



Times-News

The Quality of Our Water is in Our Hands

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ECO NOTES



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When I need to relax, I sit by the stream behind my home. The rush of water as it splashes off the rocks combined with the chorus of nearby spring peepers is as calming an experience as one can have. My son and I search for red spotted efts along the stream bank, all manner of snakes and aquatic bugs. Invariably there's always a surprise in store. A corn snake climbing a nearby branch. A mole salamander sneaking behind a rock. Or perhaps a yellow bellied slider sunning itself on a log.

Given that our many rivers and streams come from the mountains, it's natural to assume that our waterways are in excellent shape. However the "welcome wagon" our streams receive once they come out of our mountains and forestland is not always quite so accommodating. Some of the threats to water quality include sediment from construction, abandoned development sites or from stormwater rushing off of impervious surfaces; bacteria leaking from septic tanks and wastewater treatment plants; and fertilizer, pesticides and fungicides that runoff from farms and home gardens.

These are problems not only for aquatic life that depend upon high quality water, but for us. We depend upon our waterways for many things: as a source of drinking water, a place to swim, boat and fish and one of the main attractions that bring tourists into our community which is an important source of revenue. In a recent study conducted by the United Way, 63% respondents said they were concerned about polluted rivers and streams and their concerns are not without merit. Trout fishermen are telling us that our local streams are no longer the fishing mecca they once were as good quality fish are harder to come by. Kayakers on the Green River complain that after a good rain, the Green turns red from the sediment leaching into the river. And the fish kill on the Mills River several years ago was a wakeup call that chemicals running off of farms are not always benign to our waterways.

The county recently took a great step forward by adopting a local stormwater ordinance. Starting this fall, problems with runoff into our streams will be monitored by our own stormwater officer, which should have a positive effect on preventing sediment into our streams.

We can all do our part to protect water quality. Before using pesticides and chemical fertilizers, consider their harmful effects on our streams. More than half the chemicals commonly used for gardening have a moderate or high toxicity to fish and other aquatic life and after a rain, rest assured, these substances will find the nearest stream. There are a number of "nature friendly" items on the market including organic fertilizers and non-toxic pesticides that are highly recommended. By using them, you not only protect water quality, but you also protect your family's health since chemicals toxic to fish will likely have a similar effect on people too.

In the mountains, many of us are on septic systems and these systems require ongoing maintenance. It's important to regularly have your septic tank inspected. The county recommends that a household of four with a 1000 gallon septic system have it pumped out every 3-5 years. An unmaintained septic tank can overflow, leaking out raw sewage containing bacteria and viruses into a yard and into the nearest waterway, causing great harm to a neighborhood.

In addition to these things, ECO is looking for volunteers who want to help become the "eyes and ears" of our waterways. ECO is the leading watchdog in our region working to protect our water quality through biomonitoring, chemical and bacterial testing of dozens of streams, and running a community-based Adopt A Stream program that includes churches, neighborhood associations and concerned residents. Stream monitors get specialized training and work with neighborhood teams to test stream quality. ECO provides all the training, but you are needed to protect our most precious resource. Reach ECO at (828) 682-0385 or www.eco-wnc.org.

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