

## SPECIAL EDITION: Park Land Management

By Greg Sykes ([greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com))

How does land management in the parks relate to sailing a ship? In seafaring, the ship and crew are at the mercy of an oceanic wilderness. The captain reads the sea and sky to gauge fair winds and storms. When rough seas bode, a well-seasoned crew rolls with the waves and navigates the ship to safety. Captains who think they can plow through any ocean condition end up losing the ship. Larger vessels require more complicated rigging and more sailors to complete the voyage. Outboard motor enthusiasts, remember that storm waves have sent many a diesel freighter to the seafloor.

Like sea captains, Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) land managers and naturalists are formally educated to understand the wild landscape and evaluate the environmental threats. Any given plant or animal is an extremely complex organism; figuring how each one fits into the environment—let alone how they react to natural and man-made pressures—is like knowing the ropes on a full-rigged ship! The manager then trains and coordinates staff and volunteers to best work the lands. The goals include protecting natural resources (we all want clean air and water, right?), fostering a habitat to maximize biodiversity, and enabling people to both educationally and recreationally visit the park in a sustainable manner.

Ship passengers form various outlooks on a voyage—from enjoying the oceanic adventure to simply viewing it as a means of arriving at a destination. Others might complain about the expedition, sea conditions, captain, and crew. Especially dangerous is when untrained passengers decide to grab the wheel, play with the rigging, or otherwise alter the ship's course. Park visitors come with varying degrees of knowledge, and FCPA welcomes folks wishing to aesthetically enjoy the parks, use the recreational facilities, or join a FCPA volunteer program. However, the parkland health is steered off course when individuals or small groups decide to take certain actions without first consulting the park managers. The best intentions might motivate these rogue actions, but the damage remains the same. Here are some of the examples of parkland distresses observed in the Royal Lake area.

- **Visions of how a park should appear:** some people understand the need for biodiversity, healthy ecosystems, and allowing nature to take its course. Others believe parks should look like golf courses. Ecologically sterile fairways belong on golf courses, not in rich, natural areas. An overstretched FCPA staff maintains parkland parcels reserved for ball fields and amphitheaters for summer concert enjoyment. Even so, complaints about long grass, especially along trails and secondary park entrances, are common. Such areas are mowed about once every 30 days. Additionally to superior drought tolerance and weed-fighting capabilities, taller grass offers more resistance against foot traffic, resulting in better erosion control than low-mowed lawns. Those citizens who decide to maintain mowed areas themselves are defeating erosion counter-measures. They also were observed applying synthetic lawn chemicals. Most lawn chemicals wash into the nearby waterways. To make matters worse, any fertilizer absorbed by the soil may help problematic species in the lawn, such as [Japanese stilt grass](#)—an Invasive Management Area (IMA) target. Stilt grass spreads rapidly via seed dispersal, from flooding streams to hitching rides on animals and people. Nobody needs residual fertilizers encouraging stilt grass!
- **Introduction of various species onto parklands:** planting native species may benefit the woodlands, but all introductions pose some risk. Invasive, non-native species clearly harm our parks. Some of the [rose-of-Sharon](#), [autumn olive](#), and [Amur honeysuckle](#) removed by IMA volunteers show signs of deliberate planting. Saplings of these same species clearly reveal a spread throughout the woodlands. Only a few weeks ago, I removed a dried berry cluster of [Nandina](#) (aka heavenly bamboo, a moderately invasive Asian species) that was left to take root. FCPA carefully selects specimens for restoration projects. In addition to choosing the proper native species for a particular terrain, FCPA purchases locally cultivated specimens to maintain the population genetics within Fairfax County (keeping traits conducive to growing in local soil and weather conditions) and prevent disease or parasite introduction. These seed-raised plants ensure genetic diversity whereas commercial nursery stock frequently consists of cloned

cultivars. Learn about invasive plants at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/invasive-management-area>.

- **Encroachment onto parkland:** this chronic problem ranges from extending fence lines to building fire pits to discarding yard debris, trash, and hazardous materials (e.g., electronics, batteries, crankcase oil, and oil filters). These incursions are the single biggest threat to native woodlands and waterways. By definition, hazardous materials threaten human health; discarding them in parkland does not make them “go away” but rather spreads the risk to other citizens. Many people are unaware of the health risks associated with yard debris piles (to be discussed in a future article). From an ecological perspective, rubbish heaps require decades to decay, obstruct native plant growth in the process, stress trees, and potentially introduce invasive species into the forests. Some folks justify dumping yard waste and grass clippings to “fertilize the environment” or providing some other benefit to the parks. If dumping yard rubbish and the above random plant introductions were great parkland practices, FCPA might not have designated Royal Lake as an IMA site and you would mound the debris on your own property. To be a truly good neighbor, kindly dispose of trash and debris legally by either using curbside pickup or bringing items directly to the landfill (officially called the “I-66 Transfer Station Complex”), convert plant matter into fertilizer by keeping compost piles on your property, respect where your acreage ends, and refrain from encroachment. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/encroachment>
- **Creating haphazard trails:** folks, the days of Daniel Boone-style trail blazing are over. Many animals already endure stress from living in an urban setting instead of a spacious forest. Most wildlife is shy, and unnecessary trails increase stress on fauna if not squish the smaller guys underfoot. Sensitive plants are just as vulnerable as animals. Trails eat up habitat in terms of both the physical path area and the secondary influence upon the immediate vicinities, such as erosion and perpetual soil disturbance, invasive plant seeds distribution, access to litter, and pet waste. In one case, someone poured gravel down an animal den, akin to a truckload of rocks dumped on your front door! Parallel trails slashed near Shanes Creek are only 20 feet apart! Such excessive paths slice through the riparian buffers: the green park habitats left in tact to protect the streams and waterways. Let’s treasure these buffers as natural Resource Protection Areas (RPAs), which help purify water, curb erosion, and promote biodiversity. Let’s also realize that properly designed trails can be wonderful ambassadors to the natural world. For example, many parts of the Cross County Trail run along underground utilities. These utilities need access and clearance. Except for a crossing point, Shanes Creek trails are not logically built along the utility line. If one trail still is inadequate for someone’s needs, KPW has parallel sidewalks provided by taxpayer dollars in front of our homes. More on buffers and RPAs at <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/riparian-buffers-and-controlled-drainage-to-reduce-agricultural-nonpoint-source-pollution> and <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/landdevelopment/faqs-resource-protection-areas>.
- **Feeding wildlife:** Canada goose aggression and feces are two good reasons not to feed the geese. These native birds were originally migratory, spending only short layovers here each spring and fall. They initially became residents due to poorly implemented breeding programs. People began feeding geese, which encouraged the fowl to permanently stay instead of fly to Canadian breeding grounds. Refraining from feeding any wildlife is the safest practice for both humans and animals. This website lists more of the problems caused by geese and how FCPA works to control populations: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/wildlife/canada-geese>.
- **Caging trees:** residents asked about the chicken wire around tree trunks, especially after getting snagged by protruding wire. In the past, citizens made these cages to protect individual trees from beaver activity. Park managers do not regularly cage trees. Please remember that parks are reserved for all wildlife including beavers (see “[A Tribute to Beavers](#),” Dec. 2008). If a beaver gnaws on a near-shore tree, then so be it. When they fell large trees, they focus on one or two and the rest of the forest is left alone. The ultimate irony is that these cages may damage trees more than protect them; just as gardeners know not to mulch against the tree’s bark, falling leaf litter accumulating between the wire and trunk retains moisture, the dampness encourages fungal pathogens, and the tree dies. Read up on tree care at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/trees> and [https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/430/430-210/430-210\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/430/430-210/430-210_pdf.pdf)

This summary is merely the surface of issues facing parklands. Some people ask, "How do we know that the managers are steering parks towards the proper heading?" For starters, FCPA is fully accredited by the Commission of Park and Recreation Accreditation Agencies (CAPRA). Current FCPA actions strive towards a healthy, sustainable environment for both humans and wildlife. Playgrounds, ball fields, and other direct recreational facilities are safely maintained. Policies are reviewed for feasibility, long term impact, and scientific merit prior to implementation. The resulting forestry strategies stand the test of time.

That's where we come in: We need to poke, prod, and review our park system. Speak up if you see something that does not make sense, ask questions, and listen to how others respond. Would you like to both learn the ropes of environmental stewardship and work the parklands? Many programs offer ways you can responsibly participate towards a better environment! Within KPW, contact the Parks and Lakes Committee ([parks@kpwca.org](mailto:parks@kpwca.org)) for activities such as clean-up workdays and trail restoration. To hone in on a specialty or explore other County parks, visit <https://www.volunteerfairfax.org/>. You are always welcomed to join an IMA workday and control invasives; contact me at [greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com) to get on my distribution list. We have already hosted four workdays this summer. If you truly want to have a positive impact on the parks, now's your chance. Welcome aboard!

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