



2015 Annual Report



Our mission is to protect, preserve and restore the Indian Creek and greater Youghiogheny River watersheds. Your support, both financially and through volunteer efforts, has made this possible and we thank you. With our Annual Report we would like to share some of our 2015 achievements.

2015 by the Numbers...

40 Macroinvertebrate surveys conducted at 25 locations in the Indian Creek watershed

\$31,000 Amount raised to construct an in-house laboratory allowing for the analysis of E. coli samples and the continuation of our Swimmable Waters program

10 Number of bridges we inspected in the Youghiogheny River watershed as part of an initiative to document the condition of infrastructure on oil train routes

\$50,000 Amount distributed to small community groups for shale gas organizing through our Direct Support Project

148 Number of stream miles patrolled in the Youghiogheny River watershed

A letter from MWA's Executive Director

Dear Friend of the Watershed,

Founded in 1994, the Mountain Watershed Association has spent more than \$7 million in private, state, and federal dollars working toward cleaning up the abandoned mine discharges in Indian Creek watershed. These discharges are deadly to our streams. Some emanate from unstable underground mines; instability underground can result in changes in discharge chemistry and volume as well as subsidence. We are earnestly trying to protect the unmined areas of the watershed to prevent further damage and degradation to our streams and water resources. One effort now underway is to protect the Indian Creek Gorge, an area of incredible natural beauty and diversity. Anyone who has participated in our Spring Wildflower Walk knows how unique and pristine this section of the watershed remains.

On one of our informative wildflower walks an observer commented that the Gorge was a hidden jewel in the Laurel Highlands. Not only do we see red trillium but white and last year an unusual peach color. There are also bloodroot plants, wild ginger, and wild geranium among hundreds of other species.

There are successive waterfalls to rival Ohiopyle. When one walks through the old railroad cut to enter the gorge it is like passing through the portal to a different world—quiet, clean, and sedate. The only sounds are the riffing water and the sound of wind in the treetops.

Our goal for 2016 is to protect this peaceful, natural world. We hope you'll have a chance to enjoy this incredible landscape sometime during 2016. We are grateful for your continued support as we work toward protecting, preserving and restoring the Indian Creek and greater Youghiogheny River watersheds. These streams have a voice through you.

With great appreciation,

Beverly Braverman
Executive Director

Indian Creek Water Quality Continues to Improve

Twenty years ago Indian Creek flowed orange and was biologically dead due to pollution from abandoned mines. Our efforts over the past 20 years have resulted in the installation of five passive mine drainage treatment systems. These treatment systems have resulted in incredible improvements in water quality and the return of aquatic organisms to Indian Creek.

One method we use to gauge improving water quality is through macroinvertebrate monitoring. Macroinvertebrates are aquatic insects that live in the stream and serve as a primary food source for fish. Having a viable macroinvertebrate population is vital to restoring a healthy stream and fishery.

Healthfulness of a stream is all about presence, absence, and abundance of certain types of macroinvertebrates. Macroinvertebrates have different tolerance values for the amount of pollution they can survive in. Waterways that have a high diversity of sensitive species, those that cannot survive in pollution, are typically considered healthy. Waterways with a high diversity of tolerant species, those that can live in more polluted conditions, are considered impaired.

We conducted macroinvertebrate sampling at five locations between the headwaters of Indian Creek and Resh Park in Spring of 2015. Based on the results of this sampling, we found numerous organisms indicative of a healthy stream. We continue to find an increase in the number and diversity of the bugs we find including those with a low tolerance for pollution. These results tell us that our mine drainage treatment systems are functioning as planned and are allowing for the return of aquatic life in Indian Creek.



Above: This caddisfly is one of many macroinvertebrates that live in Indian Creek

2015

Indian Creek Valley Trail Expansion

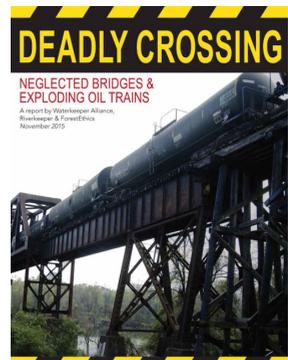


One of the best amenities in our community is the ever growing and developing Indian Creek Valley Trail. Thanks to the vision of the Saltlick Township Supervisors, the trail started out as a six mile segment in Saltlick Township. It has since expanded to more than nine miles of continuous trail from Route 31 into Springfield Township. This past construction season we spent time repairing portions of trail near White’s Bridge. Members of our community can now enjoy a one mile section of trail starting near White’s Bridge and a half mile section Camp Christian. These pieces of trail will soon be connected to the 4.3 mile section in the Indian Creek gorge.

In 2015, we were awarded a \$50,000 grant from the Local Share Account program for construction of the trail through the Indian Creek Gorge. We would like to thank all those involved in the award process for acknowledging the importance of trail development to the economic growth of our area. Commissioner Ambrosini was kind enough to attend our Annual Membership meeting to announce the good news. We live in a picturesque area with increasingly rare exceptional natural diversity. We are committed to continued trail expansion so that visitors and members of our community alike can enjoy increased access to these amazing resources.

Oil Train Advocacy

In 2015 we participated in a Waterkeeper Alliance investigative report exploring the condition of infrastructure along rail routes on which explosive crude oil is hauled– which includes the CSX main line running along the Yough River. We conducted ten visual inspections and found crumbling concrete, exposed and rusted rebar, and bent steel. Our findings were published along with those of many other Waterkeepers in a new report called Deadly Crossings. We are committed to continuing to expose the risk posed to our watershed by hauling crude by rail.



Shale Gas Legal Initiatives

2015

This year in shale gas development continues to be dominated by all things zoning. Communities around the state are struggling with how to manage the influx of this industry. Due to the complexities of zoning and the flawed approaches several communities are taking, many residents are seeking direction. It has been our goal to provide that direction.

MWA offers a unique combination of organizing support paired with legal outreach and advocacy. On the legal front, we have been on the ground in several communities directly advocating for zoning that comports with our environmental rights. Speeches to local governments, proposing zoning amendments, and media outreach are among the tools we have utilized. In Fayette, our opinion letter published in the Herald Standard challenged the legality of leasing of local parkland for drilling and also Fayette's lack of zoning updates. In Ligonier Township, we testified regarding the constitutionality of the township's proposed zoning amendments. While in Trafford Borough, we submitted detailed edits to the borough's ordinance and provided legal resources to local residents. These are but a few examples of our community-focused efforts.

This past year we also engaged in a zoning challenge to a compressor station affecting our members. Several allegations of noise and health issues surround the Springhill #2 Compressor Station in Fayette County. To protect our members, we took the challenge to the Fayette County Court of Common Pleas and are continuing to pressure the county for an investigation. Through our combination of organizing and legal support we plan to continue assisting residents and communities facing issues associated with shale gas development.

*Right: The Springhill
Compressor Station.
Photo courtesy of Bob
Donnan.*



Shale Gas Organizing & Direct Support Fund

In 2015 we made improvements to the way we approach shale gas organizing. Through the creation of the Direct Support Fund, we've distributed over \$50,000 to grassroots projects seeking to protect environmental and civil rights both here in southwestern Pennsylvania and across the Marcellus Shale region. By providing this resource, we've not only strengthened existing partnerships but also have formed new relationships with those in frontline communities facing an onslaught of shale gas development.

In 2015 a number of citizen groups used the funds for organizing tactics to increase public participation during the process of zoning changes. The Act 13 ruling gave municipalities the right to dictate where fracking can occur which enhances our ability to exercise control over impacts from the gas industry. To ensure progress, we developed a strategy to equip community leaders in the Shalefields with the most credible scientific research and knowledge of the current status of the law. When people understand their rights and what they must do to defend them, we see communities begin to act with one voice.

To defend against corporations who are as politically and financially powerful as the gas industry, we must work together to learn from each other's experiences. Our role is like that of a bridge, connecting communities beyond their boundary lines. Launching the Direct Support Fund project has taught us that financial support is crucial in shale gas organizing; however, the most powerful tool we have is each other.

2015

Right: Rally opposing the Mariner East pipeline which could impact the Yough River watershed.



Community & Watershed Protection

We spent much of 2015 responding to the threat of a deep mine in the Indian Creek watershed. It is not a question of whether you support the use of coal. It is a question of whether the proposed Rustic Ridge No. 1 deep mine will negatively impact our watershed and our community. After having a hydrogeologist and stream biologist review the permit application, our conclusion is that this proposal will harm both. The proposed Rand Am deep mine, which was defeated in 1996 after numerous days of testimony before the Environmental Hearing Board, shares a significant common area with this proposed deep mine.

Our activities in 2015 included community organizing in and around the permit area. We held community meetings and petition drives and went door to door to discuss the proposal with our neighbors. We organized attendance at a public hearing held by the DEP. We engaged experts to provide analysis of the permit and increased our water monitoring in the area in order to establish baseline water quality. A public hearing on this proposal will be held December 15 at the Donegal Community Center from 1 to 3 PM. Please attend.

Youghiogheny River Gorge Protection

In July 2015 we filed an amicus, or friend of the court, brief with the Interior Board of Land Appeals (“IBLA”). This marks the next step in our continued fight against Amerikohl’s Curry mine. We have continued our opposition because of the significant threat this site poses for the Youghiogheny River watershed and gorge. Timbering occurred on the Curry site in 2013 after Amerikohl received its mining permit. We asserted this logging should have been regulated by DEP’s Bureau of Mining because it took place on a permitted mine site. DEP’s Bureau of Mining asserted it should be regulated by DEP Waterways and Wetlands because mining had not yet started, and Waterways and Wetlands asserted it was a mining issue.

As a result of this bureaucratic inaction, we elevated the issue to the federal Office of Surface Mining in order to halt illegal and excessive sediment pollution flowing from the site into the Yough. Amerikohl has appealed a series of orders from OSM, and our amicus brief supported OSM’s position ordering Amerikohl to stop the pollution. We believe this case has the potential to set a precedent regarding the way
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timbering on surface mining is conducted statewide.



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