

Mattawoman Watershed Society honored with award

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From left, ACFHP Steering Committee member Dr. Wilson Laney, Award recipient Jim Long, Mrs. and Mr. Laser, Award recipient Bonnie Bick, and Maine Commissioner Patrick Keliher

Accokeek, MD - Who knows what the future would hold for Mattawoman Creek in Charles County had two local environmentalists not stepped forward and labored without compensation or reward for more than 20 years, often screaming against the maelstrom, to protect the fragile ecosystem.

Bonnie Bick and Jim Long, co-founders of the Mattawoman Watershed Society, were honored Oct. 23 with the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP)'s 2016 Melissa Laser Habitat Conservation Award, presented at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's 75th Anniversary meeting in Bar Harbor, Maine.

"I was very surprised," Long said, adding that co-founder Bick "had been at this long before I became involved."

"It came as a total surprise," Bick agreed.

"It was very nice," Bick said of the award. "It seemed a little weird to get on a plane and fly to Maine to get an award for something done in Charles, but we were honored to be recognized."

The Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award is bestowed upon those who tirelessly fight to further the conservation, protection, restoration and enhancement of habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent and diadromous fishes in a unique or extraordinary manner.

The award was established in memory of Dr. Melissa Laser, who passed away unexpectedly in 2010. A biologist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources, Laser worked tirelessly to protect, improve and restore aquatic ecosystems in Maine and along the entire Atlantic Coast.

"Her family was there and we were allowed to give a little statement," Bick said. "I simply said, I'm not a scientist. I'm an environmentalist. Protecting fish habitat to me is like a spiritual thing. Her family really loved that."

She said that efforts of environmentalists in Charles County, although it was a long and arduous process, have paid off for the citizens of the county.

"We were able to save Chapman's Forest, which was 1,400 acres, Green Spring and now with the Watershed Conservation District, the Mattawoman will be protected," she noted.

Although the estuary admittedly is still at the tipping point, Long noted that it was referred to at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission awards banquet as, "A great example of what a restored Chesapeake Bay would look like.

"We focus on the watershed, but what is good for the watershed is good for everyone," he explained. "Thanks to the new comprehensive plan, that means less sprawl, less traffic and more forestland which is a main component of helping restore the watershed. As the forest goes, so goes the watershed."

Beck said if the comprehensive plan passed earlier this year had been voted on even four or 10 years ago, she does not think it would have passed.

Long enumerated that for the first time in many years, Charles County has a majority on the board of county commissioners who listen to their citizens.

"They actually listened to people," he said. "That was new."

Long admitted that when he first moved to Charles County he bought a kayak and paddled in all of the estuaries up and down the Potomac.

"When I found Mattawoman Creek, it was love at first sight," he said. "If you've ever been on Mattawoman Creek, it sells itself."

While its future may seem brighter, Long admits there is still a lot of stress on the estuary.

"What I tell people is, its prospects are now much better," he said.

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