Caught in Time’s Currents

In the Twilight of Life, Md. Man Fears His River Is, Too

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Bernie Fowler begins his mornings on his knees with a prayer for the river. Now in the twilight of his years at age 82, he prays for the polluted river like he does for his own health. He does not ask God to magically restore it. Instead, he asks that those in charge make the most of what is left.

For four decades, C. Bernard Fowler has been the Patuxent River’s preacher and protector. From beginning to end, the river has run through his life, shaping it with its current. It fed his family when he was a child. It gave him steady work as an adult, renting out boats and selling crab cakes. It brought him the woman who would become his wife.

So, when he realized wastewater was destroying the river he loved, he began to fight, first in court, then in the state capital. He told his story to anyone who would listen — how as a young man wading for crabs, he could walk chest-high in the river and still see his feet. Later as a Democratic state senator, he would wade into its increasingly cloudy waters again and vow to keep fighting until he could see his feet once more.

But for all his efforts, the river’s health has not improved much, and the frantic pace of development in recent years has increased the sewage and runoff in its streams.

And now retired, as an old man wading into a still-dirty river, Fowler fears that time is running out for them both.

Families used to stake their lives on this river. If you can find any watermen still working its shores, ask them about it and watch for the far-off look that appears in their eyes.

They talk about a time when seafood pack- inghouses lined the riverbank, when so many oyster boats worked the river they jockeyed for position.

This was the era in which Fowler grew up. Raised on Brookes Island in Calvert County, the fourth-generation son in a family of watermen, he learned to shuck oysters, set trotlines and make a living on the river.

He has left the Patuxent only once, in the early 1940s to enlist in the Navy shortly after his eldest brother was drafted for World War II. He feared feeling guilty should his brother die while he was living comfortably on the water. After his brother was killed in action, Fowler returned to the river to mourn and work.

It was a few years later when he and others on Brookes Island began noticing the changes. The sea grass, once a thick lush carpet along
Md. Man Fears for River That Nurtured Him

RIVER, From B1

the riverbed, was thinning out. Their haul of crabs and oysters seemed to shrink every year. And deep in the river, a murky cloud was beginning to form.

They pointed it out to state officials, who told them that they had no science to back their claims and that the river was fine. Later, as a Calvert County commissioner, Fowler met with others from nearby counties and decided that the only way the state would listen was if they sued.

"It was a daring thing back then, a maverick kind of move," said state Sen. Roy P. Dyson (D-St. Mary's), who attended the meetings in 1978 as a young, newly elected delegate. "I had never heard of anyone suing the state before."

Fowler created an eclectic coalition of politicians, scientists and watermen. They won the lawsuit and, for a while, everything seemed to fall into place. A judge declared the state's plans for managing the river faulty. A state agency was set up to assume responsibility. Then in December 1979, Gov. Harry R. Hughes (D) agreed to take a boat down the river with Fowler—a convincing trip that turned Hughes into one of the river's strongest allies.

But eventually, scientists say, the ferocious growth of the 1990s overtook the river's recovery, as its quiet backwaters were transformed into subdivisions, big-box stores and growing towns.

Through it all, Fowler has continued telling the story of his river and its clarity in his youth. "I was up to my chest," he'd say over and over, "and could still see my feet."

It became almost a mantra in his speeches. The story had a mythic quality to it, like Paul Bunyan and his ox or John Henry and his hammer. Soon, a poem about Fowler and his river appeared in local papers, written by a county folk singer. The singer, a friend, told Fowler that to help people understand, he needed to do more than just talk about the river; he needed to wade in.

So, that summer in 1988, in an act that has become almost folklore in Calvert, Fowler stepped into the river and became a symbol. He told the small crowd that gathered about the river of his youth, so clean and clear. Then, he turned and walked until he could no longer see his shoes. When he stopped, the water was at his shins.

Since that day almost two decades ago, the annual wade-in has become the driving force behind the river cleanup. As many as 400 people have shown up for the June event. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has plunged into the water with Fowler, as have U.S. senators, state delegates and others. The wade-ins have drawn the kind of attention to the river's plight that Fowler has dreamed of most his life.

But even with the renewed interest, last month when Fowler waded in for the 19th year, nothing much had changed. The water clouded at a depth of 27 inches, the same as last year and far short of Fowler's "up to my chest" goal of 63 inches.

Every day, 60 million gallons of wastewater flow into the Patuxent. Inside that discharge is nitrogen and phosphorus—two particularly harmful nutrients that spawn algae blooms. The algae are literally choking the marine life by sucking up oxygen in the water. They have also all but eliminated sea grass in some areas by blocking out sunlight.

By some measures, the 110-mile river has not significantly worsened since its lows in the 1970s and 1980s—no small achievement, scientists say, in the face of furious growth and increased discharges. But neither has it made any great strides.

When Fowler tells his story these days, there is a tone of desperation and frustration in his voice, family and friends said. He clings to his good health, exercising an hour and half a day with wind sprints along his driveway. He competes every year in the state Senior Olympics and keeps a stack of more than a hundred medals in his basement.

He is a man who believes in preserving what you have, but he also keeps close measure of how much is left.

"I intend to fight as long as the Lord gives me strength," he said, "but I know my time is coming."

Near his exercise room in a small closet, Fowler keeps the outfit he has worn to the wade-in every year since it started: bib overalls like the ones he wore as a boy in the river, a straw hat stained with summer sweat and the old sneakers he has tried so hard to see all these years through muddy waters.

The shoes, especially, have been worn out by the years. The canvas is so frayed, you can see his toes wiggling through large tears in the fabric. After this summer's wade-in, as he has done for many years now, he cleaned the sneakers carefully with a bit of detergent and a soft hand towel.

He does not know whether the shoes will last long enough for him to wade out one day chest-high in the river and see his toes wiggling through the holes. He does not know if he himself will last long enough to see that day.

And so, he begins his mornings on his knees with a prayer.