

Greater Greater Washington

The Washington, DC area is great. But it could be **greater**.

Making the Anacostia a place to have fun goes hand in hand with cleaning it up

by [Kristan Uhlenbrock](#) • July 31, 2015

More and more people are learning how much fun there is to be had on the Anacostia River. That could mean a cleaner future for the local waterway.



A view of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens from the water. Photo by the author.

On any given weekend, paddlers and rowers are speckled along the water—all in brightly colored watercraft looking like a pack of Skittles that was spilled. The recreationalists are typically spotted around the Georgetown waterfront on the Potomac River. Many are seeking an escape from the city or trying their balancing skills as they attempt yoga on a stand-up paddle board.

However, the Potomac isn't the only river people turn to; the Anacostia is making a comeback.

In the summer of 2013, Ballpark Boathouse opened by Yards Park, the first kayak rental business along the Anacostia River in the District. The Boathouse offers both kayaks and canoes to the adventure seekers.

A little further upriver, the [Anacostia Community Boathouse](#) has been around for over two decades. This member-driven facility offers numerous community activities, from learning to paddle a kayak or row a Dragon boat to competitive regattas.

There's lots to see when you paddle up the Anacostia

What's an outdoor recreationalist to do once they find themselves floating on top of the Anacostia River? There are few interesting sites to see via watercraft.

Tucked on the eastern shore of the Anacostia River and on the border between DC and Maryland, sits a 700-acre National Park called the [Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens](#). A maze of coves and inlets steers you through a rich landscape of cattails, water lilies, and other aquatic flora. Calm waters of these wetlands let you linger.

And although the carefully planned and maintained paths around the ponds by foot are exciting, especially when the lotus are in bloom, exploring the Gardens by kayak or canoe is a whole other world.



A blue heron stalks its next meal in the Aquatic Gardens. Photo by the author.

Downstream from the Aquatic Gardens, and a little closer if you are paddling from downtown, is a small dock for landing at the [National Arboretum](#). Here, you can pull your watercraft ashore and explore the 446 acres or just take a break.

Landmarks, like the old columns from the Capitol building that stand erect resembling relics from an ancient civilization, are one of many things to see. Plus the extensive tree canopy keeps the temperatures cooler.

For those who don't have the stamina or the time to venture far upriver, [Kingman Island](#) is a nice reprieve that is inhabited with herons and turtles. Or just trolling around Yards Park will provide some interesting sites like the decommissioned Navy ship [USS Barry](#), which will be dismantled and removed by next summer.

A waterfront renaissance is stirring up attention

Revitalization along DC's shoreline is gaining speed. The [Georgetown Waterfront Park](#) final phase was completed in 2010, providing a welcome outdoor space along the Potomac. Now a national park, the waterfront serves as a starting point for the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal—a 184-mile landmark that follows the river and serves as a popular biking, running, and hiking destination.

Also, just a [few weeks ago](#) the Southwest Waterfront redevelopment project hit a milestone by completing the digging phase. The developers, [PN Hoffman and Madison Marquette](#), have begun building what will be a 25-acre wharf and 3.5-acre waterfront park, when complete.

Development along the Anacostia River is also picking up. The Navy Yard neighborhood has been growing swiftly, with the now completed [Yards Park](#) an attractive place to sit on a chaise lounge and stare at the river or wade in the waterfall.

However, there are still areas along the Anacostia waterfront that are overlooked, like RFK stadium and parking lot, or the slow development of the [Hill East District Waterfront](#).



Photo by Tim Evanson on Flickr.

All of this redevelopment along the rivers draws attention to them-and hopefully, their rehabilitation. But redevelopment needs to be done with a focus on equity, sustainability, and reducing environmental impact.

Creating a healthy river for people to enjoy is not easy

District residents realizing how much more they could get out of their shoreline means more opportunities for communities to connect with waterways and take pride in wanting to clean them up.

Trash, a visible pollutant, is still prevalent along the Anacostia. There are local and federal efforts underway to start removing it, like the EPA using the Clean Water Act to establish a total maximum amount of trash that can enter the waterway. To keep trash under the limit, the EPA estimates that 1.2 million pounds of trash needs to be removed annually from the watershed.

In 2009, the 5-cent bag fee was implemented. Since then, the revenue has been spent on tools to clean up the Anacostia such as education, grants to communities to install rain gardens or impermeable surfaces, and trash traps installed in key locations along the Anacostia watershed.

But trash is still quite visible along the river. And whether it's trash or invisible pollutants, the District's rivers still have a ways to go until they are swimmable.

Investments along the waterfront, especially in parks and other multifunctional spaces, bring people to the river's banks. Increasingly, recreationalists are venturing onto the water. And more recreation along the river is a sign that we are on a trajectory to restoring them to a more healthy state.

Correction: A previous version of this post named Ballpark Boathouse as the first kayak rental business along the Anacostia River. Bladensburg Waterfront Park in Maryland has actually been renting boats for longer, so we updated the post to clarify that the nod to Ballpark Boathouse is specific to the District.

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Kristan Uhlenbrock is a science writer and outdoor adventurer. She lives in southeast DC and can often be spotted on a paddle board cruising the Anacostia River. An ocean scientist by training, she moved to DC in 2010 to work on at the intersection of policy, science, and communication.



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Comments

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It would help people get to know the river - and be really cool - if there were eco-friendly boat transit from Yards Park to Bladensburg and v.v. A hop-on hop-off type of thing would be ideal, combined with info about bikeshare and public transit at the various stops. Like a Circulator for the river.

by Willow on Jul 31, 2015 1:21 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Thank you for writing this-- it is a good article. My girlfriend and I had season passes at the Ballpark Boathouse last year and it was very enjoyable kayaking on the weekends.

As a first step to improving the health and quality of the Anacostia River, please email your city councilmember if you live in DC and advocate for a bottle bill to help encourage greater recycling and fewer cans and bottles entering the Potomac and Anacostia.

by 202_Cyclist on Jul 31, 2015 1:41 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Hopefully this project works as planned: <https://www.dewater.com/ladybird>

by DC_D on Jul 31, 2015 1:45 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Great article. Upstream of the CSX bridge (pictured in last photo) is especially good for paddling. The low bridge keeps all but the smallest of powerboats from coming

upstream, creating a paddling oasis in a very interesting part of the river filled with wildlife.

Pro tip: look at the tide charts when you go out. The Anacostia has a 3 foot plus daily tide, and, given the severe sedimentation in certain parts of the river, when the tide goes out you could find yourself stranded deep in Kenilworth Gardens or Kingman Lake (the wetland that runs down the "inside" of Kingman Island).

The river is very flat so paddling upstream is not difficult, even against the tide. (The rising and falling tide is the closest thing the Anacostia has to a current.)

by [Brent Bolin](#) on Jul 31, 2015 1:51 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Related to this, there was a good film last year, "Fishing the Anacostia," as part of the DC Environmental Film Festival.

<https://vimeo.com/60304905>

by [202_Cyclist](#) on Jul 31, 2015 1:59 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

What are the health risks to e.g., kayaking on the Anacostia? How bad is the pollution problem.

by [Hadur](#) on Jul 31, 2015 2:36 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Sounds like a great idea. but this is not the first - or the second, or - time we've seen reports about plans to "revitalize the Anacostia".

After visiting Paris and London earlier this month and seeing what's been done along BOTH sides of the Seine and the Thames, I was amazed. In fact I talked about it so much, my girlfriend told me she was tired of hearing it. In any event, I came back feeling embarrassed for DC and the Anacostia.

It's time we did more than announce "plans.

by [August4](#) on Jul 31, 2015 2:48 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

@Hadur:

Avoid going kayaking after a rain, especially a heavy rain, try not to drink the water, and shower when you get home and you should be fine.

by [202_Cyclist](#) on Jul 31, 2015 3:04 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

The NPS and AWS have [a great map of the river](#) you can take along with you on your water-borne adventures. AWS also has free Paddle Nights on Thursdays [all summer long](#), if you want to spend an hour exploring.

Even in the few years I've lived near the river, there's been a lot of seriously wonderful improvements, like the often-lively Yards Park and a trail that extends [almost](#) the length of the river. There's also so much new construction that it'll be unrecognizable in 2017.

by [Payton Chung](#) on Jul 31, 2015 3:10 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

@202_Cyclist: thanks for sharing that video :)

Subsistence fishing on the Anacostia is a really big problem most people have probably never even thought about.

The river's major pollutants are stormwater runoff, bacteria, trash, and toxics.

DC Water is taking care of a big chunk of the bacteria with the tunnel project, but WSSC has work to do upstream in MD where a networking of leaking pipes means bacteria levels are often higher than in the combined sewer zone of DC.

Stormwater runoff will slowly come down as new development manages its runoff better and DC, Montgomery, and Prince George's work their way through retrofitting old pavement.

Trash has seen huge improvements because of the bag fees in DC and Montgomery, and the regional foam ban coming in next year will also be a huge contributor. DDOE has a serious trash trap program that is making a big difference. The upstream jurisdictions (Montgomery and Prince George's) need to up their game on source reduction and trash traps.

Toxics have the longest way still to go of any Anacostia pollutant. Some of the known sources have been tackled one at a time (Navy Yard, Pepco Benning Road, former Washington Gas site) but DDOE is heading up a massive project to study all the sediment in the river and come up with a big picture solution.

<http://ddoe.dc.gov/anacostiasediment>

If you want to do one thing for the Anacostia, tell your elected officials that you support the sediment project and toxic remediation. Its going to take a lot of political will to get that over the finish line.

by [Brent Bolin](#) on Jul 31, 2015 3:28 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

"In 2009, the 5-cent bag fee was implemented. Since then, the revenue has been spent on tools to clean up the Anacostia"

A fair sized chunk went to 'overhead'.

by Bill Smith on Jul 31, 2015 4:17 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Like the author mentions, much of the bag fee goes to "education" programs rather than direct cleanup. It's irritating. I'm still pro-bag fee, but they really sold it as "we'll be taking the crap out of the river".

The bike trails on both sides of the river are awesome. Never as much traffic as along the Potomac! Perfect for riding with the family.

by mch on Jul 31, 2015 4:23 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Take the bike trails and you're almost guaranteed to be dazzled by our osprey and heron friends.

Does anybody know how far upstream the tidal influence extends? I'm pretty sure it goes all the up to the junction of the Northeast & Northwest branches, but I wonder if it extends very far up the branches themselves.

by sglover on Jul 31, 2015 5:36 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

There are definitely tidal marshes at Bladensburg Waterfront Park, just below the confluence. Above the confluence, both branches are pretty tightly constrained by their levees, so they run pretty fast. I doubt any tidal influence extends far above Bladensburg: the Northeast Branch has a set of rapids under the B&O bridge and the Northwest Branch has a sluice right at US 1.

by [Payton Chung](#) on Jul 31, 2015 11:57 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Actually, "a fair amount of the bag law revenue" went to staff directing stream restoration projects, trash trap installation, and programs to help property owners reduce runoff from their homes and buildings. Those programs don't just magically happen. Some of it also went to getting kids who may never see the river out into nature so they can discover that there's something beyond their neighborhoods. All of those activities are directly contributing to an Anacostia River that will be cleaner for generations.

by Julie Lawson on Aug 1, 2015 9:32 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

I'm constantly appalled at the amount of litter on streets, medians and gutters everywhere in DC, especially in inner-city neighborhoods. Much of that litter ends up in the rivers. I pick up trash (and recycle all of the bottles and cans) for about eight blocks around my house, and have been doing it for 28 years as a resident in three different neighborhoods in the District.

In addition to a bottle deposit bill, DC needs to implement mechanized street-sweeping on every street east of Rock Creek Park. Not realistic, I know, but it's infuriating how many people litter and were never taught that it is wrong.

by Tom in Michigan Park on Aug 2, 2015 12:28 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

@sglover: Payton is correct about the extent of tidal influence. The river is dredged every year or so to make Bladensburg Waterfront Park docks accessible (that's how bad sedimentation still is); so above that there is a very limited channel. Go to that park at low tide and you will see that you can pretty much walk across the river because the bottom is 90%+ exposed. This is true upstream of the Bladensburg Road bridge too.

by [Brent Bolin](#) on Aug 3, 2015 10:01 am • [link](#) • [report](#)

The article is misleading at best about the advent of kayak rental along the Anacostia. While Ballpark Boathouse may be the first 'business' along the Anacostia to offer kayak rental, Bladensburg Waterfront Park offers kayak and canoe rentals, and did so before 2013. Operated by PG Parks and rec, the prices are far lower than you'll find along the waterfront in DC proper. There is also a biking/walking path there, and bike rentals. You can fish, too, though I don't know how much luck you'd have and I wouldn't eat it anyway.

Please correct the article to let people know about this additional option for kayaking along the Anacostia!

http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g41010-d3207986-r175361464-Bladensburg_Waterfront_Park-Bladensburg_Maryland.html

by Bladensburg fan on Aug 3, 2015 1:17 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

The author doesn't seem to credit just how many resources are available at the Bladensburg Waterfront Park, which rents canoes, kayaks, paddle boats, and rowboats (at extremely modest prices!). Bladensburg has had them available quite a bit longer than Ballpark Boathouse, which is inaccurately credited as "the first kayak rental business along the Anacostia River". It's possible that the Park isn't a business, since it's part of the PG County Parks and Recreation Department, but that seems a bit unfair. Bladensburg Waterfront Park also has FREE pontoon boat tours in cooperation with the Anacostia Watershed Society, which offer a great introduction to the watershed, its birdlife, and other environmental indicators.

by Michael on Aug 3, 2015 1:21 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

Sorry for the simulpost "Bladensburg fan" - you and I were on the same timeframe with our correction!

@Bladensburg fan, Thanks for pointing out the kayaking and boating opportunities at Bladensburg Waterfront Park. Another great resource for those who want to recreate along the river, as well as the opportunity to go out with AWS on the pontoon boat tours.

by Kristan Uhlenbrock on Aug 10, 2015 12:08 pm • [link](#) • [report](#)

