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Our Bay: Risky swim

Environmental activists waded into Anacostia River to highlight the bay's unacceptable water quality

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

Published 07/02/11

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Pamela Wood – The Capital

Jim Foster of the Anacostia Watershed Society points out trash in the Anacostia River at Bladensburg Waterfront Park. He's joined by author and Naval Academy Professor Howard Ernst. Environmental activists waded into the river to underscore the need for stronger actions to clean up the Chesapeake Bay.

BLADENSBURG - It was a lovely day for a swim.

Warm, sunny weather. Hardly a cloud in the sky. A light breeze.

But then again, there was trash - and lots of it: bottles, cans, a container of instant noodles, a tennis ball, a condom. (In its wrapper, thankfully.)

And there also was a slick, oily sheen on the water.

Undeterred, environmental activists went into the Anacostia River at Bladensburg Waterfront Park on Thursday as a publicity stunt to underscore their message that the health of the Chesapeake Bay is unacceptably poor, and more needs to be done to fix it.

"While it may look bucolic here ... these waters are poisoned," said Gerald Winegrad, a former Democratic state senator from Annapolis who was among the organizers of the event.

A group called Scientists & Policymakers for the Bay joined with the Anacostia Watershed Society and the Anacostia Riverkeeper to pull off the stunt.

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Many participants waded into the gross waters wearing white hazmat suits. Anacostia Riverkeeper Dottie Yunger put her suit on over rubber chest waders, just to be sure.

South Riverkeeper Diana Muller brought her kids along. She didn't allow 12-year-old Arianna and 10-year-old Keaghan to go any deeper than their rubber boots would allow.

And Riverdale Park Mayor Vernon Archer took his dip in a full business suit, meant to emphasize that he means business when it comes to improving water quality.

Once in the water, the participants posed for photos and marveled at the sheer quantity and diversity of trash.

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Winegrad picked up a lone flip-flop and examined it.

Author Howard Ernst floated deep into the water, so only his head was visible above the surface.

Before the dip, the advocates rallied their troops with a series of speeches.

They explained that the Anacostia - like most rivers in urban and suburban areas - suffers greatly from stormwater runoff.

When it rains, the stormwater rushes along roads, rooftops and parking lots, picking up trash and pollutants and depositing it in streams that turn into creeks and rivers.

Most developed areas lack adequate controls for slowing down and treating stormwater before it reaches waterways.

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State and federal environmental officials have said that stormwater is the only source of pollution to the Chesapeake Bay that is increasing. Others - farms, sewage plants, septic system - are gradually decreasing.

Stormwater also is a human health concern, as the bacteria and contaminants that flush into the water during storms can make swimmers sick. In Anne Arundel County, health officials warn against swimming in any natural bodies of water for 48 hours after a rainstorm.

"Stormwater is a public health problem," said former U.S. Sen. Joseph Tydings, who continues to work on environmental issues and is part of the Senior Scientists & Policymakers for the Bay group.

The advocates have proposals to fix stormwater pollution, although many have been turned down by politicians in the past. Some of the proposals include:

Requiring local governments to create a stormwater fee for property owners to pay. The money would be used to fix subpar stormwater controls.

Enacting strict rules for new construction projects and redevelopment projects, so they absorb and treat stormwater.

Continuing to improve the metropolitan Washington sewage and stormwater system, which overflows during rain storms, sending untreated sewage and trash-filled stormwater into the Anacostia River.

Yunger, the Anacostia Riverkeeper, said action is needed now for the Anacostia and all rivers.

"Our waters are our public right and they are our public resource," she said.

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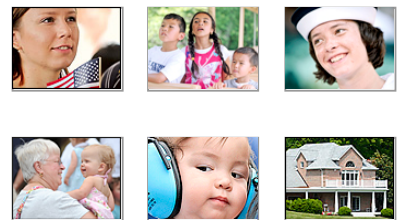
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