



**Statement of Friends of Accotink Creek
To the Annual Public Meeting of the
Fairfax County Environmental Quality Advisory Council
January 21, 2015**

First off, I want to thank the EQAC team for your excellent work as champions of sound, responsible environmental policy. Carry on!

My name is Kris Unger, and I am the Primary Conservator for the Friends of Accotink Creek. Our motto is "Find just one other person who cares" and we partner with volunteers, communities, schools, businesses, and government agencies to protect, restore, and improve the Accotink Watershed.

I'm here today to talk about Watershed Awareness.

A few years back, I went on a hike with a friend, and after about two hours of wandering off-trail through the woods, he turned to me and said, "I have no idea where we are". I hadn't really been paying attention, because I'd assumed that he knew the area. But I had been keeping track of the streams and tributaries that we'd crossed, so it was easy to find our way back by "following the water" - I had a map in my mind of how water flowed through the landscape, and I used that to orient myself.

In my work with Friends of Accotink Creek, I am constantly meeting people who are lost within their own landscape, whose lives are disconnected from the watershed they live in. When we're outside, most of our time is spent on roads, sidewalks, and turf, and few people have the time or feel the need to learn about their watershed. We are living within a human-oriented landscape, and have limited awareness of the impact of our actions and choices on our environment:

- We look at stream valleys as convenient, well-graded sites for paved trails, because that's all that's left to build on.
- We plan and implement large construction projects that damage local streams and watersheds, without being fully aware of the negative impacts.
- We describe lush and thriving forest ecosystems as "undeveloped land".
- We emphasize "revenue-generating" active recreation in our parks while failing to acknowledge the value of ecosystem services.
- And we spend time, energy, and resources to maintain sterile, dysfunctional landscapes. Otherwise known as lawns.

As Friends of Accotink Creek, in our work with local schools, it's always inspiring to see how an hour or two spent in a stream and learning about the local watershed can open children's minds up and give them a new perspective on the world they live in. They're often fascinated by the life that they find in their local streams, and astonished to learn that their school was once a forest, their playground a wetland. Volunteers at our stream cleanups along Accotink Creek are often shocked by the large amounts of trash they find, wondering where it all comes from. Participants in our educational walks and presentations are often surprised to learn about the various ways that human activities have transformed their local stream valley, like erosion, sedimentation, invasives, and disrupted ecosystems.

I feel that one of our core missions is to promote watershed awareness, to reconnect people and communities with the watershed that they live in. Friends of Accotink Creek has been privileged over the years to work with, learn from, and be inspired by many people in Fairfax County who are dedicated to protecting and restoring the environment. Some of them are right here in this room. I'm heartened by all the examples of people, communities, and local government working together to make things better.

I encourage Fairfax County to support and promote watershed-oriented initiatives that engage, inform, and inspire people, schools, business and communities. Friends of Accotink Creek will continue to work with partners and allies to find our way towards more sustainable communities, thriving native ecosystems, and healthy watersheds. We are stronger together!



Kris Unger, Primary Conservator, Friends of Accotink Creek

CONTACT Friends of Accotink Creek