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Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009

Anacostia River's fecal content drops in 2008

Reconnecting sewage pipes helped improve water quality, but water is still unsafe for swimming

by Elahe Izadi | Staff Writer



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Fecal matter in the Anacostia River near Bladensburg Road dropped slightly in 2008, yet the river still remains far from meeting the state standard for swimming.

The Anacostia Watershed Society has been monitoring fecal coliforms, which are bacteria that usually live in human or animal intestinal tracts, in the river since 2002. The test shows how much water has been contaminated with human or animal fecal matter.

AWS water quality specialist Masaya Maeda said although the river's fecal levels have dropped since 2003, scientists need to monitor the water quality over a longer period of time in order to confirm a trend.

Maeda said the 2008 drop may be attributed to reporting disconnected sewage pipes.

"We have found some totally disconnected sewer pipes discharging sewage into our stream," he said. "Those disconnected pipes were reported and fixed by WSSC immediately."

In May 2008, Maeda discovered one overflow pipe near Bladensburg Waterfront Park that was dumping raw sewage into the river after heavy rainfalls. He reported it to the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, which then sealed off the pipe.

AWS found that in 2008, the river had, on average, 860 fecal coliforms per every 100 milliliters of water. The state standard for swimming is 200, and the boating standard is 1,000.

Swimming in the river isn't prohibited, but strongly discouraged, and there's an anti-fishing advisory. Despite that, Maeda has witnessed children playing in the water and adults fishing in the river in Bladensburg. One regular fisher claims if she washes the fish thoroughly enough, it's safe to eat, Maeda said.

Maeda said some days are safer for boating than others. During dry periods the level may drop well below 1,000 fecal coliforms per every 100 milliliters of water, but a heavy rain can bring in more storm water, which can increase the fecal coliform content. In fact, 2003's increase to 2,300 fecal coliforms came in part because of above-average rainfalls that year, Maeda said.

The 2008 drop in fecal levels is encouraging news to AWS executive director Jim Connolly, who said it shows the payoff from greater advocacy with WSSC, which is responsible for the water and sewage pipes.

"We're starting to see some of the real egregious violations on the river being addressed," Connolly said.

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Connolly said managing storm water is the most important factor to improving the river's health. In 2007, the General Assembly passed legislation that requires new developments to have as much storm water management on the development's site as possible, and encourages environmentally friendly techniques like rainwater tanks. The Maryland Department of Environment is now drafting regulations on redeveloped property.

"It's the crux of restoring the health of the river. Our river is an urban river," Connolly said. "If we're going to clean it up, we have to look at the storm water, and we have to look at the source, which is all of these developments."

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