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CURRENTS

The quarterly newsletter of Sound Rivers

We're celebrating 40 years of clean-water victories

When we wrote our last newsletter, I felt a lot of hope for 2021. That feeling has continued, because of you. Your generosity in 2020 ensured Sound Rivers' program staff and Riverkeepers hit the ground running in 2021.

While there is a new administration at the federal level, we still have an uphill battle to fight against roll-backs to the Clean Water Act. We need to protect North Carolina's water-

ways – especially the millions of acres of wetlands affected by the rollbacks. Wetlands are critical to our ability to withstand flooding, especially as flooding threats due to climate change increase. This issue of Currents highlights what's at stake, what we're doing about it and how you can help.

As spring approaches, we are looking forward to our Clean Water April Challenge: generous supporters are matching your gifts up to \$25,000! Any gift you make in April will be doubled, and you can help us reach our goal of \$50,000 by making a special donation, renewing your membership, beginning a sustaining monthly gift or gifting a membership to a loved one! More details at soundrivers.org/donate.

Thank you for all you do for your waterways, and I hope you and your loved ones stay safe and healthy this spring! Best,

Weather Deck


This is a special year for Sound Rivers – we're celebrating our 40th anniversary! Keep an eye out for special programming shining a light on the incredible work that you, our clean-water community, have been a part of for four decades.

Sound Rivers

1981-2021

40 years and still going strong

Help us celebrate our past and our bright future! We've got a big year planned, including ...

-  **SPRING:** 4-ton goal for river cleanups; 40 stories for 40 years debuts here!
-  **SUMMER:** Storymapping project launch; Swim Guide returns!
-  **FALL:** Premiere events for the Sound Rivers' 40th anniversary documentary

... and much more!



40 YEARS, 40 STORIES

Four decades of advocacy for our waterways – and we couldn't have done it without the many people who have contributed their time, energy and expertise to help us fulfill our continuing mission for clean water. From founders of Neuse River Foundation and Pamlico-Tar River Foundation to incredible supporters who've joined along the way, 40 Stories for 40 Years is a look back at familiar faces whose passion for the environment and the beautiful waterways of eastern North Carolina has been, and continues to be, instrumental in keeping our waters swimmable, fishable and drinkable. More stories to come at soundrivers.org/40-stories-for-40-years!

Eddie Smith

GRIMESLAND

When Eddie Smith moved to eastern North Carolina 53 years ago, he not only purchased a failed boat-manufacturing business, but he answered the call of the river.

“When I could sneak half a day off, I had a little 14-foot creek boat, and I would go down the Tar River to Chocowinity Bay. Back then, the sea grass went out 100 feet from the shore and was just filled with every type of marine life and any kind of fish you could find,” Smith said. “And I saw that start to decline.”

The owner of Grady White Boats was already involved with many conservation efforts – serving on national boards of organizations trying to protect water quality and preserve the natural environment for future generations – by the time the Pamlico-Tar River Foundation was founded in 1981. For Smith, PTRF's mission aligned with his own, and that of the business he grew to become one of the most respected boatbuilding com-



panies in the world.

“If you look at our company's philanthropy, especially our foundation's philanthropy, we do a pie chart of our areas of interest, and one of our biggest pieces of the pie is conservation,” Smith said. “It lines up, obviously very well, because if we don't have healthy waterways, people are not going to want to recreate in or on them.”

In addition to supporting many organizations and projects through

the years – Tar River Land Conservancy, Nature Conservancy, Coastal Land Trust, NC Coastal Federation, Coastal Conservation Association, Conservation Trust for NC, providing funding for land preservation, oyster and fish habitat restoration, and support for fundraising events – Smith joined the PTRF board early on. The early days were lean, he said.

“I would say for most of us, we had a direct tie to the Tar-Pamlico watershed. If you look back at the guys, in my mind, that did most of the heavy lifting – the Mr. Leaches and Dr. Larkins – they were passionate about it. We all had ties to the watershed and interest in it. We spent a lot of time trying to figure it all out, as we were scratching to keep the lights on and pay the

director,” Smith laughed.

Keeping the lights on for one occasion meant Smith made a memorable donation: a '57 Thunderbird raffled off as a fundraiser. The raffle netted PTRF more than \$40,000 and made one ticket-holder a very happy classic-car owner.

The Smith family has continued its support for four decades: in 2015, son Chris served a pivotal role as a board member, guiding the merger of PTRF and Neuse River Foundation into Sound Rivers. After Hurricane Florence in 2018, the Eddie and Jo Allison Smith Family Foundation provided special funding for water-quality monitoring and flights to document impact, mapping inundated swine/poultry sites, river cleanups, a post-impact report and outreach and education regarding flooding, climate change and more.

And for the past four years, the foundation has supported Sound Rivers' Swim Guide, which is the No. 1 reason why the water-quality notification program has been able to get off the ground and grow.

According to Smith, that's what they do – and have done for decades.

“We tend to help the things that help the people of eastern North Carolina get started,” Smith said. “One of the things I'm proudest of is helping organizations that are protecting the waterways, protecting our resources. ... People have no idea the value of the rivers and the sounds to North Carolina.”

Opposite page: Chris and Eddie Smith at the Hatteras Marlin Tournament in 2018.

Grace Evans

ORIENTAL



“Most of our problems for the river have always been, and now certainly are, from the land.”

The words are those of Grace Evans, who, over the last 40 years, has been instrumental in the fight for clean water on the lower Neuse River.

A lifelong sailor, the wide waters of the Neuse brought her to Oriental in the 1960s; by 1972, she decided to make the riverside town her permanent home and would go on to run two sailing schools.

“We swam, we didn't get infections. We fished and floundered, just really enjoyed the river and didn't think particularly of what it might contain. The river had plenty of fish and wonderful sailing,” Evans said.

But over time, the trash began piling up: creeks the dumping ground for household appliances; the river, a garbage receptacle for day-boaters. Then came the algal blooms and fish kills, and by 1980, when the Neuse River Foundation was founded, Evans was on board with its mission.

“Even though I made my living on the river, I also used it for my recreation. Every part of my life had to do with the river,” she said. As an early member of the young environmental organization, Evans said she received an education on the urgent issues facing local waterways.

“It was just becoming aware myself of what was happening, and then

Continued on Page 11



(Photo contributed by Rain Bennett)

Rain Bennett behind the scenes during a pre-pandemic documentary filming. The Washington native and current Durham resident began shooting the Sound Rivers documentary in March.

Sound Rivers' documentary to premiere in the fall

We're taking Sound Rivers' story to the big screen! Of the several projects currently underway to highlight Sound Rivers' past 40 years of advocacy and education, one will tell our story visually, from our founding by two separate organizations to our work moving forward, through the voices of our storytellers: founders and partners, those fighting for clean water and the next generations of environmental advocacy.

Interweaving the common thread of community activism through the organization's past, present and future, the documentary will unite viewers of all demographics in a common purpose: to be a part of the change. Tackling this project is Washington native and filmmaker Rain Bennett,

who has a mission to inspire people of all ages.

"To create this documentary means I get to do what I love, to help protect a place I love and fight for the people whom I love."
-Rain Bennett

"I hope to inspire action – specifically from the Millennial and Gen-Z generations. I am aiming at the hearts of younger eastern North Carolina locals to take up the fight Sound Rivers began four decades ago," Bennett said.

After several months of honing the narrative and recruiting our storytellers and experts to provide background and the science behind

issues, Bennett began filming in March.

"I honestly had no idea all the work Sound Rivers had done over the past 40 years. In my preliminary research, I've become so aware of the challenges they face – and that we all face – and the importance of their mission," Bennett said. "To create this documentary means I get to do what I love, to help protect a place I love, and fight for the people whom I love. I am forever grateful for that."

In October, Sound Rivers' will premiere the film at events in Raleigh, Washington and New Bern, with several smaller screenings to follow. Be on the lookout for a sneak-peek of the documentary in June!

Welcome, to our two newest board members

We are pleased to welcome two new members to Sound Rivers' board: Dr. Siddhartha Mitra and Caty Gray Urquhart.

Dr. Siddhartha "Sid" Mitra is a professor of organic geochemistry, interim chair of the Department of Coastal Studies and director of the East Carolina University's flagship coastal program, the Integrated Coastal Sciences PhD program. Sid's background is steeped in science, and he brings a wealth of knowledge to Sound Rivers, with degrees in mechanical engineering, chemistry and environmental science and marine science.

"I've followed Sound Rivers and their work over the years and have been incredibly impressed with their dedication and passion for protecting the environment," Sid said. "There will always be challenges to maintaining clean air, water and soil. It is important for organizations such as Sound Rivers to advocate for protection of these resources using sound science. As a scientist, I am excited to be on the team helping them make judicious decisions in favor of natural resources."

Sid lives in Greenville with his wife and three school-age children – all



"I am excited to be on the board of Sound Rivers and to contribute by gathering people in support of Sound Rivers to educate, raise money and support Sound Rivers' mission."

– CATY GRAY URQUHART

boys, which he says has led to "1) the onset of early hair loss, 2) all possessions broken, and 3) a thriving food detritus-driven domestic floor-level ecosystem."

His love of the Outer Banks means many family holidays are spent fishing coastal waters.

We also extend a warm welcome to Caty Gray Urquhart, a native of Tarboro, former educator and now the team leader at Tarboro Brewing Company. She manages the taproom and operations at TBC and supports the sales and production teams.

Caty Gray is enthusiastic about

"As a scientist, I am excited to be on the team helping them make judicious decisions in favor of natural resources."

– SID MITRA



planning engagements that make TBC's taproom and outdoor spaces an inviting place for folks to gather – she loves to see a good crowd at Tarboro Brewing Company, enjoying each other's company and drinking cold beer!

"I am excited to be on the board of Sound Rivers and to contribute by gathering people in support of Sound Rivers to educate, raise money and support Sound Rivers' mission," Caty Gray said.

In her free time, Caty Gray spends as much time as possible outside and fosters litters of puppies until they find new homes.

QUOTABLES

"The way I started noticing (water-quality problems) was when I got involved with the Neuse River Foundation."
Grace Evans, early NRF member

"The waterkeepers are the best hope for North Carolina to fix its water-quality problems. There's no one else out there in planes, in boats, taking samples. The state should do it, but the General Assembly has cut them so much that they can't, so it's left to the waterkeepers – they're the best hope that North Carolina has."

Rick Dove, first Neuse River Foundation Riverkeeper

"It's interesting to see the evolution of the organization ... At the start there was no staff, and I don't know when or where we decided to call ourselves a board, that was a little presumptive on our part – we just did what we needed to do to get things done."

Ernie Larkin, early PTRF and current Sound Rivers board member

"I think [Sound Rivers] has become a respected environmental voice ... It's grown through the years and it's always had integrity and it's always had one goal, which is to preserve the health of the river."
Linda Boyer, early Pamlico-Tar River Foundation member

WOTUS

WATERS OF THE UNITED STATES

In April 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a new “Waters of the United States” rule interpreting federal jurisdiction very narrowly, and eliminating federal oversight for millions of acres of wetlands and small streams. The Southern Environmental Law Center has estimated the “coverage gap” created by the 2020 federal rule is roughly 900,000 acres in the Cape Fear and Neuse river basins alone – much larger across the Coastal Plain as a whole, or statewide.

Wetland types that have lost significant federal coverage under the 2020 federal rule include headwater forests, bottomland hardwoods, riverine swamp forests, floodplain pools, pine flats, pine savannahs, hardwoods flats and non-riverine swamp forests. On both a local and a watershed level, these wetlands and streams are vital for flood control, water quality, groundwater

recharge and fisheries.

“Researchers have found that restoring and protecting wetlands, implementing ‘living shorelines’ over rigid seawalls, and other nature-based measures can save a lot of money down the line because they create infrastructure capable of absorbing and redirecting the energy and impacts of a storm event,” said Upper Neuse Riverkeeper Matthew Starr.

The purpose of wetlands regulation – federal and state – is not to stop all impacts to wetlands, but to ensure that impacts are avoided if possible, and managed where necessary. So, for example, a developer who fills part of a wetland or stream for a project may be required to compensate by restoring or creating a wetland elsewhere in the watershed. Without that, many new projects would indirectly flood downstream neighborhoods and businesses.

WE CAN'T GO BACKWARDS ...

As the Carolinas get warmer and wetter, wetlands provide numerous benefits and services related to mitigating the negative impacts of a changing climate. The most recent analysis shows that North Carolina has 4.2 million acres of wetlands, 95% of which are found in the coastal plain. Estimates indicate that over 50% of the wetlands that existed when colonists first settled our state have been lost.

While the loss of federal wetlands protections is certainly a step in the

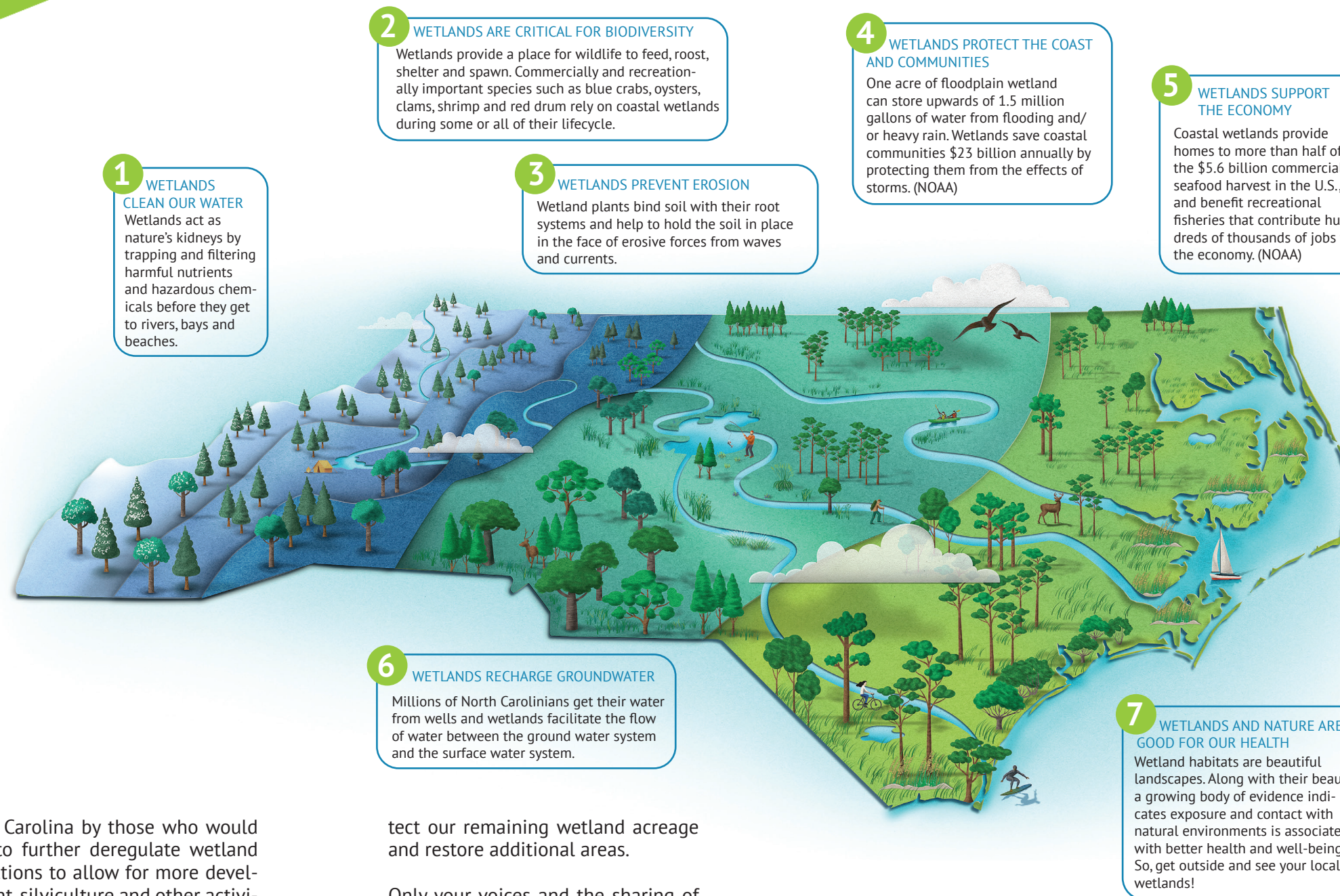
wrong direction, fortunately, a long-standing North Carolina law still requires a permit before a project can fill or destroy many of the areas that lost federal protection (though not all).

The rollbacks to WOTUS are currently being challenged by many, including our Attorney General and Department of Environmental Quality as well as Sound Rivers. Our hope is that federal protections will be restored in the next two years. Unfortunately, an opportunity has risen in

North Carolina by those who would wish to further deregulate wetland protections to allow for more development, silviculture and other activities that would destroy wetlands and leave our communities even more vulnerable to flooding. Lobbyists are currently attempting to rollback state wetland protections.

We cannot afford to go backwards. We need the Governor, the Environmental Management Commission and our legislators from both sides of the aisle to work together to pro-

Why are wetlands so important?



tect our remaining wetland acreage and restore additional areas.

Only your voices and the sharing of your stories will make this happen. Join our Riverkeepers and reach out today to your N.C. senator and representative and tell them to ensure a healthy future for North Carolina.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

at soundrivers.org/protect-our-wetlands/

“Researchers have found that restoring and protecting wetlands, implementing ‘living shorelines’ over rigid seawalls, and other nature-based measures can save a lot of money down the line because they create infrastructure capable of absorbing and redirecting the energy and impacts of a storm event.”

Matthew Starr, Upper Neuse Riverkeeper

LAUNCHED

Havens Garden gets new kayak launch

Havens Garden in Washington is now home to a newly constructed kayak launch.

The kayak launch is located on Runyon Creek and is the first of three kayak launch installations intended to get people paddling the Tar-Pamlico Water Trail.

“The goal is increase access to the trail with these launches,” said Clay Barber, Sound Rivers’ environmental projects coordinator.

The kayak launch, adjacent to the existing boat ramp on the creek, has been in the works for more than five years, when Sound Rivers received a \$100,000 Recreational Trails Program grant from the North Carolina

Department of Natural and Cultural Resources – the same grant used to construct the camping platforms along the Tar-Pamlico Water Trail – with other funding from the North Carolina Division of Water Resources. The City of Washington owns

“I think [the launch] will be a great addition, and we’re looking forward to the success of it over the summer ... It’s been a great partnership with Sound Rivers. They’ve been great to work with, and hopefully we can collaborate on some additional projects in the future.”

Jonathan Russell
Washington City Manager

the property where the launch is being installed, and worked closely with Sound Rivers in the planning stages, in addition to matching \$19,900-worth of the grant, according to Jonathan Russell, Washington’s City Manager.

“Parks and Recreation, along with the city Planning Department, helped on the front end when they were applying for the initial grant,” Russell said. “We thought it would be a great addition to our existing

Inner Banks Outfitters owner Liane Harsh inspects a nearly completed kayak launch in late February. (Photo by Jill Howell)

facility and thought it would be a great tie-in with what Sound Rivers was doing as part of their mission.” The kayak launch construction includes a concrete parking pad, a wood boardwalk and two floating launches, one of which will be ADA compliant.

According to Barber, the new construction will provide a better kayaking experience and create a separate space for launching, away from motorists launching their powerboats at the adjacent boat ramp.

“It just gives you a little separation from the motorists putting in their boats, and people won’t have to wait and you won’t feel like you’re holding things up – there will be less conflict there,” Barber said.

Russell said the partnership and the new launch is a win for both the City and Sound Rivers.

“I think [the launch] will be a great addition, and we’re looking forward to the success of it over the summer,” Russell said. “It’s been a great partnership with Sound Rivers. They’ve been great to work with, and hopefully we can collaborate on some additional projects in the future.”

The two other kayak launches funded by the grant will be located at Mason’s Landing in Washington and Port Terminal in Greenville.



A new kayak launch, adjacent to the Havens Garden boat ramp, and Backwater Jack’s Tiki Bar and Grill, is located on Runyon Creek. The launch represents a partnership between Sound Rivers and the City of Washington. (Photo by Ray Midgett)

Let’s get sampling!

Four years ago, Sound Rivers launched Swim Guide, a water-quality monitoring program where we sample for fecal bacteria levels at 36 locations in the Neuse and Tar-Pamlico river basins and get the results to you so you can swim safely!

Samples are collected weekly at our chosen sites, then transported to local labs for analysis, giving us the results 24 hours later. With bacteria level results in hand, we notify the public through a number of avenues and publish the results to Swim Guide. Swim Guide is a mobile app and website that makes it easy to find water-quality information near you. Every week for the 16 weeks of the summer, we send out water quality updates through our text list (text SWIM to 33222), website at soundrivers.org/swimguide, as well as through weekly water report videos on social media.

How could we get all this done, you ask? Our wonderful volunteers!

Nearly two dozen trained volunteers collect hundreds of samples, traveling by foot, boat and car to gather them. Volunteers follow careful collection procedures, keep samples on ice and get samples to our lab for analysis

Volunteer Tracy Jones takes samples of water during a past Swim Guide season. (Photo by Sound Rivers)

every week.

Our Swim Guide volunteers make this entire program possible, and we’ll need even more volunteers as we’re expanding to new sites this summer, thanks to the Water Quality Fund, established in memory of Gene Pate.

Would you be interested in volunteering with Swim Guide this year? Without the help of these dedicated volunteers and their concern for clean water – as well as funding from our Swim Guide sponsors Grady-White Boats and APNEP – we would not be able to bring you regular and timely information about bacteria levels in our local waterways.

If you’d like to help up monitor the waterways for safe recreation, email volunteer@soundrivers.org to join our 2021 Swim Guide team!





Unanimous vote denies Kittrell landfill

The Vance County Board of Adjustment voted unanimously on Feb. 11 to deny a conditional-use permit for a land clearing inert debris landfill in Kittrell.

“In the grand scheme of environmental issues, a LCID landfill in Vance County does not make major headlines, but this is a huge win for the residents of Egypt Mountain Road. It would have completely upended their lives, so that makes the win really impactful,” said Pamlico-Tar Riverkeeper Jill Howell. “It’s also a win for water quality in the Tar River basin.”

The conditional-use permit had been under consideration by the Vance County board since August 2020, when property owner Kenneth Harrison III requested the permit that would allow a landfill to be built on 83 rural and residential acres that include Long’s Creek, which runs into Tabb’s Creek, a tributary of the Tar River.

The issue played out during a series of hearings held from September

to January, in which residents aired their concerns – including impact on the environment, health and increased traffic down residential roads – and experts were called

“This type of providing technical assistance and showing up for a community is the kind of work I love. It does really matter, and it does make a difference.”

***Jill Howell
Pamlico-Tar Riverkeeper***

in to give testimony as lawyers for the property owner and a group of neighboring residents argued for and against the permit. While Vance County BOA members during the January hearing noted a conditional-use permit for the landfill did not violate any statutes and is an approved use of the land, they also acknowledged a landfill would not be “in harmony with the surrounding area,” nor promote public health and

safety – requirements for granting the permit. Attorneys were asked to present their findings of fact, for and against, Thursday for review by the board.

Howell, who testified before the board about the potential water-quality impact, became involved in the issue after residents of the land’s adjacent properties reached out for help to navigate the initial public comments hearing. She said early engagement by the community on issues at the county level can be especially significant to outcomes.

“This type of providing technical assistance and showing up for a community is the kind of work I love. It does really matter, and it does make a difference,” Howell said.

There may be next steps, according to Howell: Harrison had 30 days to appeal the Vance County Board of Adjustment’s decision.

“We’re in a waiting game to see if they’re going to appeal or not,” Howell said of the appeal.

Riverkeepers launch statewide microplastics monitoring project

Sound Rivers’ Riverkeepers launched a new program in February to identify what types of microplastics can be found in local waterways.

“Microplastics are harmful to both human and aquatic health for many reasons, one of which is because they are so small, we can’t see them, and we don’t know how many there are in a given area. Also, they can be ingested by aquatic animals, then ingested by humans, in turn,” said Lower Neuse Riverkeeper Katy Hunt.

Microplastics are small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long which can be harmful to waterways and aquatic life. As plastics break down over time into microplastics, they are an environmental and public health issue. Microplastics are so small that they are not picked up by water filtration and are often eaten by fish, birds and other aquatic animals, negatively impacting their health.

The study – “Improving Human and Ecosystem Health through Microplastic Reduction” – is funded by a \$188,000 Environmental Enhancement Grant to Waterkeepers Carolina, a science-based, environmental advocacy group representing Waterkeeper Alliance programs in North Carolina, including Sound Rivers. The grant was announced in October 2020, and sampling for microplastic pollution in 30 urban and rural rivers and streams began in February. Waterkeepers Carolina has partnered with University of North Carolina-Wilmington’s Plastic Ocean Project and Duke Law and Policy Clinic for the study, to better understand the degree to which microplastic pollution is impacting streams, wildlife and public health, and determine possible solutions to reduce microplastics pollution. To do that, a close look at water

samples has to be taken, according to Haw Riverkeeper Emily Sutton, the project’s lead.

“Microplastic pollution can be seen under a microscope. Sometimes they are small fibers, sometimes they are microbeads, and sometimes they are films or flakes. Our samples will be collected in glass jars to prevent any microplastic contamination from sample bottles, and we’ll send the samples to a lab in Wilmington for processing,” Sutton said.

There, the samples will be boiled down and filtered, leaving microplastics to be counted under a microscope.

Hunt, Upper Neuse Riverkeeper Matthew Starr and Pamlico-Tar Riverkeeper Jill Howell began Sound Rivers’ microplastics sampling mid-February at Lawson Creek, a tributary of the Trent River, at Lawson Creek Park in New Bern, Little Rock Creek in downtown Raleigh and Jack’s Creek in Washington. This year, each Riverkeeper will take bi-monthly samples at two sites on these bodies of water, one upstream and one downstream.

The second part of the study will take place in 2022, when “trash bandits” – litter traps that resemble floating cages – will be installed at sampled sites, to determine the source of microplastics.

“The main goal of this project is to gain a better understanding of the amount of plastics in our waterways and better inform the public of this type of pollution,” Hunt said.

The project represents a statewide effort to understand the impact of microplastics, with all 15 of North Carolina’s Riverkeepers taking part.

Grace Evans
Continued from page 2

making other people aware of it, too,” Evans said.

Those early members met in living rooms and in offices loaned for the occasion, before making the Neuse River Foundation’s first home in a trailer in Bridgeton. NRF petitioned the state to ban phosphates in cleaning products, the same phosphates that were throwing off the river’s natural balance, and won that battle. They built an army of creekkeepers – those who knew their waterways best – to keep tabs on polluting. Then, with a push from Evans, NRF made a pioneering step in honing its mission.

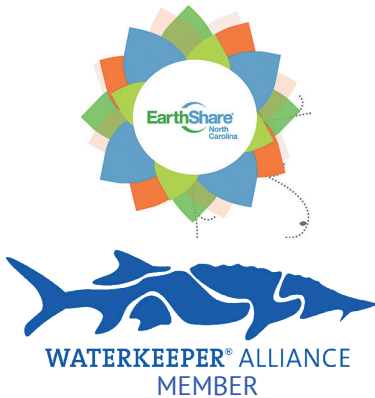
“We hired the first Riverkeeper in North Carolina, Rick Dove, and he was very effective. He was completely dedicated to the projects – nitrogen loading, animal farms, what the state was allowing different sewage treatments to do,” Evans said.

At 90 years old, Evans remains passionate about the work the Neuse River Foundation has done for the past 40 years, and that Sound Rivers continues today. Despite four decades of advocacy and education, she believes the work is far from over; an evolving array of issues continue to plague the waterways, from the sources of ongoing fish kills to sea-level rise and flooding.

“It used to be septic tanks, now it’s industrial farms,” Evans said. “What I’d like to see is much more awareness of what is happening on the land, and how what’s happening on the land affects the river.”

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Tell Me About It TUESDAYS SCIENCE SERIES

Sign up at soundrivers.org/events/

April 13, 7-8 p.m.

Storm-driven Pollution in the Neuse River: Sleuthing the sources of nutrient pollution, Chris Osburn, N.C. State University, with Katy Hunt, Lower Neuse Riverkeeper

May 11, 7-8 p.m.

Sea Level Rise: How saltwater is transforming our coastal ecosystem, Justine Neville, Graduate student at N.C. State University, with Jill Howell, Pamlico-Tar Riverkeeper

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Clean Water April Challenge is back!



Your April Gifts MATCHED

Help us meet our **\$25k** goal, which will mean **\$50k for clean water!**

Support the work of your RIVERKEEPERS® with your gift this spring! Give today at soundrivers.org