

A River Under Siege

Shenandoah Makes List of Most-Endangered Waterways

By [Stephanie McCrummen](#)

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Paved driveways, parking lots, roads and other trappings of encroaching development are threatening the health of the delicate and storied Shenandoah River, which made its grim debut yesterday on an annual list of the nation's 10 most-endangered rivers.

The Shenandoah, ranked fifth by the environmental group American Rivers, is not one of the most polluted in the nation, but was included with nine others because, the group said, it has reached a tipping point -- a crucial time when decisions made by local governments could affect the river's health for decades.

"This report is about timing," said John Eckman, executive director of the Valley Conservation Council, which worked with American Rivers. "It's about the fact that there is some critical decision-making going on as far as where we put houses, how do we tighten up the zoning. . . . Fredericksburg is almost developed, and when you drive around the Shenandoah Valley, what looks like open farmland is already platted."

The Shenandoah is an important source of drinking water for the counties it traverses and a main tributary of the Potomac River, which supplies 90 percent of the drinking water for the Washington area. The Shenandoah supplies 13 percent of the Potomac's water.

Other rivers on the list wind across the country -- the Pajaro River in California, the Caloosahatchee in Florida, the Salmon Trout in Michigan and the San Jacinto in Texas -- and include many whose problems were blamed on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which, American Rivers said, is relying too much on outdated and failed methods of taming rivers. A spokesman for the corps had no comment on the specifics of the report.

In the case of the Shenandoah, however, the report focuses mainly on local officials in the six mostly rural Shenandoah Valley counties in the river's vast watershed. Those counties are now encountering national builders and the seemingly unquenchable demands of thousands for new houses in pretty spots.

"Land and home values have seen a sharp rise in the last year or two," said Page County Administrator Mark J. Belton. "We've gotten inquiries from developers -- there's been a noticeable increase in interest, no question."

Local boards and planning commissions are in the process of revamping comprehensive plans and zoning laws and otherwise making decisions now that activists say could help diminish threats to the river.

"Thirty years ago, I could stand in the river and catch 50 fish an hour, until my arm got tired," said Meryl Christiansen, who lives in Warren County and helped found Friends of the Shenandoah River two decades ago, after the company Avtex Fibers was charged with dumping toxic waste into the river. The company was fined \$6.15 million. "Now I might catch one fish."

The rivers in the report are there because local activist groups nominated them, and Christiansen and others have lobbied for years to get the Shenandoah included, submitting evidence of high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous, which ultimately reduce oxygen levels and throw the river's ecosystem out of whack.

In recent years, their case was bolstered by massive fish kills in the north fork of the river in Warren County. Last year, about 80 percent of redbreasted sunfish and smallmouth bass were found dead with lesions on their bodies for reasons that state officials are still trying to determine.

"This is a problem that's going to keep growing with development," Christiansen said. "Development's not the whole story -- everyone that lives in the valley is guilty in one way or other. Homeowners who put a lot of fertilizer on their lawns, farmers that don't protect the soil, poultry processors that dump stuff in the river. . . . Everybody's guilty."



An old kitchen sink is washed up on the bank of the Shenandoah River in Harpers Ferry, W.Va. (By Ricky Carioti -- The Washington Post)