

Trout group focuses on conservation

Ryan McManamay, who answers to the title of president of the New River Valley chapter of Trout Unlimited, is like any other politician. He's working off an agenda and knows how to keep things moving in the desired direction.



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A biologist and stream ecologist working on a doctorate in stream restoration at Virginia Tech, McManamay was a key mover and shaker a couple of years ago as the local chapter was being revived after a period of dormancy.

Right off the bat, McManamay, 25, knew what his goals

were. Along with Jason Steele, another stream ecology graduate student at Tech, they began discussing the notion of jump-starting the chapter with a new focus.

"We thought that the chapter should not particularly be a fishing club but a conservation club, which was the original intent of TU," McManamay said.

Fishing is still important to chapter members. Meeting the first Wednesday of the month the past two years, the chapter often has speakers share their expertise on various aspects of angling for reluctant salmonids.

The next such talk will be 7 p.m. Wednesday at Radford University West Conference Center, when noted fly rodder

George Daniel will discuss his experience in competitive international angling.

The local chapter has focused on public service from the start. McManamay and his fellow activists, such as vice president Todd Lowe, were profoundly influential, not to mention hardworking.

"These young guys have brought a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for these kinds of projects that have been lacking in the past," said Spike Andrew, 53, the club's public relations man. Andrew had been with a previous incarnation of the chapter before becoming involved again when the chapter was revived a couple of years ago.

Working with an entirely

volunteer force, the chapter embraced a large and successful stream-restoration project at Cherokee Flats on Big Stony Creek in Giles County last fall. In addition, stream improvements were put in Peak Creek more than a year ago in advance of part of that stream being put on a delayed harvest trout-stocking program.

Another restoration project is planned for Big Stony farther upstream from Cherokee Flats going toward the West Virginia line.

It's a big job that will match grant money from TU national with local labor, mostly volunteer. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

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and the U.S. Forest Service will play supervisory roles. There will also be private contractors and consultants involved.

The chapter also has another TU grant available to put a couple of trout-raising projects in local classrooms. The idea is to install a fish-rearing tank in the school, provide students with fertilized trout eggs in the fall, and let the students raise the fish to fingerling size.

If you're having problems envisioning what size trout a fingerling is, think minnow. Those that make it to that stage will then be removed from their artificial nursery to the chilly waters of a local stream.

There has been some interest in the project from a science teacher at Eastern Montgomery High School but no follow-through yet. There is another tank (retail price: \$1,000) available for another school. Somebody from TU will set up the tank and provide the eggs at no cost. The students will then take on the parenting role for their wiggly little charges.

"Education is a key component of conservation," McManamay said.

The new restoration proj-

ect in Giles County will be a learning experience for all concerned. The job will take place on some 300 meters of Big Stony as it meanders through the flat section that runs through the old Glen Alton farm, now owned by the federal government.

Years ago, cattle grazed the pasture through which the creek ran. Trout have many enemies in this harsh world, none meaner than bovines.

I understand the cattle industry is a major player in the Western Virginia economy. But cows are dumber than the flat-earth crowd.

They stomp stream banks into a muddy mess, pollute the water as they stand blithely in it to drink and enjoy the scenery, and basically render the stream a morgue for any kind of sport fish. Unless managed properly, streams that pass through cattle country will never be trout water.

The plan on Big Stony is to grade and reinforce the banks with stone and tree roots; install in-stream structure for fish cover; create plunge pools; plant trees, mostly sycamores and willows (beaver-proofed with fencing); and grass in a riparian zone streamside.

The idea is for the stream to be restored to a state in

which the native brook trout can move into the main stem of the creek from its trout-infested branches such as the North Fork and the White Rocks Branch.

All this is going to take a lot of labor, not to mention money and time. A lot of time.

"This is probably going to take at least 10 years," McManamay said.

McManamay, a South Carolinian, figures to be working on his doctorate here during the next several years before moving on. He predicts the work will continue without him. Andrew agreed.

"There's going to be a nucleus of members — local people, retirees and others — who will be around to see this thing through."

The service ethic will endure, as long as the current leadership has an influence.

"I'm a Teddy Roosevelt conservationist," said McManamay, evoking the first U.S. president to heartily embrace the cause. "I believe that we should conserve resources so the public can enjoy them."

For more information on the chapter and its work, see its Web site: www.nrvtu.org/.