

**“RE-STORYING” THE ANACOSTIA RIVER:
AN ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTIONS AND CHANGE**

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Abstract

This paper evolved from the idea that in order to fully restore the Anacostia River to a swimmable and fishable state, as mandated by the Clean Water Act, we must “re-story” it. For years the Anacostia River has been shrouded in a negative reputation of pollution and toxicity and generations have been conditioned to stay away from it. Yet, in order to advance advocacy efforts for its restoration and build stewardship, the river must be promoted as a recreational resource and an asset to the community. To better understand current perceptions of the river and how more positive narratives could be promoted, I conducted twelve in-depth personal interviews as well as surveys around the Anacostia metro, Anacostia Park, and the Anacostia Community Boathouse. Through this research, I found that higher levels of contact with the river shaped more nuanced perceptions and in turn influenced the possibilities people saw for the future of the river. My conclusion was that in order to build sustained political will and environmental stewardship around the river’s restoration, environmental groups must focus on building community around the river. In order to promote this new narrative, environmental organizations can look towards other city’s examples of recreation and community events such as the Clearwater Festival on the Hudson River.

When I began this project Irv Sheffey of the Sierra Club told me that in order to restore the Anacostia, we have to “re-story” it. For years the Anacostia has been shrouded in a negative reputation of pollution and toxicity. The reproduction of this image has helped raise awareness for the clean up and structural changes needed, but it has also taught people to stay away from the river. By saying we need to “re-story” the river, Sheffey is suggesting that the river will never fully be restored if the pervasive negative perception is not changed. Using this phrase as a guiding principle, I seek to analyze the changing and nuanced perceptions that residents hold of the Anacostia River and how positive perceptions can be fostered among a wider audience to further advance already successful advocacy efforts to clean and restore the Anacostia.

To this end, I conducted interviews and surveys to gather how people use, interact with, and perceive the Anacostia River. I became particularly intrigued by how different levels of contact with the river influenced resident’s perceptions of the Anacostia and in turn how this constructed understanding shaped what people saw as a possible future for the river. To analyze the information gathered, I employed a multidisciplinary approach that combined elements of anthropology, environmental justice, discourse analysis, and political ecology. Through this exploration of varying perceptions, I uncovered intriguing ideas for the future of the river. Decades after the spotlight was first turned towards the ecological problems of the Anacostia, its pollution is now well known, but a lot of energy is still being exerted to spread this message. My interviews and surveys have highlighted other narratives that praise the river as a community asset and recreational resource. The only way to build long-term stewardship is to build a community around the river. In order to promote this new narrative, environmental organizations should be looking towards

recreation and community events using models such as the Clearwater Festival on the Hudson River.

Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

My research process has been a journey and along the way my project evolved as I adopted multiple frameworks of analysis. This movement through theory has been shaped by my own personal interest and excitement for interdisciplinary approaches, but it also resulted as a necessity to navigate the intricacies of an urban river. Throughout this paper I utilize multiple approaches to uncover the varying perceptions held by those who directly use the river or live within its watershed. Within an overarching anthropological approach, I combine environmental justice, discourse analysis, and political ecology. More specifically, I use much of the theory delineated in Richard Peet and Michael Watts's *Liberation Ecologies*. I have concluded this winding, academic journey with a more holistic understanding of the social forces that shape the river beyond the strictly environmental.

The journey began when I chose the subject of this paper. I set out hoping to research an environmental justice community in Washington, DC and from what I had heard the neighborhoods surrounding the Anacostia River stood out as perfect case studies. The concept of environmental justice that originally sparked my interest in the river was birthed from social movements that aim to prevent a disproportionate environmental burden landing on the shoulders of low-income, minority communities. The unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits is a trend that started to gain popular as well as academic attention around the early 1980's.¹ In the 70's and 80's, most of the concern for the Anacostia River came from DC's black communities east of the river.

¹ Paul Mohai, David Pellow, and J. Timmons Roberts, "Environmental Justice," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 34 (2009): 406.

They knew the amount of coliform bacteria in the water was at unhealthy levels and that the pollution and trash that gathered around the river's banks were a major threat to their health. Most importantly, they were certain that the reason for the river's degradation was neglect. It flowed through poverty-stricken neighborhoods and therefore experienced disparate enforcement of environmental regulation. It seemed impossible to separate race and ecology because the residents saw Georgetown on the Potomac flourish as their community suffered.²

Many east of the river residents still feel this way and I began this project with the intention of studying the transformative power of environmental justice. Because I wanted my research to be connected to already existing advocacy efforts, I reached out to the Anacostia Watershed Society (AWS) to see what research would be most useful. When I sat down for my first meeting with Brent Bolin, director of advocacy for AWS, he warned me that I should use environmental justice as a guiding framework but try not to mention it directly to community members because after decades of struggle people are growing tired of this concept.³ Nonetheless, it has been an important part of drawing attention to the river. By the end of this meeting it was decided that a useful addition to ongoing efforts would be to study uses and perceptions of the Anacostia River as well as people's visions for the future. As soon as I started down this path, I realized that there were many social forces shaping the development of the river beyond environmental justice that required scholarly attention.

² John R. Wennersten, *Anacostia: The Death and Life of an American River* (Baltimore: Chesapeake Book Company, 2008), 181.

³ Brent Bolin, in discussion with the author, September 9, 2011

I gathered this information about uses and perceptions through personal interviews and surveys. In roughly two months, I completed twelve interviews. The majority were conducted in person and filmed and two were conducted over the phone. My original contact was Brent Bolin of AWS and through him I met Irv Sheffey of the Sierra Club when we both attended a River Terrace Community Association meeting. Irv sent me a list of contacts, which developed into a snowball sampling approach as one contact introduced me to another. Due to my initial contact, the majority of my interviews tended to be with more official spokespeople of the river, such as leaders of environmental organizations or well-known community figures. I added the survey component to my research with the hope that I would hear from a wider sample. Given my time constraint, I decided the most effective method of surveying would be to distribute the surveys in places where I know a lot of people congregate. I surveyed at Anacostia Park, the Anacostia Community Boathouse, and the Anacostia metro station. Based on these locations and people's interest level, most of the responses came from individuals who had some direct connection to the river.

As I collected this data and found a nuanced range in people's perceptions of the river, I decided to employ a discursive approach to analyze my findings. I was interested in learning how people construct their descriptions of the river and how these perceptions shape their attitudes and actions towards the future of the river. Through my secondary research I found that there is a small faction of scholars writing about environmental discourse. In the article, "Does discourse matter? Discourse analysis in environmental policy making," Peter H. Feindt and Angela Oels delve into the social construction of environmental problems. That is not to say that there are no physical realities of illness,

loss of species and contamination, but that there is no one authoritative interpretation of these events. The exploration of these “contested interpretations...as elements of dynamic and systemic developments, as anthropogenically caused or as posing management problems” is where environmental discourse enters the conversation.⁴

In their article, which was the introduction to an entire special issue on environmental discourse in the *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, they explain: “Taking a discursive perspective allows one to understand how ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ are continuously ‘produced’ through environmental policy making, planning, research and development as well as through everyday practices. It also allows one to ask if environmental policy is about nature and the environment at all or rather about a redistribution and reconfiguration of power in the name of the ‘environment’.”⁵ I use this perspective to challenge what policymakers hold as conventional knowledge, particularly in regard to their understanding of residents’ relationships to the river. Discourse analysis also contributes what Feindt and Oels call “a strong emancipatory motive”⁶ in that it strives to democratize how knowledge is produced and then used in policy. One of the main goals of interviewing and surveying residents who are directly affected by the health of the river is to include their experience in the process of policymaking.

Furthermore, I will be using a Foucauldian perspective on discourse, focusing on the production and reproduction of knowledge. Certain discourses expand or limit what people see as possible and shape what they see as their role in future changes. “Foucault analyses discourse as a ‘strategic situation’ that is formative of actors, that enables and constrains

⁴ Peter H. Feindt and Angela Oels, “Does discourse matter? Discourse analysis in environmental policy making,” *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 7 (2005): 162.

⁵ Feindt and Oels, 163

⁶ Ibid.

them by shaping their field of opportunities and by limiting the freedom.”⁷ In the context of the Anacostia, there are certain narratives that are constantly reproduced among residents and through the media. Through my research, I have seen how people’s description of the river expand or limit what they see as the potential of the river and the subsequent political will that surrounds its restoration. I will be returning to and expanding on this point throughout my analysis of the interviews and surveys I conducted. Finally, the discourse that is known to surround an environmental problem expands and constrains what policymakers see as available options and who gets to participate in these solutions.⁸ I use discourse analysis to highlight marginalized discourses, which bring with them alternative policy options that may not have been considered when the conversation being analyzed was more limited.

Richard Peet and Michael Watts also discuss discursive approaches as one of the new directions being taken in political ecology, which has been a multidisciplinary field from its inception. They refer to this new wave as *liberation ecology* and central to this discipline is “a sensitivity to environmental politics as a process of cultural mobilization, and the ways in which such cultural practices—whether science, or ‘traditional’ knowledge, or discourses, or risk, or property rights—are contested, fought over, and negotiated.”⁹ Similar to the previously discussed article, the authors emphasize the importance of tackling the large variety of perceptions of environmental issues and the implications this has for creating new policy alternatives. A particularly important point of *liberation ecology*

⁷ Feindt and Oels, 165

⁸ Feindt and Oels, 169

⁹ Richard Peet and Michael Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.

is to focus on “the emancipatory potential of the environmental imaginary.”¹⁰ Through an expansion of the discourses that are studied and considered, stakeholders and policymakers can find new ways to harness social agency.

I used a chapter from this book, “Environmental Discourses on Soil Degradation in Bolivia: Sustainability and the search for socioenvironmental ‘middle ground,’” as a guide in terms of structure and theory to analyze the different discourses I uncovered. The author of this chapter, Karl S. Zimmerer, uses a political economy analysis of environmental change in combination with “the analysis of articulated perceptions or discourse.”¹¹ He pays particular attention to the way each group of stakeholders, such as development institutions and peasant farmers, define the problem of soil degradation, specifically examining how they understand the phenomenon and their ideas for solutions based on that specific understanding.¹²

The author found that the government, development institutions, and NGO’s blamed soil erosion on the ignorance of peasant farmers, whether the perceived ignorance was of modern technology or their own traditional knowledge. Therefore, all of their solutions revolved around on-farm technical assistance and training but the author argues that their analysis was incomplete. When he interviewed peasant farmers, he discovered the young rural union leaders denounced the contradictions of the national government for wanting them to conserve the soil while pressuring them to exploit it further to earn a living. They were aware of the on-sight problems as well as the economic pressures of neoliberalism. This led to a demand for other types of assistance. I see a similar situation arising around

¹⁰ Peet and Watts, 16.

¹¹ Peet and Watts, 109

¹² Peet and Watts, 110

the Anacostia and think it is imperative to reevaluate the policy options being constructed from a specific perception of the problem. The takeaway point is that a more nuanced understanding of how the problem was being perceived demanded different solutions. As multiple discourses are accommodated, social actors should seek to find a “middle ground” in their common desire to combat soil erosion. The author warns that this does not mean sustainability will be easily attained when a “middle ground is established, but that without an arena for debate on sustainability, there is little hope for resolving environmental dilemmas.”¹³

Zimmerer establishes the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the discourses of multiple actors. Yet, what I have read focuses on the discourse around defining the problem. I decided my research should focus on the discourse around the river itself. By wording my interview and survey questions in a way that did not necessarily require a response related to environmental issues, I have expanded the range of the discourse considered. While Zimmerer is studying the way different stakeholder groups define the cause of soil degradation, I was looking at how people defined the river in general and what they would like to see in the future. By opening up the discourse beyond the scope of specific environmental issues, there is more potential to see connections between the environmental and social forces that affect the river. Most importantly, it became more likely to uncover new ways to advocate for the river’s restoration outside the practices of more traditional environmental groups.

This shift is supported by the argument of another author who uses the term, *liberation ecology*—Frances Moore Lappé. Although she uses the term in a slightly different

¹³ Peet and Watts, 112-120

way, Lappé rejects the disempowering messages coming out of the environmental community that focus on limits. She encourages her readers to rid their mouths and minds of constraint and embrace the empowerment of possibility.¹⁴ It is easy to find many disempowering messages around the Anacostia River, but a focus on pollution and degradation will only bring the movement for its restoration so far. There is a much more transformative power in looking towards the endless possibilities of the future as well as the agency of social actors to co-create the future of the river. The ultimate goal of this paper is to highlight the empowering, positive narratives around the river and analyze their potential in redirecting the future of the Anacostia.

Finally, this paper should be regarded as a starting point for future research into the power of perception to shape policy around the Anacostia River and beyond. My sample size is relatively small given the fact that I was working alone and for only a few months. There are also some inherent limitations to my findings. In regard to my surveys, my response rate was much higher from people who were involved with activities in and around the river, as they tended to be most excited about talking to me. At the Anacostia metro, I had less than a fifty percent response rate. It seemed that people either did not want to be bothered or they felt they had nothing to say about the river. Furthermore, my results were certainly affected by the fact that I was a researcher coming from outside the community. One way to improve this study would be to work more closely with a community member and see what answers they would get from their neighbors. In a future study, I would also expand my interview pool to include more community members who are not affiliated with any group and I would interview government officials to see how

¹⁴ Francis Moore Lappé, "Liberation Ecology: Beyond the disempowering gospel of 'no growth' to the ecological reality of 'endless possibility,'" *Resurgence* 252 (2009): 19-20.

they talk about the river. With these constraints in mind, this paper introduces a new way of thinking through solutions for the river's restoration that are shaped by the community's perception of the river.

Remembering DC's Forgotten River: A Background

Before delving any deeper into analysis, an understanding of the changes that have taken place in and around the river over the past few decades past must be established.

Gail Lowe, senior historian at the Anacostia Community Museum, introduces her book "East of the River: Continuity and Change" by pointing out the public misperception that everything east of the river is "Anacostia," a name that has become "synonymous with poverty, crime, overcrowding, underemployment, despair, desolation, ecological problems, and economic and political disenfranchisement."¹⁵ Yet, the story is a lot more complex.

Brett Williams, a professor at American University, lays out an eloquent description of the historical ebb and flow of the river in her article, "A River Runs Through Us." Highlighting the need to explore the river's past, she states, "Understanding the pollution and the preciousness of the Anacostia River requires exploring natural and social processes that are connected dialectically, because contradictions are always there, and change is always coming."¹⁶

Williams begins with the first indigenous inhabitants of the river's banks but for the purposes of this paper I will begin with urban renewal starting in the 1950's and how it reinforced spatial segregation. In the wake of World War II, many changes occurred to the physical layout of the state-controlled, racially tense District of Colombia, particularly in the southern half of the city. Williams describes the changes as follows:

¹⁵ Gail Lowe, ed., *East of the River: Continuity and Change*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2010, 10

¹⁶ Brett Williams, "A River Runs Through Us," *American Anthropologist* 103 (2001): 409

In a burst of abusive state power [the Redevelopment Land Agency and the District Commissioners] purged Washington's central core of black people, rigged zoning and fire codes, threw up highways and bridges to transport commuting workers into a congested 9 to 5 downtown, lined the Anacostia River with warehouses for the poor, and mutilated the area east of the river. In many cities, these renewal projects engineered a massive allocation of private and social resources to reduce inner cities to rubble.¹⁷

As a result of this haphazard change, many people who were promised they could return to their neighborhoods in Southwest DC were dislocated east of the river and the concentration of poverty in the district was intensified. Far Southeast was specifically chosen for the purpose of low-income housing projects because it was isolated across the Anacostia River and most of the land was undeveloped and cheap. Between 1954 and 1958, around 20,000 people were removed from Southwest Washington and the majority ended up in hastily constructed apartments in Far Southeast.¹⁸

Demographic statistics paint a pretty clear picture of the rapid change. By 1970 the white population east of the river had decreased from 82% to 6%, the area was transformed from the city's most rural to 75% apartment zoned, and the schools were operating at 83% beyond capacity.¹⁹ Amidst the rapid transformation of Far Southeast, city planners failed to increase public services to meet the needs of the new residents. This would have meant more garbage pickups, a better public transport system, and more recreational, school, and health facilities. Inadequate zoning laws also led to increased storm water runoff and soil erosion due to lack of regulation requiring developers to install

¹⁷ Williams, 419

¹⁸ Lowe, ed., 43-44

¹⁹ Williams, 421

safeguards against erosion like retaining walls.²⁰ This neglect through lack of services and regulation is particularly important in explaining the degradation of the Anacostia River.

Regarding these changes, famous DC resident, Nap Turner, told Brett Williams, “The Anacostia Freeway went up the same year as the Berlin Wall. It meant about the same thing.”²¹ As the river itself emerged as a symbol of this segregation, the residents east of the river were physically cut off from the recreation areas of Anacostia Park by the freeway. Moreover, the Iron Curtain metaphor is particularly poignant in the context of environmental quality as east of the river became a convenient hiding place for urban waste. According to John Wennersten’s very thorough account of the river’s history, *Anacostia: The Death and Life of an American River*, the river devolved into a dumping ground as DC became unable to handle the amount of trash produced annually. Activists from the area were certain that disparate enforcement of environmental regulation resulted from neglect towards their struggling black communities.²² Williams paints a jolting picture for her readers as she describes the effects environmental racism had on the community:

In predictable irony, automobiles choke the Anacostia River with oil- and grease-soaked groundwater that washes over the highways' impervious surfaces, which cannot clean and filter them as soil would. Exhaust fumes poison its neighbors, who suffer alarming rates of blood lead contamination and asthma. Used motor oil, tires, and metal parts...are discarded in local landfills, recycled in facilities next to creeks that also pollute the river, or tossed directly in. Most of the people who live near the Anacostia River do not own cars, but nearby sites of pollution like Fort McNair, the Food and Drug Administration, Potomac Electric Power Company [Pepco], the US Capitol Power Plant, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Hess Petroleum, and the General Services Administration do not employ them, so carfare to work poses a nagging concern. Overflow from the city’s trash transfer station, run-off from the Metrobus maintenance yard, weapons waste recalling the imperial ambitions at the Navy Yard,

²⁰ Lowe, ed., 47

²¹ Williams, 420

²² Wennersten, 181-184

and urban litter garnish this noxious brew.²³

As the Anacostia was being continuously degraded, federal efforts were being put toward clean up of the Potomac. In reference to this fact, journalists began referring to the Anacostia as “the forgotten river.”²⁴

Despite the lack of outside attention, many residents within the area began to feel that the socioeconomic improvement of their community was tied to the fate of the river because a cleaner river meant more investment in their community. Yet, many residents viewed the river as a barrier rather than an asset. Motivated to make a change and concerned about their health, residents of River Terrace, a neighborhood particularly affected by pollution, organized to hold companies such as Pepco and the government accountable. In 1985, River Terrace successfully fought the construction of additional generators near the existing Pepco plant because they knew they would only receive about ten percent of the energy generated but 95 percent of the pollution. This was one battle in a much longer war. In another case they could not hold anyone accountable for their air quality due to the abundance of overlapping factors.²⁵

In all of the neighborhoods that border the Anacostia, residents were and continue to be concerned about what the African American Environmental Association referred to as a “toxic soup.”²⁶ Sewage overflow from an antiquated sewer system remains a major concern. Metropolitan sewage is directed towards a treatment facility, but after only half an inch of rain untreated sewage begins to flow directly into the river.²⁷ According to Jim

²³ Williams, 422

²⁴ Wennersten, 185

²⁵ Wennersten, 186-187

²⁶ Wennersten, 189

²⁷ Williams, 422

Connolly, former director of the Anacostia Watershed Society, about 2.6 billion gallons of raw sewage flow into the river each year.²⁸ Another particularly concerning ingredient in this soup is a carcinogenic substance known as PCBs, a mixture of up to 209 chlorinated chemicals. The soup also includes chlordane, mercury, and PAH, a byproduct of fossil fuel emissions.

This dangerous mixture has led to the disappearance of fish that were once very common such as the sturgeon. The fish that are left are extremely unhealthy for consumption. One study found that 50 percent of the catfish population had liver tumors and 37 percent had skin tumors.²⁹ Now many of these chemicals are banned but their effects are still being felt. To help explain the degradation of the Anacostia River, Jim Connolly offered the metaphor of a human hand. When we get a cut, our skin has the ability to quickly heal. The river once had this capability because the surrounding land acted as a natural filter, but due to the impervious concrete surfaces that now surround this urban river, runoff cannot be filtered.³⁰

Although it came long after the national environmental achievements of the early 1970s, such as the Clean Water Act, the Anacostia River eventually gained the attention it needed to set it on a path to healing. The past two decades have seen major improvements that grew out of a long grassroots struggle. A major turning point came in the late 1980s when a stream coordinator for the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, Robert Boone, was given a small grant from a retiring developer to begin an environmental organization to restore the Anacostia. He called it the Anacostia Watershed Society because

²⁸ Jim Connolly, in discussion with the author, October 24, 2011

²⁹ Wennersten, 189-192

³⁰ Connolly

he understood that for a river to heal, there is a lot more than the water that needs to be restored. For a while the nascent organization was operated solely by Boone and he focused on the things he could achieve without a large staff such as shaming polluters with bad publicity. AWS wanted to see the river restored so people could safely swim and fish in it, a minimum standard for a waterway under the Clean Water Act, but quickly grew tired of waiting around for government organizations like the EPA to enforce regulation. As the organization gained more momentum and added a few staff members, they saw a major achievement in the late 90s and early 2000s when through legal action the Navy Yard transformed from a major source of pollution to a model of what restoration can look like in the future.³¹

Around the same time that AWS was growing to be a major force on the river, Earth Conservation Corps was also developing. Their main focus was connecting the disenfranchised youth of the area to environmental stewardship. They saw that the African American youth they served were just as endangered as the river. By showing them how to reclaim the river, they learned how to reclaim their own lives. In an interview Kellie Bolinder of the ECC recalled that their first project consisted of only nine young men and women, but those nine people pulled out 5,000 tires from Lower Beaver Dam Creek. This drew even more attention to the river. Bolinder also told me that there was very little going on in terms of restoration when AWS and ECC were founded. Looking back, she feels one of the most important contributions of their advocacy efforts was bringing people to the river so they could see the signs of hope that still remain, such as the osprey that come back every year despite the pollution. When ECC began they had to convince neighborhood

³¹ Wennersten, 200-208

youth to participate. Today many people are seeking out ECC because they already understand the value of the program³² Jim Connolly, Boone's first hire, also emphasized that the role of AWS beyond informing people about the pollution was, and remains to be, reconnecting people to the river through recreation. In 1991, when Connolly came to DC he saw very little recreational opportunities on the Anacostia. After AWS started offering canoe rides he has seen a significant increase in recreation.³³

Recreation on the Anacostia boomed alongside the growing environmental movement but its roots go back much further. Connecting back to the segregation discussed earlier in this section, many African Americans learned to swim in the Anacostia because the public pools were segregated.³⁴ The Anacostia River also became home to the first African American boating club on the East Coast, the Seafarers Yacht Club, in 1945. During segregation the Anacostia was the only place black seamen could get boat slips to dock their boats. These black yachtsmen were in many ways the first advocates for the river.³⁵ Man-powered recreation on the Anacostia took a bit longer to gain popularity. In 1988, the Organization of Anacostia Rowing & Sculling or OARS was established to promote the sport for the betterment of the community. The group, co-founded by active members of the community with a lifelong connection to the river such as Carl Cole and Dianne Dale, began with pilot projects that recruited local high school and middle school students to get out on the river. They eventually invited the Capital Rowing Club, which was once limited by its overcrowded facilities on the Potomac, to move to the Anacostia. Over the next two

³² Kellie Bolinder, in discussion with the author, October 21, 2011

³³ Connolly

³⁴ Dennis Chestnut, in discussion with the author, November 7, 2011; Carl Cole, in discussion with the author, November 10, 2011

³⁵ Wennersten, 224

decades their dilapidated site evolved into the Anacostia Community Boathouse that exists today.³⁶ The current president of the Capital Rowing Club, Jennifer Ney, was recruited at a local gym in 1999. A decade later they no longer have to recruit. Jennifer estimated that each week during rowing season there are 800 people going out on the river through the Anacostia Community Boathouse.³⁷

Reflecting back on the changes he has seen in the river, Mike Bolinder, the Anacostia Riverkeeper stated:

It's an incremental improvement but it needs to get a lot better. I think the biggest change is the number of people that actually use the river for recreation now. The city has gone out of its way to improve access points and people now for the first time are getting an opportunity to come on to the river and see what a great resource it is...it's the most wild national park probably east of the Mississippi River. I can't think of any other national park that's this wild. Maybe some of the Everglades but in terms of a true urban park, there ain't nothing like this anywhere.³⁸

The Anacostia River is still a long way from becoming a swimmable and fishable river but nonetheless residents of its watershed are returning to its banks in greater numbers. This marks an important turning point in the history of the river. Environmental organizations were successful in the first step towards restoring the river, alerting the public that there is a problem and pressuring the polluters to acknowledge it as well. To ensure that the long-term changes needed are implemented, a strong political will to restore the river must be sustained. It is now up to the organizations that care for the river to foster this new attention and direct it towards the river's restoration.

Narratives of a Paradoxical River: An analysis

³⁶ "History," Anacostia Community Boathouse, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://www.anacostiaboathouse.org/about/history>

³⁷ Jennifer Ney, in discussion with the author, November 11, 2011.

³⁸ Mike Bolinder, in discussion with the author, October 26, 2011.

From this brief history, it is clear that the Anacostia is on a path to healing, but this does not mean the journey has been completed. With an eye towards continued progress, I wanted to study how people currently perceive the river and its potential future, decades after the movement was started. In Zimmerer's discourse analysis of soil degradation in Bolivia the primary goal in his interviews was to ask people why soil degradation happens to ascertain their understanding of the problem. From there he sought the best solutions to the problem based on how different groups defined it.³⁹ In my interviews and surveys, I never directly asked people about the pollution of the Anacostia. It certainly came up in the course of some interviews, but I was mainly trying to uncover how people thought of the river itself. By expanding the discourse being analyzed, I could expand the solutions being considered by environmental agencies advocating for the restoration of the Anacostia. One of the questions I asked to analyze perceptions of the river was, "How would you describe the river to someone who has never been there?" I got a fairly wide range of answers and few were one-dimensional.

In the majority of my interviews this question revealed the paradoxes people see in the river. They know it is polluted and there is a lot of work to be done to clean it up but they also see a lot of beauty and potential in the river. Mike Bolinder's description of the river captured the dualistic nature of the Anacostia River that I had been hearing from others. He said:

The river is simultaneously an old man and a child. It obviously has been here longer than any of us, predates what we currently know as Washington, DC and you know as old men go it's kind of become decrepit and can't really take care of itself anymore and a lot of that is because of the things that we did that we thought were helping this river twenty, thirty, fifty years ago, building concrete walls along the edges, dredging it. That's sort of the old man side but then simultaneously it's like a

³⁹ Peet and Watts, 112-120

child, it is a new emerging resource that had been forgotten for fifty years and now, really after just a short amount of time, five or six years of really focused attention, it's starting to blossom into a new recreational, cultural center for the community and in terms of the wildlife it's a new stomping ground for all kinds of birds, deer, and waterfowl. So it's got these two natures that seem like they contrast but at the same time it makes sense.⁴⁰

This description does make sense for a wide range of people, spanning from new residents like Nathan Harrington, a Maryland native who recently moved to Congress Heights to teach at a public school, to members of generational families, like water enthusiast Carl Cole. Both Harrington and Cole are intent on breaking people's stereotypes of the river. When I asked Harrington to describe the river, he told me, "It's not what people expect it to be, I know that. That's true of east of the river communities as well...They develop an image in their head of what it must look like, I know I had one before and...once they come here they're always really surprised by how different it is from what they thought and I think it's the same with the river itself."⁴¹ This statement is not only true for people coming from outside the community, but for residents who have long been cut off from the river despite living so close to it.

Cole has a similar impression based on the decades he has spent admiring the river. He finds it very unfortunate that what tends to be publicized about the Anacostia is "that it's something to be avoided." For this reason, my interview with Carl Cole was particularly interesting. He has become so accustomed to university students approaching him to discuss the degradation of the river that he was quite defensive when we first spoke over the phone to set up an interview, insistent on laying down ground rules of what he would and would not discuss. When I explained my project, he relaxed and opened up to me. He

⁴⁰ M. Bolinder

⁴¹ Nathan Harrington, in discussion with the author, November 1, 2011.

merely wanted to avoid perpetuating the one-dimensional image that many have of the river because the Anacostia and the opportunities it provides the community mean so much to him. This shone through his romantic description of the river:

Well when I was a boy scout back in 1958, I did a piece for nature badge. I called it my urban wilderness, which in my mind had stuck because that's exactly what it's always been to me...It's changed a little here and there. It's still very much the same as it was during my childhood...It's sanctuary. I guess that's the way I'd describe it to a newcomer. But, I describe any body of water as sanctuary if you know what to do. You don't have to have a vessel under you to enjoy what water brings to you. You can walk the edges of a river, stream or what have you and just soak it all in so it's really always has been a sanctuary to me and it continues to be so.⁴²

Due to his connection to the river, Cole has become a lifelong advocate for the potential it has.

As I review and interpret my interviews, I have grouped another man with Carl Cole that makes a conscious point of romanticizing the river, photographer Bruce McNeil. When McNeil first began photographing the river he thought he could evoke a reaction by throwing the pollution he saw back in people's faces as a form of protest. With this goal in mind, he would photograph the old tires, the cars, and the debris floating down a grey river, but he quickly had second thoughts about what he was doing. McNeil decided that in order to get the type of response he was looking for he needed to do it through what he calls, "positivism" rather than "negativism." Now, he told me, "I beautify non-heroic sites." He focuses his art on what he wants to see, not on what upsets him. He feels that this has gained a lot more attention because he is presenting people with hopeful visions of the future.⁴³ Nurtured by this attitude, both McNeil and Cole have innovative visions for the

⁴² Cole

⁴³ Bruce McNeil, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2011

future of the Anacostia that go beyond an environmental clean up. I will delve deeper into this in the following section.

I first must clarify that extended contact with the river does not necessarily conclude with monolithic positive responses. As I stated at the start of this section, the commonality tends to be the apparent paradoxes rather than a consistent description of the river. David Smith, a lifelong resident of the area and a former staff member of the Earth Conservation Corps seemed a bit more disillusioned than Cole and McNeil. Despite his charming childhood stories about catching a snapping turtle in the Anacostia River that looked like a prehistoric monster, David's description of the river today is "putrid, disgusting, contaminated, don't touch it." Although he admitted if he was talking to a "nature lover" he would tell them it is beautiful in certain parts so it is "a mixed bag." David was one of the only people I interviewed to tell me the river has gotten a lot worse, and now that he is a father, he warns his children not to go near the Anacostia. He also emphasized that the state of the river is a result of neglect.⁴⁴

Another trend I noticed among environmental advocates surfaced when I asked if a particular memory of the river stood out in their mind. The majority enjoyed talking about all the different types of trash they pulled out of the river. They really have seen it all—jacuzzis, motorcycles, televisions—and they are proud that they played a part in removing these objects from the river.⁴⁵ In fact, Mike Bolinder admitted, "I really started to like digging trash out. One of my first and favorite memories was being waist deep in a mucky tributary stream called Lower Beaver Dam Creek and me and six other guys dug out a refrigerator." He went on to tell me that this refrigerator had probably been leeching lead

⁴⁴ David Smith, in discussion with the author, November 16, 2011.

⁴⁵ Tremayne Benton, in discussion with the author, October 21, 2011; K. Bolinder; M. Bolinder; Connolly

into the river for over fifty years. It took them six hours and Bolinder joked that they may have caused more harm than good, but they got that 400-pound refrigerator out of the river.⁴⁶ The only environmentally focused people I interviewed that did not mention clean-ups despite being a part of them were those that had specific childhood memories, which held a higher rank in their memory. One of the members of ECC I interviewed recounted a boat trip he went on in the third grade. His class conducted mini science experiments and learned about the native species that lived in the area. This was one of his first encounters with the Anacostia River and its ecosystem and he credits this trip with sparking his interest in biology and conservation.⁴⁷

Another lifelong resident with stories to tell is Dennis Chestnut. At the end of each interview I would ask whom else I should speak to and his name came up more than any other. When I finally got a hold of this busy man I was charmed by all of the stories he had about the river. One of his favorite childhood memories of the river is the time he found a large cement mixer with a few friends. Their immediate thought was to drag it down to the river and see if it floats. It did. So, they all hopped in and set sail in their new boat. Decades later, Dennis is now executive director of Groundwork Anacostia, DC. Something that began as children playing evolved into a connection to the river that motivated stewardship.⁴⁸

The perceptions of the river as paradoxical, as polluted yet a community asset, that were so pervasive in my interviews were mirrored in my surveys. Of the thirty-eight people I surveyed, twenty-nine said they go down to the river at least once a week. The majority either row or spend time in the park next to the river. Out of those who frequent the river

⁴⁶ M. Bolinder

⁴⁷ Lee Garrett, in discussion with the author, October 21, 2011.

⁴⁸ Dennis Chestnut, in discussion with the author, November 7, 2011.

weekly, 72 percent had positive elements in their description of the river; 31 percent of the descriptions were entirely positive. One of the more positive responses stated that the Anacostia is a “beautiful waterway in our nation’s capital” with “lots of recreation opportunities” “that needs to be loved back to health.” Others mentioned that the river is “vital economically” or that it’s a place to relax. Many of the surveys that I counted as having positive and negative elements sounded like the description I heard of a paradoxical river in my interviews. They stated that the river is beautiful but dirty or that it is polluted but fun to row on.

It was much harder to get a response from people who either rarely or never went to the river. Some who rarely went (meaning about once a year) told me it was dirty and needed to be cleaned up. One man told me that if it were cleaned he would go down more. Most of the respondents who never went down to the river had neither a description nor a vision for its future. I cannot use a lack of evidence as proof but certain respondents’ inability to describe the river or tell me what they would like to see happen with the river in the future does illuminate the broader issue of community involvement. Dennis Chestnut told me with certainty, “The river will not be restored if the community, especially the communities that border the river, is not involved in its restoration.”⁴⁹ The first step in serious community involvement is going to be creating a stronger connection to the river among the general population. Chestnut believes the community must recognize the potential the river has to provide recreation and sustainable development.

To promote this side of the river is to “re-story” it. Although it is not black and white, those with a connection to the river, especially in the context of recreation, tended to

⁴⁹ Chestnut

include more positive elements in their description of the river. If one accepts Peet and Watts's interpretation of environmental politics as a process of mobilization, the environmental community should be looking at what motivates the community they are working in. Through these interviews and surveys, I discovered the potential of positive narrative to shape a new vision for the future of the river. In trying to achieve this mobilization and a long-term community solution, advocates need to foster the positive narratives that have created the strongest connection to the river.

Visions for the Future

Over the years a multitude of strategies have been employed in the hope of restoring the Anacostia River to a swimmable and fishable state. Reaching this goal is going to involve the melding of many different interests. In recent years, it was necessary to draw people's attention to the problems of the Anacostia River because it was being neglected. This was successful in putting a spotlight on the river but some activists worry it focuses too much on one dimension of the river. Mike Bolinder explains it well:

The environmental community, of which I'm a part of, is really great at telling negative stories, gloom and doom, toxic PCH's and PAB's, and cancerous fish, and all that stuff's important. It's important to know so that we don't do it again and the people that did it in the first place, some of it we just didn't know, we didn't know that you shouldn't dump raw sewage in the river in the 1850's and some of it people did know and they need to be held accountable and that's all great. We're doing that and ultimately we'll be successful, but there are so many positive stories about what goes on out here that people need to know and part of what I hope to do both as the Anacostia Riverkeeper and as a member of the greater community of folks that care about the river and want to improve it is to tell some of the positive stories, that have yet to be told.⁵⁰

Jim Connolly not only sees a shift in narrative as something that he would like to do but as something that needs to happen to maintain a sustained interest in the river. He told me:

⁵⁰ M. Bolinder

People always want to be associated with the winning team. It is human nature. When the consistent message about the river and about the environment in general is negative, this does not excite the majority of people to get behind the cause. People want to be able to feel good [ab]out their associations and also want to have a sense of the possibility of achieving victory. A positive message associated with the Anacostia will help to compel people to join in the effort.⁵¹

These positive narratives already exist but the question remains of how to promote and spread them.

To this end, I asked everyone I interviewed about his or her vision for the future of the river. I was particularly intrigued by the less conventional solutions suggested by the advocates who were not directly connected to the environmental movement. The statement that best frames this newly envisioned future came from the photographer Bruce McNeil; “I would like to see the river become a culture.”⁵² Bruce McNeil happened to be the first person I interviewed and I don’t think this statement fully sank in until I interviewed other people for whom the river had been a defining force in their lives. As I conducted more interviews I could see that there was a culture forming, especially around the Anacostia Community Boathouse. Yet, McNeil would like to see more initiatives that would attract a wider audience, from artists to rowers to businessmen. From what I gathered, there are two main ways of achieving this, events and recreation in and around the river.

In my interview with McNeil he mentioned Pete Seeger’s *Clearwater*, which lead me to a perfect model for what could happen around the Anacostia River. The Hudson River in New York has suffered a similar legacy of environmental abuse, from the dumping of raw sewage to the contamination of PCB’s. In 1961, Seeger wrote a song about his Hudson

⁵¹ Jim Connolly, email message to the author, December 1, 2011

⁵² McNeil

River; he sang, "Sailing up my dirty stream, still I love it and I'll keep the dream, that some day, though maybe not this year, my Hudson River will once again run clear."⁵³ Eight years later, Seeger started raising money to rebuild a sloop, a classic, single mast sailboat, that he would call the *Clearwater*. Given the context at the time of anti-war protests and the civil rights movement, Seeger thought his goal may be a little frivolous but it soon grew into much more than a sailboat. As Seeger put on small music festivals with other musicians like Arlo Guthrie to raise money, he gained a lot of support and his goal evolved "to build a boat to save the river." The *Clearwater* added an educational component to its sailing trips and after sailing down to Washington DC for Earth Day in 1970, it became a major symbol for clean water legislation advocacy. Despite its growing reputation, *Clearwater* maintained its local roots.⁵⁴

The festival, known as *Clearwater's Great Hudson River Revival*, now has a permanent spot at Croton Point Park. It has grown into the country's largest environmental festival. According to the website, last year's festival included "a number of superb storytellers and family-oriented entertainers as well as juried crafts, the Green Living Expo, the Working Waterfront with small boat exhibits and rides, environmental education displays and exhibits, and the Circle of Song where audience participation is the focus."⁵⁵ It is a meeting place for entertainment and education. As a fellow artist, Bruce McNeil sees the same potential in the Anacostia. It could be a place of congregation and creation. Carl Cole sees this as well; he told me, "you bring people to any bodies of water by making visits

⁵³ Frances F. Dunwell, *The Hudson: America's River*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 297.

⁵⁴ Dunwell; "Festival Information," *Clearwater's Great Hudson River Revival*, accessed January 15, 2012, <http://www.clearwaterfestival.org/aboutfestival.html>

⁵⁵ "Festival Information"

there festive and I don't mean just on the Fourth of July and Memorial Day or Labor Day. I could see that as often as we could possibly muster the resources to do that."⁵⁶

Another way to create a connection with the river is through recreation, which is something the Anacostia Watershed Society and other environmental organizations have already begun. As explained in the background section, the Anacostia is starting to be seen as an invaluable recreational resource, especially for people-powered boating. When I asked Cole how we would encourage more people to come down to the river, he responded:

Through promotion. Talking about what is here recreationally. We tend to think in these times recreation is going and sitting in front of a TV set and watching a game. It's hard court stuff—tennis, basketball, even golf. Even though I'm a golfer, golf, but there's also a lot of recreation that waterfronts can bring to you...a lot of states actually have entities within their bureaucracies that promote their waterways as an asset and as a recreational asset...we don't have that here. Unfortunately when we do hear something with regard to the river, not from us boaters and the active people who are out here is that it's something to be avoided, you know to stay away from it.⁵⁷

Whether it is music festivals or a crew team rowing down the river, the first step is promoting the opportunities to engage with a neglected river outside of a strictly environmental context. This sets in motion a mutually reinforcing process that I believe will lead back to a more holistic environmental stewardship. It is dialectical in that promoting more positive narratives leads to more engagement, which reinforces and contributes to the positive perception. When people engage with the river in a context that is separate from all of its problems, they begin constructing a new narrative about the river. This will eventually create a base of citizens that care about the river, building stronger political will to restore the river. Jennifer Ney, president of the Anacostia Community

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cole

Boathouse, agrees that promoting recreation is almost synonymous with promoting environmental stewardship. She realized as a rower that the Anacostia is an incredible natural resource and is now determined to advocate for the Anacostia River as DC's river, rather than a second choice to the more famous Potomac.⁵⁸ I find it particularly intriguing that these types of interactions promote a desire to clean the river as well as a vision for what comes next.

As I delved deeper into these ideas, I learned there were already mainstream efforts moving in this direction that recognized recreation has an important connection with restoration. In April of 2010, President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative with the goal of developing a contemporary conservation and recreation agenda through fostering and supporting grassroots movements. During the summer of 2010, AGO held "listening sessions" to achieve their main goal of improving the federal government's utility as a community partner. Based on these sessions they delineated a list of goals as well as recommendations to achieve them. In the sessions it became clear that people were seeking more recreational access and opportunities. Increased access was also a common theme I heard throughout my interviews and surveys. According to the report:

AGO listening session participants spoke about the need to make the outdoors desirable and relevant to America's young people, and to redefine the "great outdoors" to include not just iconic places but neighborhood and city parks, community gardens, and school yards as well. Participants observed that their experiences in nature and at historic places inspired a lasting connection and, for some, lifelong careers and commitment to service in the outdoors.

To this end, the initiative has emphasized increased access through a variety of tactics: improved infrastructure, increased youth involvement, improved career pathways in this

⁵⁸ Ney

field, and streamlined federal involvement in local conservation efforts.⁵⁹ Around the Anacostia specifically, Dennis Chestnut, one of many who spoke about structural improvements, hopes to see more public boat launches, the completion of the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail, and an improvement to the park areas, making them more usable with seating, restrooms and vending areas.⁶⁰

With a specific concern for America's waterways, AGO also formed the Urban Waters Federal Partnership. After a period of outreach and community meetings, the Anacostia River was chosen as one of seven pilot locations that would receive focused assistance from the partnership. According to a press release from the Department of the Interior, the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail has twice been identified as a priority project. Twelve miles of the trail already exist in the District with a total of 20 planned in addition to what is being created in Maryland. There are also plans for two new pedestrian bridges across the river. The main goal is increased access to the opportunities the river provides as well as increased recreation and transportation options around the river. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar thinks these sort of structural changes will transform a place that was once known for pollution and poverty into a model urban park.⁶¹

Although the idea for the trail did not come out of this initiative, they are playing an important role in attracting and coordinating the necessary agencies to finish the project. Brent Bolin is excited about the implications that this new support has for the future of recreation around the river. If the only result of this initiative were to be getting agencies to work together in a more productive manner, Bolin would still regard that as a huge

⁵⁹ "America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations," *America's Great Outdoors*, February 2011.

⁶⁰ Chestnut

⁶¹ "Anacostia's Great Outdoors: Top Federal, D.C. and Maryland Leaders Commit to Transform Anacostia Riverfront into Model Urban Waterway and Park," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, 4 November 2011.

accomplishment.⁶² In sum, all of the necessary resources seem to be in place to improve access and recreational opportunities around the Anacostia. It is up to the grassroots organizations that are already established to make sure these agencies follow through with their political promises. They can also add even more to the AGO initiative through community events that focus on positive promotion.

Conclusion

Ending this paper is more of an introduction than a conclusion. It is an open invitation for environmental advocates to explore new ways of thinking about the river and its future, motivated by the emancipatory power of liberation ecology rather than the frustration of constraint. Many of the current advocacy efforts around the river are constrained by a singular focus on pollution and toxicity but they should be taking a long-term view. Looking back over the recent history of the Anacostia River, the years of focused attention to its problems has indisputably helped set its path in a new, healthier direction. It is time to start thinking about what comes next. How can a community interest in the river be reawakened and sustained to ensure stewardship continues beyond its physical restoration?

Through my process of research, outreach, and analysis, I learned a lot about how people perceive the river and how this constructed perception inevitably shapes the possibilities for its future. The Anacostia is a paradoxical river, both neglected and polluted and loved as an asset to the community. The next step should be fostering the latter, the positive narratives, and spreading an appreciation for the Anacostia to a wider audience. Promoting positive narratives will go hand in hand with hosting community events and

⁶² Brent Bolin, email message to the author, January 3, 2012.

improving recreational access, as each effort will mutually reinforce the other. There are already models in place, such as *Clearwater's Great Hudson River Revival*, to show what positive attention can do for the health of a river. Environmental groups interested in the river's restoration should use all resources available, including the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, to promote positive narratives, attract residents to the river, and ensure its sustainable future.

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