

## Anacostia River Gets Spruced Up for Earth Day



Volunteers haul "trophy trash" out of the Anacostia River during the annual clean up and Earth Day celebration hosted by the Anacostia Watershed Society. (Newsline photo by Steven Mendoza)

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may have inadvertently helped create.

Plastic bags, water bottles, beer cans, tires, raw sewage and Polychlorinated biphenyls all flow in the eight-mile river, which begins in Bladensburg and ends in Washington.

It's not safe to swim in it because of the high levels of fecal coliform bacteria, says Masaya Maeda, water quality specialist for the society. If you catch a fish, it's best to throw it back.

Anacostia Watershed Society President Jim Foster says that the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority has made improvements to its storm water system, resulting in a 40 percent reduction in what he says was 2 billion gallons of raw sewage spewing into the river annually.

Foster says the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, the water and sewer agency in Montgomery and Prince George counties, has been going pipe by pipe repairing storm water and sewer pipes that are in some cases 100 years old.

Both of these system improvements are the result of consent decrees from lawsuits filed by the Anacostia Watershed Society.

Sedimentation is another problem for the river. Foster says it's caused by soil erosion and the development of land

*By Steven Mendoza*

Maryland Newsline

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BLADENSBURG, Md.—The Anacostia River is dirty and polluted, and sometimes it smells from the raw sewage carried in its mocha-colored water.

But people have not lost hope in it.

Last Saturday more than 1,800 volunteers celebrated Earth Day early by pulling at least 40 tons of trash from the river. The majority of the trash comes from the river's tributaries, which originate in Maryland.

“Every time it rains ... you get a conveyer belt of trash,” says Steven Reynolds, communications director for the Anacostia Watershed Society, which sponsored the event.

That trash then flows into the Potomac River, which feeds into the Chesapeake Bay and finally the Atlantic Ocean. Only about 10 percent of the trash in the river actually ends up on the shoreline, says Robert Boone, founder of the society.

On Saturday, volunteers in canoes and on boats moved from bank to bank filling up trash bags with filth they

that used to be wetlands.

He says that parts of the Anacostia Watershed are 50 percent impervious, meaning that rainwater is not able to soak into the ground. Generally this is caused by pavement, sidewalks and roofs that create a boundary between rain water and the ground. It forces the water to rush into the river instead of trickling through the soil, bringing pollutants and sediments with it.

Bladensburg Water Park, at the head of the river, once reached depths up to 40 feet in colonial times and served as a major shipping thoroughfare. The average depth is now only 3 to 4 feet, Reynolds says.

The sediment makes it difficult for aquatic vegetation to grow on the bottom, because it blocks sunlight from reaching it. Anything that does find a way to take hold is quickly buried by more sediment, Foster says.

He touted the success of a non-native plant, hydrilla, in filtering the water of the Potomac. He says the plant has provided excellent habitat for underwater species in the Potomac River and helped create a thriving bass fishery in the D.C. region.

“When you see guys in bass boats, you know the water is clean,” Foster says.

While the idea of a bass tournament is a long way off in the Anacostia, Boone says that he has seen dramatic changes in community involvement since he founded the society almost 20 years ago.

In 1989, the first cleanup he organized had 12 volunteers.

This year, Boone sees familiar faces from past efforts combing the banks and piling trash into the borrowed canoes and on boats.

“It gives a sense of hope to people,” he says. “It’s not all just going down the drain.”

Trash, he adds, is a “psychological toxin. You see a trashed area and you want to get away from it, and you want to stay away from it, and you don’t want [anything] to do with it.”

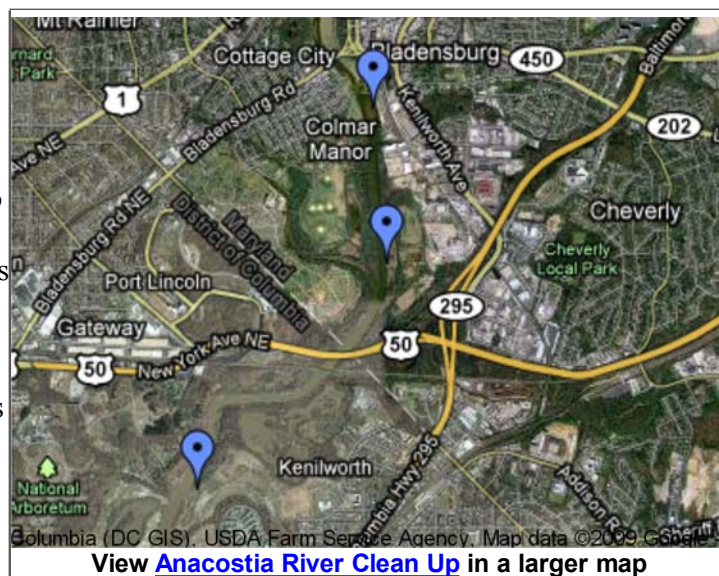
Volunteer Dylan Ubaldo, 18, from Frederick, Md., says he expected to collect three bags of trash from the river.

“We went out there, and we ended up filling like 10 or 15 bags,” Ubaldo says. “A lot of the spots you’d get to and it was just devastating, because it was bottles upon bottles, plastic bags, everything, just filled up. It’s just disgusting.”

Amanda Anderson, 19, a sophomore at the University of Maryland, says that even though the effort may appear to be futile, she enjoys pitching in to help the environment.

Cleaning up the river is part of the Anacostia Watershed Society’s strategy to reconnect it to the surrounding community. The goal is that by bringing people to the river, they will be more likely to use it and in turn become more invested in its future.

“If we can get rid of the visual blight on the river, we can get people to buy into the larger possibilities that this river offers,” says Anacostia Watershed Society Executive Director James Connolly. “But if it looks bad, people are gonna want to stay away from it.”



The Anacostia River watershed is roughly 175 square miles, says Foster, and reaches up into Montgomery and Prince George's counties. Only about 20 percent of it is contained within the District of Columbia.

The society also focuses efforts in politics. The group endorsed a tax on consumer bags in the District of Columbia. The bag tax would charge 5 cents at grocery stores, liquor stores, food vendors, drug stores and other businesses where customers normally receive free paper and plastic bags. Four of the 5 cents would go to a fund to help clean up the Anacostia River, while the remainder would go to the stores.

The bill was co-introduced Feb. 17 by every council member except for Jim Graham (D-Ward 1). It is under review in two committees.

If passed by the council, the bill would have to be signed by D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty and approved by Congress.

Whether or not the bill passes, the Anacostia Watershed Society will still be there to clean up what others throw away. Foster says that even though pollution per capita is down, the influx of new people to the watershed area is creating more urgency.

"It's an urban river. It's gonna be urban warfare to get it cleaned up," he says.

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