hear! Below are links to find more activities.

- The Chessie Trail stays close to the Maury River. friendsofthechessietrail.org
- Brushy Hills features trails and activities. www.friendsofbrushyhills.org
- Boxerwood gardens, boxerwood.org
- Natural Bridge State Park is always a showplace. www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/natural-bridge

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PFAS chemicals finally get some environmental regulation

As reported in the winter newsletter, PFAS “forever chemicals” have been found in Rockbridge waterways and may be ubiquitous due to the practice of spreading sewage sludge as fertilizer on farm fields. This family of chemicals requires sophisticated laboratory analysis and has never been included in federal environmental regulations.

That just changed. In a press release, the Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) proclaimed that they were issuing “the first-ever national, legally enforceable drinking water standard to protect communities from exposure to harmful per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)...[which] will reduce PFAS exposure for approximately 100 million people, prevent thousands of deaths, and reduce tens of thousands of serious illnesses.”

That is very good news, but local expert Joe DiNardo points out that the allowable levels should be still lower and will still cause a great deal of health and/or environmental issues. Furthermore, he notes that the new rule applies only to “water systems,” failing to consider well water. In the Rockbridge area, that leaves out a majority of households as well as institutions such as schools that have their own water wells, although a pilot program is underway in Rockbridge - stay tuned!

Also unaddressed is the problem of fish caught in waters contaminated even at a very low levels; DiNardo calculates that in many Virginia localities, children eating even one serving of local, freshwater fish per month may be getting a toxic dose of PFAS.

On April 19, the EPA added rules to sanction polluters. “Designating [PFAS] chemicals under our Superfund authority will allow EPA to address more contaminated sites, take earlier action, and expedite cleanups, all while ensuring polluters pay for the costs to clean up pollution threatening the health of communities,” EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement.

Bottom line: Federal authorities are finally beginning to address PFAS problem, a move that should have taken place years ago. However, legal battles with industrial chemical giants will doubtless ensue.

RC at Environment Virginia

On April 9-11, the Virginia Military Institute hosted the annual Environment Virginia Symposium, the premier environmental conference in Virginia. More than five hundred environmental professionals attended the 3-day event, including representatives of non-profit organizations, grass-roots groups, municipalities, higher education, industry, and environmental consultants.

The symposium was co-hosted by the environmental agencies of the Commonwealth. The involvement of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) provided attendees with opportunities to engage directly with regulators and learn about new and emerging environmental priorities. DEQ used the meeting to update attendees about the implementation of the new "PEEP" program, designed to improve permitting processes.

The symposium also offered dozens of sessions on a diverse array of emerging environmental topics. I participated as panel member or speaker in two sessions, "Finding Your Funding," which discussed finances for environmental projects (RC has already subscribed to the new app), and "Data Center," that addressed capacity hurdles facing data centers as they try to serve a growing global population.

Each year, Environment Virginia provides an opportunity to educate attendees about environmental topics as well as to engage with nearly every environmental organization active in the Commonwealth.

Astrika Adams, RC board member

RC Board supports activities with 100% donating in 2024

Please join us in supporting RC's valuable work. This QR Code will take you directly to the donations page on the RC website.



Rockbridge Conservation does a lot with a little!

Recent initiatives:

- Administering the Septic & Well Assistance Program (SWAP) for low-income homeowners
- Removing invasives and planting natives along Woods Creek (Friends of Woods Creek)
- Working to reduce downstream pollution from Lake Merriweather (Maury River Alliance)
- Supporting improved green infrastructure in Lexington (Healthy Green Neighborhoods)
- Advocating for solar panels on local Habitat houses (Solar Seed Fund)
- Helping draft an ordinance to regulate siting of commercial-scale solar installations
- Publicizing and coordinating local PFAS water-testing

Continuation of longtime programs:

- Organizing the annual Rockbridge Community Cleanup (more than 30 years!)
- Presenting public educational conservation seminars on important issues
- Recognizing local businesses that help the environment (Caught Green-Handed)
- Reducing waste through community composting programs
- Managing two trails for public use (one in Lexington and one in Rockbridge)
- Monitoring the Maury and local streams

Help us do more by donating today!



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Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (RACC)
P.O. Box 564
Lexington, VA 24450



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