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Profile of a Conservationist

Deborah Barber

There's a rumor floating around The Nature Conservancy. A rumor about a secret society. And a chair.

According to the rumor, when an employee reaches his or her 25th anniversary, a secret committee delivers a beautiful wooden arm-chair to their doorstep, engraved with the TNC logo. Last spring the Maryland/DC chapter learned that the rumor was true when a chair appeared in Deborah's office to celebrate her 25 years of service to nature.

"Just last week I saw a porcupine waddling down a hill" said Deborah when asked what still excites her about her work as a land manager. "I've never seen a porcupine in Maryland before. It's always thrilling to see a rare plant, but animals are even more exciting because they're less predictable."

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A photo taken by Dr. Ariana Sutton-Grier while sightseeing in Stockholm, Sweden, during World Water Week in August 2018.
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Silver Spring to Stockholm

The Nature Conservancy Represented at World Water Week

Director of Science Dr. Ariana Sutton-Grier was invited to speak at World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden, this past summer. World Water Week occurs annually and brings together scientists, policy makers, nonprofits, and government agencies from around the world. These experts address issues of water quality, water shortages and inequitable access, and to work toward innovative, inclusive solutions to secure water for people and nature. The theme of the conference this year was "Water, Ecosystems and Human Development."

Dr. Sutton-Grier was invited by the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) to talk about the importance of "natural infrastructure" as a solution for ensuring sustainable food, water and energy. Her talk focused on explaining the role ecosystems play in buffering human infrastructure from a changing climate. She gave a compelling example of how The Nature Conservancy is using science to quantify the benefits coastal ecosystems provide in terms of reducing storm energy and coastal erosion. She also talked about the importance of healthy habitats to human health for immune function and disease prevention.

While attending the conference, Dr. Sutton-Grier concluded that Stockholm was a lovely setting for the event. Among her favorite attractions were Gamla Stan (the Old Town), which includes the Royal Palace where the Queen lives, and the Vasa Museum, which features an entire 17th-century Swedish battleship that sank on its maiden journey in 1628, but was recovered more than 300 years later and restored. Dr. Sutton-Grier also discovered a love of Swedish meatballs and cardamom rolls ("Kardemummabuller").



Top: a controlled burn at Sideling Hill Creek preserve. Bottom: post-burn monitoring © Gabriel Cahalan/The Nature Conservancy.

After the Burn

In the right place at the right time, fire is a land-management tool that can offer numerous benefits to people and nature. Many plants and animals rely on the rejuvenating role that fire can play on the landscape. The Nature Conservancy deploys teams of fire experts who use controlled burns to safely restore this natural process that our forests need to be healthy.

In the summer of 2016, The Conservancy’s Maryland/DC chapter initiated a dendrochronology (the science of tree-ring dating) study to gain a better understanding of the role that fire plays across the Western Maryland landscape.

In the central Appalachians, human fire suppression began around the turn of the 20th century, when the population had significantly increased and fire was perceived as a destructive force. We are now adding to a network of fire studies throughout the Appalachians so that we can better understand how these forests are adapted to the persistent presence of fire. The lack of fire can make Central Appalachian forests less healthy, less biodiverse and potentially more vulnerable to wildfires.

The Maryland/DC chapter of the Conservancy has been burning on the Eastern Shore for decades. Now, science has guided us West. Last spring, we led a burn on a Western Maryland preserve in hopes that success on TNC land will lead to the wider adoption of prescribed fire on state and private forestland. Building on our long history as a leader among environmental organizations, The Nature Conservancy is always looking for ways to push the boundaries of conservation. We take risks where others can’t, and in the process, the we are redefining what it means to restore our forests.

Maryland Winter Wildlife



© Kent Mason

A window into ice ages past, Finzel Swamp is located in a “frost pocket,” an area where the surrounding hills capture moisture and cold air that conspire to create a landscape more reminiscent of habitat found to the north in Canada. The conditions created by this rare mix of altitude, temperature and precipitation are home to spectacular wildlife.

During the winter months, quiet and attentive visitors to Finzel Swamp might observe bobcats, river otters, wild turkeys and an assortment of birds. And if the animals are being shy, their tracks in the snow reveal their presence.

Learn more about Finzel Swamp:

Nature.org/mdplaces