

Some Perspectives on Starting and Sustaining a Friends Group

Ron Klauda

(Friends of Hunting Creek)

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Every watershed has similarities and differences. In like manner, so do the Friends groups organized to stand tall and work hard to protect them.

With the encouragement and enthusiastic support of Greg Bowen, Executive Director of the American Chestnut Land Trust (ACLT), who sadly passed away on February 25th, the Friends of Hunting Creek (FOHC) was formed in early 2020. Since then, our group has been actively engaged in a number of initiatives led by a small core of dedicated volunteers. As we begin our 6th year, a little reflection might be useful to us and helpful to others. From this reflection, some perspectives emerged that are shared below.

To focus a new Friends group, it helps to start with a clear VISION for the group and then create an ambitious MISSION statement. Few folks want to get involved and contribute time/energy/money to a group that says, “Well, OK, we’ll do what we can.” Be committed, passionate, and bold.

“If we wait for the meek to inherit the earth, there won’t be anything left to inherit.” Bob Hunter

Our VISION and MISSION statement are:

VISION: The Friends of Hunting Creek envision a future where current residents and future generations act as stewards of a balanced ecosystem functioning sustainably within a healthy, resilient Hunting Creek watershed.

MISSION: The mission of the Friends of Hunting Creek is to promote the ecological health and resilience of the watershed’s 50 miles of streams and landscape so that landowners, citizens, government agencies, and elected officials together take an active role in protecting and sustaining the natural and cultural resources.

From these two foundational elements, a Friends group should also develop challenging GOALS and achievable OBJECTIVES.....that can be linked with future ACTION ITEMS.

It's always helpful to measure your group's success. If you accomplish some goals, you can crow a bit. If you come up short, that insight can stimulate some necessary adjustments.

“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.” William James

An important next step is: get to know your watershed, up close and personal, and give the key natural features an identity.

Create a map of your watershed that shows all the major streams and roads. Your group will use this map to show the members and everyone else exactly what you are doing and where.

Drive the roads. Look, see, map, and photograph all areas of the watershed, especially residential developments, large farm fields, active construction sites, etc. View your watershed as your extended neighborhood and become totally familiar with it.

Name the unnamed streams, because it's harder to love and protect something if it has no name.

If a tributary in your watershed is crossed by a major highway (e.g., Rts. 2/4), request a green stream name sign from the State Highway Administration, so passing motorists know what stream they're crossing.

One way to get 'up close and personal' with the tributaries in your watershed is to walk the streams. Conduct stream corridor and habitat assessments. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources has a protocol document and field data sheets (<https://dnr.maryland.gov/streams/Publications/SCAProtocols.pdf>) and (https://dnr.maryland.gov/education/Documents/Pages_fromStreamDataSheet_COASAL.pdf) that provide instructions the Friends group volunteers can explore stream segments, observe and photograph the habitat in and adjacent to the stream channels, and score the condition (quality) of ten habitat characteristics from Poor to Marginal to Fair to Good. Like collecting water samples, conducting these stream corridor and habitat assessments will require landowner permissions.

“Many people living in Calvert County never see a waterway, except where they cross the river on MD 4 in Prince Georges County or the river at Solomons or Benedict. Most have no idea what watershed they live in. Chances are they will be less likely to care about the health of waterways or wildlands if they never get access to them.”

Greg Bowen

If your group can get access to the tidal creek portion of your watershed, host some paddle events for members and other interested citizens. Explore the area in kayaks and canoes. Most of Calvert County's tidal creek are relatively undeveloped, quiet, and offer a near-wilderness experience. I kid you not.

Hold periodic but not too frequent meetings of your membership when there are tasks that need ACTION and/or relevant news to share.

Participate in the Water Quality Blitz, coordinated by the American Chestnut Land Trust, and try to sample at least one major stream in each subwatershed (catchment). The Hunting Creek watershed has 13 major catchments and we sample 22 sites during our annual Blitz.

“If there is magic on the planet, it is contained in water.” Loren Eiseley

Go beyond this once-a-year, single parameter monitoring event if you have volunteers who like to hike, get wet, and will adhere to standard water sampling protocols.

If you need to cross private properties to access your sampling sites, you must and receive permission from all landowners. If you collect a water sample by accessing the stream from a bridge on a public road, the preferred location is at least 10 yards upstream from the bridge. Always thank the landowners who gave your group permission and share your findings if they're interested.

A favorite saying of the FOHC is: *“Monitor today for healthier streams tomorrow; so monitor we should and monitor we shall.”*

“If you don't monitor, you don't know what's going on.” Buddy Hance

Also, monitoring yields knowledge and knowledge is power....but only if your Friends group uses that power to protect your watershed.

If your Friends group is regularly monitoring in their streams and County agency staff/elected officials know that, what you and your representatives say will have added credibility.

“Those who have the privilege to know have the duty to speak.”

Albert Einstein

To be effective “watchdogs” in your watershed, don’t be afraid to “stand up and speak out” if you see a problem that is adversely impacting or could impact your watershed. Be an informed and steadfast advocate for your watershed.

Advocacy is simply but importantly the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal to which you are committed. Advocacy includes many activities that a Friends group can undertake to support their primary commitment: to protect their watershed.

“It’s not enough that we do our best. Sometimes we have to do what’s required.” Winston Churchill

There are zoning ordinances and environmental regulations in place, plus government agencies charged with enforcing the ordinances and regulations. But, to ensure that these “safeguards” function as intended, a Friends group must be constantly vigilant and strongly advocate to make them effective.

It is important to make sure your advocacy is based on reliable information and extensive knowledge...another reason why we monitor, monitor, monitor.

Pay close attention to new, active construction sites where the land is being cleared of trees and other vegetation and bare soil is exposed. Most soils in Calvert County are highly erodible, and when exposed to rain and wind, will be easily moved and blown or washed down wind or downslope during even moderate storms. If you see soil erosion occurring and/or sediment laden, turbid water in adjacent streams, call the Calvert County Department of Public Works (410-535-2204) and let them know. County employees work for us and they are supposed to listen and act.

At Public Hearings and in other situations where public comments can be given, take advantage of the 5 minute vs. 2 minute rule. If you speak on behalf of your Friends group, you get 5 minutes to raise your objections or offer your suggestions or make your points. An individual who is speaking for themselves gets only 2 minutes. Believe in the power of your voice.

Monitoring key water quality parameters (e.g., nitrogen) is important. But, shining a light on aquatic critters, the macros and fish living in your watershed streams, can also identify “hot spots” of concern as possible pollution problems. In addition, the general public will pay more attention to pictures of the critters that live in your watershed, at public education events, than to the water quality parameters you measure.

Document all your monitoring program results and find interesting ways to communicate the key findings to your target audience.

“In the end, we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.”

Baba Dioum

As of March 2025, the FOHC has produced three water quality reports (2021, 2022, 2023), three articles, and a story map focused on stormwater management failures linked to development in the Prince Frederick Town Center. Our most recent report is focused on impervious surface trends in the Hunting Creek watershed. These documents are all posted on our website (<https://www.acltweb.org/index.php/friends-of-hunting-creek/>). One of our members presented an overview of FOHC activities at the 2023 conference of the Maryland Water Monitoring Council. The FOHC also has a Facebook page.

Share your water monitoring results with County agency staff, your elected officials, other Friends groups, and the general public.

An attractive and easily accessible website/webpage that can accept donations from the public is helpful.

Ask Dr. Elliott Campbell (MD/DNR) to estimate the dollar value of various Ecosystem Services that your watershed provides every year, free of charge. For the Hunting Creek watershed, the value in 2023 was \$26 million per year, which translates to \$1,308 in free annual benefits per acre from Mother Nature.

“A forested valley generates almost no costs in county services, while it saves the county in ecosystem services such as attenuation of stormwater going into Parkers Creek, nutrient uptake, carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, and so on.” Greg Bowen

Whenever we receive a gift, some sort of ‘thank you’ or reciprocity is common courtesy and good manners. To thank Mother Nature, we should do what we can to not adversely impact our environment.

“All must pay the debt of nature.” Annie Proulx

Attend public events like the Patuxent River Wade-In (usually in June) and Patuxent River Appreciation Days (usually in October) and staff an exhibit table to showcase your Friends group and tell people why you exist and what you’re doing. Bring maps, colorful and informative posters, pamphlets, and free handouts to attract people to your table so you can engage them in meaningful conversation. Tabling events can sometimes be a good place to recruit new members and expand your cadre of active volunteers.

“One person with passion is better than forty people merely interested.” E.M. Forster

Find ways to fund your group’s activities via donations from watershed residents and grants.

Collect, compile, and publicize as much information about your watershed as possible. Your Friends group should be able to identify and map those areas that are in the best condition (places to protect), those areas in the worst condition (places to restore), and those areas that are still healthy, but at a high risk of habitat degradation (to be watched closely).

When your Friends group has accumulated a lot of information and can demonstrate that many residents in your watershed are committed to protecting the streams, wetlands, and other natural areas, that might be a good time to apply for a grant. If you’re successful, the funding will enable you to hire a contractor who will work with your group and others to prepare a watershed assessment and action plan.

If you complete a plan for your watershed that clearly documents the existence of degraded streams, you can then apply for additional grants to

prepare a restoration design and, ultimately, complete one or more stream restoration project to fix the most degraded streams.

Recruiting and keeping an active core of volunteers who are interested in water monitoring is challenging for a Friends group. The FOHC doesn't have any sure-fire suggestions at this time about how to accomplish this goal, beyond talking to your neighbors and participating in public outreach events. We are open to helpful suggestions.

Building and maintaining a lengthy email distribution list for regularly disseminating information about your Friends group can help achieve you public education/outreach goals. Plus, you can tally the names on the email list and call them all group members.

The FOHC receives invaluable support from Mary Hoover, ACLT's Southern Maryland Conservation Alliance Coordinator, another essential ingredient for building and sustaining an effective Friends group.

For the annual Water Quality Blitz and tabling tasks at public events, the more volunteers, the better. But the ideal numbers of active volunteers needed to conduct more frequent water monitoring tasks that include the measurement of several chemical parameters or involve biological sampling and even some physical habitat assessments are 3 to 6 well-trained and dedicated crews of at least 2 people per crew. Nobody should sample streams alone.

The monitoring data collected by Friends group volunteers must be able to withstand scrutiny by County agency staff and also be sufficiently robust to be used in any Friends group-initiated legal challenges. To achieve these data quality goals, your group's monitoring crew should understand and strictly follow standard sampling protocols, and also strive for maximum consistency among monitoring crew members.

If anyone wants to talk about anything said in this document, don't hesitate to contact me: rjklauda@gmail.com or 410-535-0570.

“The importance of preserving Southern Maryland’s resilient landscapes is even more critical when considering the degree of climate change and human modification of lands expected over the next century.” Greg Bowen

