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**Just a Bunch of Hippie Talk, right?: The relationship between and impact of outdoor culture in Richmond, Virginia on the health of the James River-**

The environment and its purpose has often been a popular topic, stretching back centuries and generations. Throughout this time and even today, the discussion teeters between using it for humanity’s industrial and economical benefit, but indifferent to the damage; and the conservation and care for the environment for scientific purposes and interests in the outdoors. One major outdoor element that has been a part of Virginia culture for centuries is the famous James River. Located right on the James is the historical capital of Richmond, which is often coined ‘The River City’ due to its high amount of activity and dependence on the river for much of its economy and recreation. In comparison to the past it has become the central focal point of Virginia’s, and more specifically, Richmond’s, outdoor culture in more recent years; however, while there are more positive influences between Richmond and the James River and surrounding environments, it doesn’t indicate that the negative influences aren’t there as well.

 The history of the James River is nothing especially new to many American citizens, and even more so to the population of Virginia. Centuries previous to and during the European settlements in Virginia, the Native Americans depended on the James as their way of life. Then, in 1607, the Jamestown settlement was founded by British colonists near the mouth of the river close to the Chesapeake Bay, beginning the history of the American colonies that would one day turn into the America known today.

Halfway up the near three-hundred and forty miles of river, is where Richmond is located on the Fall Line. The settlement of Richmond began here due to the drastic elevation drop in only a few miles as it flows toward the Chesapeake, which, while it restricted settlers from sailing upstream, offers a great resource for industry. The 105 feet drop in elevation creates a series of churning white-water rapids that were harnessed for generating power for mills and factories, then direct transportation to the sea for exporting, including munitions and supplies for multiple wars like the American Revolution and Civil War.

But while it created and supported much industry, the relationship between the two was antagonistic towards the health of the river; it often became a dumping ground for chemicals, pollution, and sewage of the city. The quality of life, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, declined, becoming unsuitable for many organisms to use. But in recent years, things have begun to change.

As stated in the Bay Journal article regarding the ‘improved health of the James River’, after the “Allied Chemical dump[ed] wastes from the production of the highly toxic pesticide kepone into the James” for nearly ten years, “in 1975....commercial and sport fishing were banned,” which impacted not only the fishing business and economy of the James River that many people depended on, but also, more importantly, the health of the river. Pollution in the James River caused a decrease in multiple species of fish, such as Atlantic sturgeon, and decreased quality of life for many land animals that use the river for water and food. The ban most likely contributed to the cut-off of production waste dumping by the same company within the same year, pollution still flowed into the river from agricultural and urban run-off, waste treatment plants, and overflowing sewers.

In the same article, Bill Street, the CEO of the James River Association, which works to raise awareness of the James River and the environment, describes that the restoration and conservation of the latter part of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century is “nothing short of remarkable,” as the overall health ‘[report card](http://www.jamesriverassociation.org/stateofthejames/)’ of the James River that is at its highest in about sixty years, mainly due to that “given 40 years ago, the 120 miles of river was closed to fishing due to toxic contamination, pollution and raw sewage.”

But this is only a fraction of the overall goal. The JRA and other associations like it often spread awareness about the James River, to continue waste treatment plants, raise money for healthier storm-water management, agricultural cost share practices, and for land conservation along the James. It doing so, they hope to decrease the amount of toxins and pollution that enters the water. JRA program director, Shawn Ralston, who oversaw the report card, explains that “each category [of the report card] builds on the others...wildlife depend on healthy habitat. Habitat is affected by pollution, but protection and restoration actions can reverse these impacts.”

This suggests that the human population is imbalanced with the outdoors. While humanity harms, the other suffers; however, this then can affect humanity in turn. The ban placed in 1975 is a mere example of how humans harm each other indirectly, taking away jobs in the fishing economy, but also destroying the recreational sport of fishing.

Many groups, some of which became affected by the pollution in some manner, then become inspired to spread awareness about the environment, either because it’s their livelihood or because they care for it. A large majority of these people may have careers in the outdoors or scientific community, but mostly are outdoor enthusiasts, who are people that enjoy activities in the wilderness, feel connected to nature, and often are more perceptive to the harm done to the outdoors.

In an interview with local Richmonder, Elli Morris, she discussed much about the outdoor culture of Richmond, its impact, and what it means to Richmond. Elli Morris is a photographer, journalist of many outdoor activities in Richmond, an adventurer and outdoor enthusiast, author of *Cooling the South*, and third place winner for the RVA Environmental Film in 2014 with her film *An Affair with the James*. When asked about what outdoor culture means, she quickly responded that “it’s the mindset of being outdoors...and the recognition that it’s a different world…[and] enjoying it as it exists rather than building one,” but she was most clear to say that it’s “the appreciation and conservation [of the outdoors], promoting its health and spreads awareness to take care, and consideration.”

This could then suggest that many outdoors enthusiasts may also believe and take part in this mantra of awareness and James River conservation, and Richmond has been becoming much more of a nature and outdoor activities focused city. In more recent years, it has acted as home base for many adventuring companies, such as Black Dog Paddle, Riverside Outfitters, Peak Experience’s Passages, and many others. While the Fall Line may have once frustrated the early settlers, and then act as a more industrial tool later on, the churning waters also offer multiple classes of white water for every skill level. Outside of the regular kayaking and rafting, many counties, along with the city of Richmond, reserve lands as parks for hiking, biking, and climbing. According to Elli Morris, is the “central focal point” of Richmond and Virginia, and “[don’t] know what the city would have without this river...this wild outdoor culture surpasses other cities’...and is accessible to all, and has a variety of skill levels,” describing the positive symbiotic relationship between the city and its river.

While the companies gain economically from the business that the river brings, the James also attracts many numbers to live in the city. Elli, who has also lived in fifteen cities in twelve different states and has travelled in nearly fifty countries, believes that “it’s not the majority [of the population], but it’s a vast greater number that partake [in outdoor activities] in comparison to other cities...and more people and moving here,” and personally states that she chose to live in Richmond because of the opportunities offered on river, along with many people that she knows and works with.

As this new population finds Richmond as their home and the river becomes a more occupied venue, there also comes concern for the health of the people who spend time on the river, which starts with the quality of the James. In more recent years, the pollution that makes it way into the James River mostly consists of regular trash, the JRA also explains in their annual report of the “State of the James”, it also is partly sediment, many chemicals from agricultural and industrial runoff, and from nearby homes.

However, many of these organizations, including the JRA with their “campaign entitled "Our River at Risk" that they will be taking to the General Assembly in 2015... [JRA is] hosting three forums this month to raise awareness,” (*Why Richmond, Why?!* article) work to raise money and governmental support for upgrading waste and stormwater management systems, mostly using the examples of levels of pollution, and industrial accidents, such as this past year when “three rail cars fell into the James River and one caught fire and lost an estimated 30,000 gallons of volatile Bakken crude, either by burning up or spilling into the James,” (*Why Richmond, Why?!* article), that occur.

In fact, recently, in the *State of the James* report, the JRA explains that “Virginia has recently passed stronger stormwater management and erosion control regulations that may help,” however, remain unsatisfied until “targeted stream restoration [that] may also be necessary in order to address major sources of sediment pollution,” which describes the relentless care and concern for the the conservation and restoration of the quality of the James River.

However, while there are more negative effects other than the accidental pollution that comes from runoff, sediment, and industry; there’s also the indifference and blatant careless behavior that people may also adopt. Because someone enjoys the outdoors, and partaking in nature activities, they could still be harming the environment around them at the same time. Majority cause indirect pollution, such as going off of pre-made trails while hiking, biking, or running.

Although they believe it’s just them cutting through the brush, if everyone took the same path, there wouldn’t be any plants to hold in soil from eroding. Dog excrement that isn’t picked up by owners, increase chemical levels, such as increased levels of nitrogen and phosphorus (*State of the James Report*) that may result in higher algae rates that restrict the amount of sunlight that passes towards plants at the riverbed; similarly, trash left behind are sometimes nearly indistinguishable to an animal from their normal prey, and will often be consumed and is unable to be digested.

Many Richmonders have pointed out that while organizations have increased the quality of the James, the increased amount of people that use the river and surrounding areas for recreation take away the solitude cleanliness of the environment. While it is true that the more people there are, the chances for direct pollution by humans is increased, and the peaceful quietness of nature is taken away, the impacts are amplified and people are more likely to see the destruction done. One way Elli describes it, however, is that “people become more aware of their habits impact...there’s more people to care for it [the outdoors]...and to change [their] habits outweighs the negative effects of being there.”

In attempt to control the amount of direct human pollution, many schools, organizations, such as the JRA, and other programs try to educate as much of the adult and children populations are possible. Organizations put on adventure races, such as the annual “Splash and Dash”, that incorporate the James and surrounding areas, and other environmental festivals like the RVA Environmental Film Festival and Dominion Riverrock that incorporate many outdoor activities and introduce them to crowds that wouldn’t have another opportunity beforehand.

Many camps, like those run by Chesterfield County Parks & Recreation, are based around outdoor activities that teach how to interact with nature in consideration in order to create building blocks of a more adventurous and aware society. Similarly, many schools work in tandem with opportunities given by their county’s parks and recreation branches or other companies to teach in classes the importance of restoration, conservation, responsibility for their habits, and awareness of the natural world.

Students and kids are affected by the water, one of many of Elli’s stories include chaperoning a group of students kayaking on the upper James stillwater, where one boy was afraid of jumping into the water. Elli helped him through it, holding his hand and jumping in with him; afterwards, the same boy had stated that “being in the water is like being in heaven,” while several others concluded that they would want to go kayaking more, demonstrating how participating can completely change someone’s views.

Coming from Richmond, it’s difficult to think of home without thinking of the James River as a central part of its culture; the two go hand-in-hand. In consideration of the belief that outdoor enthusiasts and the outdoor culture ‘faze’ are useless to society for any reason outside of recreation, and are people who ‘just enjoy the outdoors’ is a simple misunderstanding and an understatement. Like Richmond and the James River, outdoor culture often correlates with the awareness, protection, and consideration for nature, but most importantly, the desire to make it better. The outdoor culture in Richmond, while it may have its downsides, it also spreads the ideals and love of the outdoors, then leading to that desire to protect it. Elli Morris summarizes the spread and use of outdoor culture and the James in a few, simple words: “if they (Richmonders) don’t know it, they won’t take care of it...and participating (in outdoor activities) is the only way the river will be healthy.”

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