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Frogs hop back into Stony Run

Residents and experts voice enthusiasm about early payoff to stream restoration project

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Sun Reporter

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Every day for the past year, biologist Eric Schott turned over mossy rocks in Stony Run, looking for hope. Finally, this summer, he and other members of the Jones Falls Watershed Association, a volunteer conservation group that protects the 3.3-mile creek in Baltimore, found it.

Here, hope croaks.

Frogs - tadpoles to palm-size juveniles and full-grown bullfrogs - have been seen and heard for the first time in more than five years in this threatened streambed, said Schott, a biologist with the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute who has tracked Stony Run's condition.

The return of the frogs to Stony Run is a sign that water quality in the greater Jones Falls watershed, which includes the stream, is improving, said the biologist. It is also encouraging evidence that a once-ailing ecosystem is on the mend. Schott said that greater numbers of crawfish are also flourishing in Stony Run's silty waters, which ultimately join the Jones Falls and spill into the Chesapeake Bay.

Holding a large bullfrog tadpole in his hand, Schott explained the life span of the amphibian. "These guys can stay in the tadpole stage for as long as two years," he said. "The water's got to be pretty good to sustain this tadpole."

The evidence of new wildlife is a relief for residents as well as biologists and ecologists who had hoped for - but not expected so soon - this byproduct of the city's \$10 million-plus stream restoration project along Stony Run.

William Stack, pollution control administrator for the Baltimore Department of Public Works, said the return of the frogs and other creatures to the streambed is proof that the project has helped.

"There are intangible benefits that do not enter into [cost] equations," he said. "These include the presence of frogs, where none existed, the ability to reintroduce native fish species, and the establishment of a new sense of 'place' in the community."

Stack's department faced criticism in August 2006 when it felled more than 100 trees to allow bulldozers to level the tall clay banks and re-engineer the Stony Run's gushing current. Crews added dams of boulders and logs to create pools and waterfalls. Officials promised irate residents that if they waited, they would see new habitats of fish, invertebrates, insects and amphibians.

But those who watched the thinning of Stony Run's lush and verdant canopy were skeptical. Until now.

"I wanted the water to be healthy for my children to play in, for my dogs to swim in, but I wasn't happy about all those trees being knocked down," said Lynn Heller, who lives in Baltimore near Stony Run. "But it's nice to know that they're seeing new wildlife there, and hopefully, we can see more trees there soon."

The Hellers were among more than three dozen families yesterday rooting for plastic toy frogs to win a downstream race on the Jones Falls. The race, a fundraiser to benefit the Jones Falls Watershed Association, was held to let families know about the watershed's slow recovery and the need for continued cleanup. The race helped the group raise about \$3,000.

Watershed association volunteers released 562 plastic frogs into a part of the Jones Falls just south of Robert E. Lee Park, while families waited a quarter-mile downstream in Mount Washington for frogs they "sponsored" - \$5 a piece or 6 for \$25 - to arrive. While shoppers picked through organic pie pumpkins at a nearby Whole Foods Market and ordered caramel macchiatos at a Starbuck's, the Hellers kept a close watch for Frog No. 347. The 260s came down first, but then there was 347, squeezing in at 12th place.

"We've held other fundraisers in other parts of the city, but we thought it would be important to hold one where people are looking at the river," said Halle Van der Gaag, executive director of the Jones Falls Watershed Association. "We figured if they're looking at the water, they'll come up and ask us questions, want to know more about what's happening with it."

Van der Gaag's group will spend the fall planting about 1,300 trees, bushes and flowers along Stony Run. The group hopes to control erosion by planting over 50 varieties of plants, from elderberry and dogwood shrubs to red maple and river birch trees. The new trees, when they're mature, will help cool the water and create a more complex habitat for wildlife and plants.

"It was hard for many people to lose so many trees, but the erosion was so bad for so long that the city had to go in and do something," Van der Gaag said. "We're working to replenish that a bit, so that the [Stony Run] corridor is completely filled and becomes the woodland it once was."

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