

The Human Side of Volunteerism

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Much of the parkland leading to and around Royal Lake has habitat rehabilitation activity through the Fairfax County Park Authority's Invasive Management Area (IMA) program. The initial invasive plant removal work started in 2007 along the Shanes Creek stream valley. With the [Shanes Creek stream restoration](#) currently underway, countless people who know about IMA's efforts here asked how I, a site leader from the start, feel about some of the IMA sites getting blitzed. The complicated answer steps away from the nature-topics characterizing these [Eco-Articles](#) and looks at the human side of volunteerism.



Figure 1. The Shanes Creek stream restoration cuts through this Eagle Scout project site that supported the IMA program.

There is some sorrow in seeing the work of so many volunteers uprooted. In one case, half the site of the first Eagle Scout project that I sponsored is now bulldozed. However, from that day in 2013 until now, this section provided a native plant plot that benefited scores of wildlife. Furthermore, the invasive [English ivy](#) and [winged burning bush](#) were gone for nine years, meaning that they no longer pumped seeds into the environment and spread to other places. The stream restoration planners considered IMA's work when mapping the construction zone and did their best to reduce damaging those healthy sites. This stream restoration must be done for the greater good: improving water quality from Shanes Creek to the Chesapeake Bay.

The depressing part about the stream restoration is that it needs to be done in the first place. Pre-Bay Act land development set the stage in motion. Subsequent years saw more impervious surfaces installed throughout the watershed and polluted runoff entering the waterways. Now people know more about [riparian buffers](#) and keeping waterways healthy, yet few landowners—residents, schools, businesses, HOAs, and transportation departments—take steps to improve water absorption beds, replace lawns with gardens, reduce or eliminate synthetic lawn chemicals, remove invasive weeds, and integrate more native plants in the landscaping. Poor land management impacts stream valleys more than other Northern Virginian ecosystems. Another tragedy is when people buy a beautiful native woodland lot that is many decades old and mow it down, then replace it with lawn, artificial structures, junkpiles, exotic plants, and invasive weeds. Especially disheartening is when folks encroach onto parkland and, through ignorance or willful disregard for laws, damage natural areas. There is a difference: destroyed IMA sites by Shanes Creek restoration is for a common good whereas zones destroyed by encroachment is a selfish act causing shared misfortune. In the big picture, people own short-lived items like clothes. Since the land long outlasts us all, we are more stewards of the real estate instead of its owners. A great irony is hearing people thank us as we toil in the parks only for them to return home and unknowingly cultivate the very weeds that IMA volunteers are eradicating! Actions speak louder than an uninformed “thank you.”

[Dog walkers](#), the best way to thank park volunteers is to obey the rules and always keep your pooch leashed on walks. Even if the dog is well-behaved off-leash, keeping the dog leashed sets a good example for others to follow. It will prevent any more volunteers from getting bitten. Always clean up after your pet since the volunteers working around the parks inevitably get in the feces.

Another sad point is when planners fail to fully see their project's impacts. A common complaint about many exposed playgrounds is how baked they get in the summer sun and metal surfaces become too hot to touch. A more thoughtful approach is to leave some of those 80-year-old trees already providing shade

instead of total deforestation. Woodland playgrounds look great and kids love them! Another oversight is placing trails in wrong places. Locating trails in wetlands (without boardwalks), through sensitive areas, and along flash flood corridors is foolish. Paving a trail does not part floodwaters! Sustainable trails are along gently sloped higher ground with good drainage and stable soil; the only maintenance is occasionally trimming branches.

In conversations and online forums, people ask about “when we are gone.” What happens to anything from native gardens to park restoration areas after their caretakers move on? We are creating habitat now that is better than the alien infestations previously present. Our work might not last forever, but the result is an oasis for wildlife today. Our work is merely the start and can inspire future generations to continue the battle including looking after existing IMA sites. With more people embracing sustainable landscaping, habitat restoration success improves. Help the public understand what we do and why it is important. Here are three resources to assist folks to better care for their yards, common grounds, and other places where permission is granted:

- Swearingen, Jil M. and Judith P. Fulton. 2022. *Plant Invaders of Mid-Atlantic Natural Areas, Field Guide*. Passiflora Press. pp 200.
www.invasive.org/midatlantic/fieldguide/index.cfm—a book to help identify most of the common invasive plants in Northern Virginia.
- www.inaturalist.org/—an online tool that identifies plants and other organisms based on photos snapped on a smartphone.
- Chatham, Margaret, et al. April 2022. *Plants for Northern Virginia, 4th Edition*. Plant NOVA Natives. pp. 65.
www.plantnovanatives.org/files/ugd/9c55f5_1d2d3e0424f0420dacbfc78a48acfb41.pdf—a book listing native plants suitable for various landscaping solutions, planting strategies, and more!

The four essential steps for these and other literary resources to succeed are: Read, Heed, Retain, and Share. We can work together for a healthier neighborhood and sustainable world.



Figure 2. Volunteers have different reasons for joining IMA: giving back to the community, making friends, getting constructive exercise, and enjoying nature, to name a few. For me, it’s righting the wrongs that humans inflicted onto the environment. It’s helping those critters without a voice, like (A) this yellow-rumped warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) and (B) pair of wood ducks (*Aix sponsa*). It’s looking at a bird in the tree or wood frog hopping by and knowing this IMA workday is for them.

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