

Lifestyle

The lasting value of a natural place

What is the value of a natural place? A small, unspectacular space. Perhaps a small stream, with its surrounding valley. A common place, perhaps here on the well-watered East coast. Thinking about such a place might teach us something about who we are, and about our way of life, especially here in Adams County.

For many years, much of my life has been spent in a place very different from Adams County, the densely urban area of Hampden, in Baltimore. Now rapidly gentrifying, this once blue-collar neighborhood was originally built around the cotton mills and iron furnaces that arose along the stream known locally as Jones Falls.

The falls, and its tributary streams, were an ideal source of industrial power at the turn of the last century, lying as they did at the fall line between the Piedmont and the Tidewater.

In pre-colonial times, the area surrounding the falls was cloaked in dense forest, which acted as a massive green sponge that soaked up rainwater, held it, and released it slowly. Jones Falls and its tributaries were once idyllic, rushing over rocky beds and waterfalls as they dropped through Baltimore to the Chesapeake Bay. But the water was there to be used, and the fate of the streams themselves was of no consequence to those who harnessed their

flow.

Fast-forward to the present, and these same streams now lie degraded, surrounded by dense development. Still, they're considered by many nearby residents to be precious natural resources, small slices of the kind of world everyone wants to call their own. A small piece of nature being desperately preserved as a quiet place to exercise dogs, take a jog, or just breathe.

One such place is a park called Wyman Park Dell, and the stream called Stony Run that runs through it. The stream itself would not be remarkable anywhere else. It's just two miles long and drains only about three square miles. The main campus of Johns Hopkins University fronts it to the east. On the west lies the neighborhood of Hampden. The dell itself is heavily used, its walking paths threadbare and in need of upkeep that costs money the city doesn't have. The native vegetation struggles to fend off invasive species, a struggle valiantly supported by an army of tireless volunteers who are trying to make the dell a decent green space.

But then, there is the flooding. The natural forest sponge is long gone, replaced by swaths of impermeable surfaces that channel polluted runoff into Stony Run, causing heavy erosion of its banks. A massive effort over many years has sought to stem

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erosion and stabilize the banks of Stony Run, but this effort is not without its negative effects.

I walked the path along Stony Run recently. At first glance, the stream was beautiful. Small waterfalls and riffles flowed over the massive blocks of green limestone that lined the stream bed and banks. Then, I saw them: Wire baskets full of stone along the stream bank. Called gabions, they form the first line of artificial defense against erosion. Someone had put them there in a well-intentioned effort to protect the stream and its banks; they were definitely not native to the site.

Then I saw the manholes along the streambank. It was clear that beneath the stream lay an artificial network of concrete storm drains and sewers. In fact, it could be argued that the storm drains were the real stream, handling the bulk of the runoff and leaving Stony Run above ground, just for show. All this effort to recreate what had existed naturally for untold eons. And for what? Well, for the practical control of water, something the stream had been doing

quite nicely on its own for a very long time. But why bother to recreate the stream above?

Because humans need natural spaces, especially free-running water, to survive psychologically. We need it enough that we'll expend enormous amounts of energy and money to attempt to recreate what was once there naturally. Because forests and streams, or even a semblance of them, are vital to our welfare.

I offer, as a counterpoint, several places that still exist as healthy, functioning natural ecosystems: forests and streams which, if not pristine, still offer some resemblance to a world in balance. Damaged by the massive storms and flooding brought by climate change? Yes, but no underground storm drains, no artificial stream banks, no gabions.

Some exotic aquatic environment? No: Adams County, Pennsylvania. Specifically, the streams that run down from South Mountain and form the headwaters of the Susquehanna and Potomac rivers. Two good examples are Toms Creek and the Conewago Creek, which flows from its headwaters through The Narrows just north of Arendtsville.

These precious places tell a story about the value of land preservation. There is human-caused damage there, make no mistake. Just take a visit to the valley that holds

Toms Creek. It is ancient, softly rounded, and mostly flat at the bottom, the product of infinite time and water in a slow-motion balance. But the stream channel itself is in many places deep, narrow, and raw: the product of more recent, accelerated erosion. Runoff from denuded hills and valleys, but especially from impervious surfaces, the direct effect of development. But so far, the damage is minimal, and nothing compared to Baltimore's ruined Stony Run.

When you think of Adams County and land preservation, think about how our streams are changing. And think about the 8.5 million people who live within 100 miles of Gettysburg. Think about how poorly planned development could further damage these precious streams and their valleys, bringing gabions and sub-stream storm drains to what are now clean, high-quality streams. Think about all we have to lose, and how pathetic would be our attempts to recreate it.

The Land Conservancy of Adams County is a member-supported non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the rural lands and character of Adams County, Pennsylvania. For more information, visit PreserveAdams.org.

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