

## Albemarle County Natural Heritage Committee

### Annual Report / 2008 – 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and represent the Natural Heritage Committee and our work over the past year.

since we have some new members on the board of supervisors, I'd like to say a few words about the vision of the committee and why we are here. Most people that have lived in this county for *any* amount of time are attracted to its natural beauty. I believe our natural resources are the foundation for much of our economy. When students choose a school, or people buy a home, or tourists come here to visit, they see this place and know we've have something special.

It is impossible to separate the beauty of our area, and it's natural resources from the people themselves. The farmers of our valleys, and the people who've lived in our mountains for many generations, are a rich in culture and history. To illustrate this point, I've brought some paw paw custard pie. Paw paws are a fruit that grow along our rivers, and since colonial times, people along the Rivanna and the James would serve paw custard at inns and lock houses. The tree is a beautiful tropical looking tree with teardrop shaped leaves, and it is the only host to the zebra swallowtail butterfly. Since it is not in grocery stores, many people now have *forgotten* about the Paw Paw, (except perhaps for a childhood song, *which I won't sing*) but if you ask people that grew up in the country, you'll find picking up paw paws in the fall is still a *cherished* local tradition.

As more of us live in the suburbs, we have increasingly lost touch with our natural heritage. Even within policy, It can become too easy to see a stream buffer as lines on a map without seeing the paw paws. One of the primary goals of this committee is to help identify the natural resources in the county that help make us unique and work *with* landowners and policy makers to find ways to

preserve those resources for following generation. In doing so, we also hope to help preserve a deep history and a way of life going back to Thomas Jefferson and before.

So, how are we accomplishing that mission? In the past year we've applied practical knowledge about the counties natural resources to some new policies:

- At the request of the County we provided input on the new weed ordinance to find a least restrictive approach that would not penalize people rural areas, and would allow people in growth areas to plant native plants and wildflowers to benefit wildlife.
- In a similar way, we were asked to evaluate the potential use of wind power and when it was clear from our research that would have a negligible impact on wildlife, we voiced our support for a reasonable policy that could permit this on a small scale.
- We've also been actively communicating with the ACE committee to help invest our conservation dollars as wisely as possible, by including scoring criteria that takes into account the special places and resources the committee has identified through its ongoing work.
- Most importantly, we have begun providing input on the comprehensive plan that we feel will help simplify and improve the effectiveness of our approach to rural areas and natural resource conservation.

We've also engaged landowners and citizens by:

- Participating in Charlottesville Earth Week, where we distributing native wildflower seeds and a questionnaire for participants to report important natural resources on their own property.
- At the Albemarle County Fair, we collaborated with the Baldwin Preservation Center, to develop a presentation to help educate landowners about various incentive programs and tools that would protect streams and wildlife, while possibly saving the family farm too.

- We've also continued the process of updating our website, and hope to bring online some new resources in the near future, including an online form to report natural resources.

We've also been actively developing a closer partnership with Parks and Recreation to provide important data that will help inform their planning process for new parks.

- Given the many possibilities for use of a new park like Preddy Creek, we provided guidance to parks to help make sure that new trails and other park features would minimize damage to streams, wildflowers and wildlife habitat.
- For the Patricia Ann Byrom Forest Preserve Park we are engaged in the process much earlier, and have already spent time helping parks identify natural resources which could provide valuable information for management and planning in the park.
- It's also our hope that as master planning for Biscuit run state park proceeds that we may be of use to the county in that process as well.

In addition to these initiatives, we've continued our ongoing work in developing a landscape scale conservation plan for the county. Including a partnership with the Nature Conservancy, Stream Watch and other groups to create a land cover mapping for Albemarle.

In the coming year, we feel the skills we've developed will be very useful as we continue to provide input on the relevant sections of the comprehensive plan, and as our input may be needed on policies that affect the rural area, urban habitat, and natural systems.

We also will continue our collaboration with other conservation organizations, like the American Chestnut Foundation, which hopes to establish a test farm for reintroduction of the American Chestnut in the County.

Currently the only support the committee receives is some limited time of Scott Clark, who serves as a liaison at monthly meetings, and who has been a tremendous asset by helping the committee focus it's efforts on the priorities that are most important to staff, and you, the board.

Although there *are* indeed additional kinds of support that would greatly improve the ability of the committee to meet its objectives, we realize we are all under tighter financial constraints right now. In that spirit, we also feel we can help the county maximize the money and volunteer resources we do have towards protection of the places and resources that matter *most*.

In short, our committee works best when it is used to its fullest extent. Especially since staff time is at a premium, we encourage you to use us to provide support and input when developing policy that will affect rural areas, green space, and our natural systems. For example, when green space is included in a rezoning or comp. plan change, are there ways that we can do more direct the protection of open space to the areas that may have both the *most* conservation and recreational value for the public? Also, are there creative ways we can incentivize ,or *remove* barriers to conservation, as the county develops policy? Lastly, when restoration takes place in urban areas and parks there may be the potential to use information we've gathered about our unique plants, animals and landscapes as a blueprint for developing places that actually *look* and *feel* more like Albemarle County. Like the paw paw, our county is unique, and the more we can know about what makes it so, the better we can preserve those qualities for future generations to enjoy.