



Washington Post's Series of Three Articles on the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers May 2, 2012

PDFs of the 3 articles are attached, but below are a few points the articles made.

Key points noted re: **Potomac** are:

- a. Biggest Issues - Stormwater run-off and CSOs
- b. Cleanup Efforts - Mont. Co.'s Green Streets projects, as well as upgrades to Blue Plains and the CSO LTCP
- c. What You Can Do – References proper disposal of personal care products, lawn care, and Alice Ferguson Foundation's upcoming clean-up effort.
- d. Cites Potomac Conservancy's 2011 report card rating (D) – citing poor land use/rapid growth, emerging contaminants; mentions intersex fish
- e. Curtis Dalpa quote '...river is in danger of slipping backwards'.
- f. Mike Bolinder (Anacostia Riverkeeper group) quote '...Potomac got cleaned up first because it isn't near poor minorities and toxic landfills'

Key points noted re: **Anacostia** are:

- a. Biggest Issues – Litter, Location (i.e., lower income residents bearing brunt of burden), stormwater runoff
- b. Cleanup Efforts – Bag tax, 'Talking Trash' (DC & PG school programs), and LID
- c. What You Can Do – Rain barrels, rain gardens, visit the Anacostia.

Potomac River's and Anacostia River's cleanup makes progress, but much work remains

By [Megan Buerger](#), Published: *Washington Post* May 2, 2012

It's Saturday morning on the Anacostia River, and the sun is filtering through the trees on Kingman Island. In the distance, a pair of deer splash across a large, lush cove. Six turtles tumble, one by one, from a sun-soaked log into the river below.

"This is exactly what you think of when you think of Ward 7," said a sarcastic Brent Bolin, director of advocacy for the [Anacostia Watershed Society](#), who is steering the boat through Kenilworth Marsh. "The sad thing is, there are people living less than a mile away who have no idea this is here."

That's because for many years, the Anacostia was one of [the most polluted rivers](#) in the country. Meanwhile, its larger neighbor, the Potomac, was the focus of a [major ongoing cleanup](#).

This could slowly be changing. Inlets such as Kenilworth Marsh are starting to show signs of revival. With the rise of nearby high-profile development projects such as Nationals Park and luxury apartments by the Navy Yard, the neglected Anacostia riverfront is getting attention.

But environmentalists stress that because the region's waterways are connected — the Anacostia flows into the Potomac, which flows into the Chesapeake Bay — a holistic approach to cleaning them is necessary. If one river is neglected, the region suffers.

"The greatest concentration of PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls], a serious poisonous toxicant in the Potomac, is the spot where the Anacostia enters it," said Ed Merrifield, head of the Potomac Riverkeeper group. "So if you care about one, you care about the other."

Experts agree that both rivers need serious work. That's why every year around this time, hundreds of [cleanup sites](#) along the Potomac and Anacostia rivers host thousands of Washington area volunteers in honor of Earth Day. They weed the wetlands, pick up litter and compile a bizarre list of found items that in recent years have included toilets, a Studebaker and a newspaper vending box for the long-shuttered Washington Star.

River cleanups are important because they connect residents to resources in their back yard, said Kellie Bolinder, executive director of the [Earth Conservation Corps](#). First-time volunteers are often stunned at how beautiful the Anacostia is, and they are inspired to help restore it, she said.

There are several arguments as to why the Anacostia has been so neglected, primarily that it doesn't supply drinking water, but the prevailing theory is that the communities surrounding the river — wards 6, 7 and 8 — have been forced to bear the brunt of the District's waste.

“America has a shameful history of putting our pollution on poor minorities, and there’s no other way to say it,” said Mike Bolinder, head of the Anacostia Riverkeeper group. “You can slice and dice it any way you want, but the Potomac got cleaned up first because it isn’t near poor minorities and toxic landfills.”

Experts on both rivers acknowledge that cleanups have helped usher in progress, but they’re quick to caution residents about celebrating too soon.

“Cleanups treat the symptoms of a much larger problem,” said Lori Arguelles, executive director of the [Alice Ferguson Foundation](#), which promotes environmental education. “Without addressing the infrastructure problems that led us here, we’ll be holding cleanups a thousand years from now.”

The Potomac River, in good health and bad

By [Megan Buerger](#), Published: *Washington Post*, May 2

If the Potomac River has gotten more attention than the Anacostia in the past 50 years, it's partly because the Potomac supplies 90 percent of the region's drinking water. That amounts to an average of 486 million gallons a day, according to the Potomac Conservancy. The Potomac watershed, which includes 14,670 miles of land that drains to the river, covers parts of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, the District, Maryland and Virginia. In the 1950s, reports of stench and dangerous levels of pollution clouded the Potomac's reputation. But the 383-mile river wasn't always in such bad shape.

History

In 1608, Capt. John Smith described the Potomac and Anacostia rivers as being full of wildlife. More than 300 years later, a 1914 Public Health Service study found the Potomac in "generally good condition" with "ample oxygen."

But things soon went downhill. The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin reported that the District's raw and partially treated sewage doubled between 1932 and 1956. And in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the river a "national disgrace."

"Johnson's words sparked a renewed interest in the Potomac," said Ed Merrifield, of the Potomac Riverkeeper group. "The river had really become an embarrassment."

The Clean Water Act was a turning point for the river, prompting federal laws on sewage effluents and major updates to the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Facility in Southwest Washington. Fisheries reopened, largemouth bass reappeared, and litter levels in the Potomac fell drastically.

But years of stagnating pollution continue to haunt the river in less obvious ways. A 2005 U.S. Geological Survey found, to the public's horror, intersex fish that developed as a result of severely contaminated waters. The most recent report by the Potomac Conservancy downgraded the river from a D+ (2007) to a D (2011), citing poor land use in a rapidly growing region and a host of emerging contaminants.

"Today, the river is in danger of slipping backwards," said Curtis Dalpa, the commission's communications manager, "and not because of a lack of effort but because of rapid population growth."

Biggest issues

Storm-water runoff and combined sewer overflows: Storm-water runoff occurs during periods of rainfall or snowmelt. The water, which can't soak into hard surfaces such as paved driveways,

sidewalks and streets, flows into nearby storm drains, picking up road oils, garbage and chemicals.

Cities use combined sewer systems to collect runoff and wastewater and keep it from flowing into nearby waterways. The region's sewage is transported to a plant for treatment and then discharged into the Potomac. But the District's sewer systems can only hold so much. When it rains, the pipes overflow and release excess wastewater into the river. Robin Broder, vice president of Potomac Riverkeeper, said combined sewage overflows are most common in older East Coast cities, where the population has outgrown antiquated sewer systems.

Invisible pollutants: Many problems the Potomac faces aren't visible. "Today, our problems are hidden in the form of new contaminants that didn't exist 20 years ago," Merrifield said, "and we don't have the technology to completely remove them yet." Those contaminants are largely from pharmaceuticals and personal-care products, such as antidepressants, birth control pills and some shampoos and lotions with endocrine-disrupting compounds that, when improperly discarded or flushed down the toilet, contaminate the river.

Cleanup efforts

Green Streets: Montgomery County officials are tackling storm water by planting grassy areas along roads where rainwater can dissipate and soak in before running off highways and parking lots. Those projects, called Green Streets, are an example of low-impact development efforts in the Potomac watershed. Officials plan to retrofit 30 percent of the hard-surface areas this way.

Wastewater treatment upgrades: Over the past 40 years, the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant, the largest in the world, has undergone significant expansion and updating. It can treat 370 million gallons of sewage a day. Over the next 15 years, D.C. Water, which operates Blue Plains, has planned about [\\$4 billion](#) in improvements, including modernizing the city's sewers and building three Metro-size tunnels to store runoff when it rains. Julie Lawson of the Anacostia Watershed Society said that when completed, the tunnels will reduce combined sewage overflows by 98 percent.

What you can do

Read labels. Buy personal hygiene products made with natural ingredients. "If you can't pronounce the chemicals on the ingredients label, you probably don't want to buy it, and you definitely don't want to flush it down the toilet," Broder said. For information on medication disposal, visit www.disposemyeds.org. To find products that are environmentally friendly, go to www.ewg.org/skindeep.

Control lawn care: Avoid using fertilizer and pesticides near ditches and gutters, where they can flow into storm drains. If possible, treat your lawn during dry weather, because heavy rainfall creates runoff. It is illegal to dispose of lawn and garden chemicals in storm drains. "The Potomac won't be safe until we change our behavior" Merrifield said, "and that's the toughest

part. How do you explain to a person that by over-fertilizing their lawn in Olney, they're contributing to the dead zones in the Potomac and the Bay?"

Get informed. The Alice Ferguson Foundation, which started the first Potomac Watershed Cleanup 24 years ago and is headquartered at Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek, Md., is hosting its annual Spring Farm Festival on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. The event includes a history of the Potomac River, a plants and crafts sale, hay wagon rides, barn tours and live music.

The history of the Anacostia River

By [Megan Buerger](#), Published: Washington Post May 2, 2012

The Anacostia River might be small — 8.5 miles — but don't be fooled by its size. Its watershed, which stretches 176 miles across portions of the District and Prince George's and Montgomery counties, is the most developed area within the Potomac's watershed, and arguably the most important. "The Anacostia watershed is extremely populated, developed and polluted," said Ed Merrifield, head of the Potomac Riverkeeper group, "and because of its size, those things are highly concentrated. If you step back and look at the region's water as a whole, the Anacostia is by far the most important chunk."

HISTORY

Long before the Anacostia River was nicknamed "the forgotten river," the Nacotchtank Indians called it "anaquash," which means "village trading center." Historians estimate that Native Americans lived on the river for 10,000 years.

In the early 1600s, English settlers began to clear forests in the watershed to grow tobacco and use the river as a shipping channel. Gradually, toxic silt began to build on the river's bottom. By the mid-1800s, ships had trouble making it to the port at Bladensburg. The river, no longer useful for business, was abandoned.

Over the next century, the District's population grew tenfold, reaching 800,000 in 1950, which covered 25 percent of the Anacostia watershed with impervious surfaces. Today, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that less than 10 percent of the area's original forests and wetlands remain.

But Mike Bolinder, head of the Anacostia Riverkeeper group, said that some [recent developments](#) have been welcomed by environmentalists, who hope for the birth of a green community along the riverfront.

"Nationals stadium was probably the first time in history that environmentalists and developers were on the same side," he said. "Environmentalists knew that development would bring money to clean up the area, and developers knew that in order to get permits, they had to go green."

During this year's Earth Day cleanups, the parking lot at RFK Stadium was decorated with banners bearing the new slogan, "Rediscover your Anacostia."

"It really all comes down to people," said Brent Bolin, the society's director of advocacy. "You can do a hundred tests and give a hundred tours, but where there's real estate, there's progress."

BIGGEST ISSUES

Litter: Garbage has plagued the river for decades. More than 20,000 tons of trash pollute the river each year.

Location: Bolinder said the Anacostia River is surrounded by lower-income communities that have not had an opportunity to advocate for themselves. “We want to inspire people who live in these communities to take action,” he said.

Stormwater runoff: The Anacostia’s issues with stormwater runoff are closely tied to the region’s population growth. “More people means more pavement,” Bolin said. “Pavement is a superhighway for runoff.”

CLEANUP EFFORTS

Bag tax: Authorities say the Anacostia River Cleanup and Protection Act, also known as the “bag tax,” has reduced the river’s most common form of litter by about 75 percent since it was enacted two years ago. The fees also paid for trash traps on the river. One year after the fee was enacted, the District reported reductions in the use of paper and plastic bags from 22.5 million to 3.2 million. Montgomery County adopted the fee in January.

Talking trash: Trash Free Schools, a litter reduction initiative by the Alice Ferguson Foundation, teaches students about recycling programs and waste management. Of the eight schools participating in the District and Prince George’s County, six are within walking distance of the Anacostia River.

Low-impact development: Julie Lawson, of the Anacostia Watershed Society, said Nationals park set the bar for low-impact development with green roofs and a runoff control system. “It manages rainfall in a very sophisticated way,” she said.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Install a rain barrel. Rain barrels keep stormwater from sweeping debris and chemicals into drains, and they provide clean water for tasks such as gardening. If used regularly, they can also reduce water bills. D.C. Greenworks (www.dcgreenworks.org) offers rebates for rain barrels.

Dig a rain garden. Rain gardens are designed to soak up runoff. RiverSmart Homes, a program run by the District Department of the Environment, will reimburse homeowners \$1.25 for every impervious square foot treated. Details are at ddoe.dc.gov/riversmarthomes.

Visit the Anacostia. The Earth Conservation Corps (202-479-4505, Ext. 101) and Bladensburg Waterfront Park (www.pgparcs.com) offer boat tours of the river, and the Anacostia Watershed Society holds cleanups, paddle boating clinics and native plant walks (www.anacostiaws.org).