

Notes on the River – Doug Gansler and Fish Kills

By Tim Junkin

Attorney General Doug Gansler will be in town this Wednesday, September 23, to conduct a Miles River audit. His office asked us to assist in identifying key pollution issues that he might address. There will be a town hall meeting at 5 p.m. in the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Steamboat Building. We encourage concerned friends to come and to arrive with productive ideas to reduce nutrients and polluting sediment in this important waterway.

His visit coincides, unfortunately, with the notice we just received of a major fish kill on the Neuse River in North Carolina. Fifty million fish are estimated to have died over a few days due to inadequate oxygen levels in the water. Photographs of dead fish carpeting the surface can be found on our website at www.crebconservancy.org. Larry Baldwin, the Lower Neuse Riverkeeper, reported that "The stench around New Bern is awful and that is true far downriver..."

The Neuse is the longest river in its state, opening up into Pamlico Sound. It suffers from problems similar to those in our local estuaries—pollution from excess nutrients and sediment, the majority of which comes from fertilizer and animal waste. Fish kills, of course, are not foreign to Maryland. In 2007, the Baltimore Sun reported 15 fish kills on the Bay from the Potomac River to above Annapolis. In 2001, there were 180 fish kills in our rivers, and some may remember what occurred in 1997 on the Pocomoke River. Parts of the tributary had to be shut down due to massive amounts of dying menhaden, rockfish, croakers and blue crabs.

Recently I read a book that I would recommend called *The Unnatural History of the Sea*, written by Callum Roberts. The book traces our depredation of the world's fisheries beginning with the rivers of Europe in the Sixteenth Century through our unchecked pillaging of the open oceans during the Twentieth, but ends with a number of very hopeful examples of regeneration. Decimated coral reefs nearly given up for dead, used as experimental models around the world, have shown an amazing capacity to regenerate when given a chance to heal. One point that struck me from the book, though, is a description of what the author calls *societal amnesia*. Each generation is apt to view the environment that it was born into as natural or normal. Thus, today's teenagers are not concerned that they can't wade for soft crabs off the shore or fish for shad during the spring migration because they have never known what it is like to wade in clear water in this area or to witness the bounty of a healthy shad run. As Roberts explains it, "Shifting environmental benchmarks cause a collective societal amnesia..." The "gradual deterioration of the environment and depletion of wildlife populations passes unnoticed." As a result, "our expectations diminish with time, and with this our will to do something about the losses."

Reading about our rivers, past and present, is a way to fend off societal amnesia. Remembering the shad runs, the early mornings of soft-crabbing in the shallows, and the oyster reefs rising over the low tides is important. Acting to reverse the gradual deterioration of our rivers,

however—something to prevent future catastrophic fish kills—is even more important. Let us welcome Attorney General Ganzler with appreciation for his interest, but also with a common demand that he and all of our state and local officials begin to truly enforce a moratorium on waterway neglect and abuse. No industry, business, or individual should be exempt. If our leaders hear our united commitment, they will act on it, and like the coral reefs, our waterways can and will regenerate themselves.

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