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Deciding the Future Course of Our North Carolina Rivers

by Taylor Livingston on August 10, 2017

A post by Rob Shapard, PhD

- An oral history with Matthew Starr, a Raleigh native, Army veteran, and self-described “North Carolina environmental nerd” who monitors the health of the Upper Neuse River
- “Water quality should not just be a Democratic issue, or a Republican issue. It should be an issue that every legislator cares about. Without clean water, we’ve got nothing.” — Matthew Starr, Upper Neuse Riverkeeper

While we often forget it, the fact is that we citizens of North Carolina are tied inextricably to our rivers. We draw essential water from the state’s rivers, and we rely on them to support a diversity of life, along their courses and in the estuaries at the coast. The health of our rivers turns fundamentally on how we treat them, as reflected in the wastewater that we pipe directly into rivers, and the materials and chemicals that we allow to drain into rivers from the lands around them.

Wilmington area residents—and by extension, all of us—are being reminded of the importance of healthy rivers by [ongoing news](#) of the presence of an industrial chemical in the Cape Fear River, including the waters used in the Wilmington area’s primary drinking-water plant. This story continues to unfold, but [North Carolina State University researchers](#) and others have reported finding several chemicals, including a chemical called “GenX,” in samples from the river, and a Chemours manufacturing plant north of Wilmington is the source of the chemical, used by the company in making Teflon.

[The Chemours Co.](#) has federal approval for releasing a small amount of GenX into the Cape Fear River at the Fayetteville Works industrial site, about a hundred miles upriver from Wilmington. But regulators [plan to look more closely](#) at whether the company has stuck to this federal limit, and at questions such as whether Chemours is correct in claiming the GenX came from another of the company’s manufacturing processes at the site—a process not subject to the same federal limit on GenX. Chemours and other companies at the Fayetteville Works rely heavily on the Cape Fear River both as a source of raw water, and a conduit for their treated wastewater. Prof. Larry Cahoon of UNC Wilmington stated [in a recent interview](#) that the plants there release some 30 million gallons of wastewater per day into the river on average. About seventy miles downstream, the [Cape Fear Public Utility Authority](#) draws water from the river, and pipes the water to its main treatment plant in Wilmington, and on to customers from there.

The GenX story is the latest spark for renewed attention on river health. In reality, the story of the health of North Carolina rivers is one of perpetual, degrading impacts on their water quality, rather than periodic impacts. Put another way, there is no meaningful period of time when our rivers are not receiving pollutants. In addition, scientists, local officials, and environmentalists are [raising concerns](#) about the water



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levels in many of the state's streams. The people working as riverkeepers for non-profit organizations in North Carolina recognize the ongoing nature of these issues, and they monitor and shine a spotlight on our rivers' health. For example, Raleigh native Matthew Starr spends his days, and many evenings, as the Upper Neuse Riverkeeper for [Sound Rivers](#).

This is Starr's job, but the work is also quite personal. In an oral history interview for the [Southern Oral History Program](#), Starr describes a deep love for the Neuse River and North Carolina ecosystems more broadly, rooted partly in his personal history of growing up in Raleigh and spending many hours outdoors as a kid. North Carolina natural landscapes are part of his identity. Starr followed an interesting path away from his native state and then back, including a tour of duty maintaining Apache helicopters with the U.S. Army in Iraq. In his current job, he regularly sees the effects of sediments, nutrients, animal wastes, and other pollutants washed into the Upper Neuse and other rivers, and also the real potential for greater coal-ash pollution. The following excerpts from the 2014 interview with Starr were edited for length, clarity, and narrative flow:



Matthew Starr by the Upper Neuse river in Raleigh
Photo by Ray Black III, courtesy of Walter Magazine

One great thing about [being a riverkeeper](#) is that my work day-to-day changes greatly. When you're trying to meet a mission of fishable, swimmable, drinkable water for a river that's 248 miles long and a basin that's over 6,000 square miles, there's never a lack of work. And with the current political climate that we have in terms of the environment, I have a lot of job security as well. We're working on everything from protecting Falls Lake, which supplies over half-a-million people with drinking water, trying to keep the rules in place for that body of water, trying to keep SolarBees off it, unlike [what has happened with Jordan Lake](#), and working on sedimentation—too much dirt in the water—and trying to [limit] excess nutrients—too much nitrogen and phosphorus—which cause algae blooms and lead to fish kills.

And there's coal ash that I work on almost every day. There's a large coal-ash pond and other inactive coal-ash ponds that sit literally on the banks of the Neuse River. And then we get into large agricultural practices. We work to stop pollution from factory animal-feeding operations. It's not Auntie Mae going out throwing feed to the chickens on the ground. You've got tens of thousands of chickens in a single barn, or turkeys, so the whole poultry industry—and industry is the key word there. If I mention "farm," there's this sense

that there's a dude in Wranglers on a horseback, mending a fence. That's not what this is. These are poultry and [hog] operations that are in these huge barns. [The animals] get trucked in, they get fat, and they get trucked out.

A big byproduct of that operation is the fecal waste these animals create. That creates a big problem for tributaries of the Neuse, the Neuse itself, and the estuary downstream. It's one of the most productive estuaries in the nation. It's really important to North Carolina in terms other than just environmentally. The estuary is very important in terms of economic [benefits], which include tourism and everything else. So when you start looking at all these factors that play into our water quality—and those are just some of the big ones—when you start looking at it as a whole, there's obviously a big issue.

Coal ash didn't [first] become a problem when [the Dan River spill](#) happened. We've had groups working on coal ash for many, many years. It's not just a Dan River problem. It's a problem that affects almost everyone in the entire state. There's a lot of misunderstanding by the legislators, the fact that the legislators think this Dan River thing is what really got the nation looking at it. I think the people in Kingston [Tenn.] would highly disagree with that. The [Kingston coal-ash spill](#) was huge. It blows my mind that we couldn't have been progressive enough, on the heels of Kingston, to work on an issue that affects North Carolina. We had to wait for our own disaster to happen to fix the issue, which is quite disheartening. But as they say, follow the money. It's disheartening, but it shouldn't come as a shock to anyone.

A seep can be a stream of illegal coal-ash pollution that looks like a creek. So while “seep” may convey something minor, it is something actually quite major. And it's been going on for years and years and years. It's just so frustrating, because you can see it and you can show [officials]. They say, “Oh, that's not a problem; it's naturally occurring.” Well, how come when I sample that seep or that stream that's literally flowing into the Neuse River, why does it have arsenic over the standard? Why does it have manganese over the standard? Why does it have selenium over the standard? Why does it have all these other heavy metals over the standard? There's sites all across the state, and a hundred percent of these sites are contaminating ground- and surface-water. Democratic administrations didn't handle it, either.

I think an important thing that I can do is remind [officials], “You remember playing in this creek when you were growing up? You remember enjoying being outside? Well, guess what? We're going to have a generation that can't do that.” Just reminding them where they came from and what they enjoyed, and if they are truly worried about protecting our natural resources, well, they've really got to change [their approach]... It would be amazing to be able to take some of these legislators out and show them the pollution taking place. But it's quite difficult to actually achieve. Some of them have taken the Duke Energy tour, so they drive around the coal-ash pond. Well, you can't see a seep from standing on the dam and looking down. Not possible. It's crazy. And they'll tell you, “I went to this site. I didn't see any of this.” Well, who gave you the tour?

[Being a riverkeeper](#) and part of a nonprofit organization, I represent our members, so a lot of it comes to educating our members on the issues, and having them lobby their legislators. I think that's very important, to have legislators remember that they're here because their constituents voted for them, not because they're privileged, that it's something that their dad did, so they get to do it. It's not an inherent right. It's a privilege to represent your constituents, and it's important to remind them the actions or inactions they're taking in Raleigh are having a direct impact on citizens.

Another example [of pollution] was on a subdivision in Johnston County for over a year. When subdivisions are built, they clear the land for the subdivision, they come out and lay

the roads, and start building houses. They're supposed to have a sedimentation/erosion-control plan, approved by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, which means they will keep the sediment [on-site], as they disturb the land and build these homes and communities, that it will not run down the road into a stream. Sedimentation is the number-one pollution in North Carolina waterways. It leads to many bad things. It can cause thermo-pollution. It can suffocate fish. It can cover the aquatic plants on the bottom of the river, which causes them to decompose. All those things lead to very poor oxygen levels in the body of water, which lead to fish dying, and just a really unhealthy body of water.

At this site [in Johnston County], we got a call from someone who lived nearby who alerted me to what was going on. When I got there, there was a mud river running off this site and into Marks Creek, a pretty large tributary of the Upper Neuse River. This continued day after day, for over a year, and the state never did anything about it. I got complaint after complaint. I would go out there and see this happening time after time again, a huge mud river flowing into this tributary. I mean a nice, wide stream that this created, that was just causing Marks Creek to turn orange. That site finally came into compliance. How did they come into compliance? Because they stopped. All the houses were built. They were not required to do anything. They did not get in trouble. They came into compliance because they stopped building on that stretch of road.

I am passionate about protecting my community. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I met my wife at [East Carolina University]. We have three awesome kids—five, two, and one. And they're all about to have birthdays in October. I want them to have their own experiences, but I really hope they continue my [path] of being passionate to protect North Carolina. I think any time we look into what we're doing with our lives, a large part is for the next generation, for our kids, our kids' kids. I want them to be able to play in the creeks, and be able to eat the fish. I want there to be fish to actually catch. I want them to have a viable drinking water source.

I love North Carolina. I love my N.C. State Wolfpack. Elementary school, I can remember the teachers wheeling in the TV on the cart and we'd watch the ACC basketball tournament. We'd have kids (for) N.C. State and UNC and Duke and Wake Forest. And being able to go to the beach and the mountains, I just really love North Carolina. I was born in Rex Hospital. I grew up in Raleigh, moved around a little bit through college and through the Army, and came back to Raleigh. My entire family, except for one aunt on both sides of my family, lives in the greater Raleigh area. Being able to protect a river I grew up on, and the river that three of my kids are growing up on, it's super important.

I grew up in a subdivision called Lake Ann, and Umstead Park is not too far from there. And you've got Crabtree Creek. You've got all kinds of cool natural resources to enjoy growing up. I remember my mom taking me outside and playing in the rain, playing in the storm water and just having fun. I really think that's where I got my environmental activism, enjoying and appreciating our water resources. My mom was a teacher at Leesville High School, [and] Garner High School before then. My dad worked on the Reedy Creek Research Farm. Then they moved over to Lake Wheeler. My stepfather was a professor at N.C. State. My mom, my dad, my aunts, everyone except for one uncle, went to N.C. State. So I am North Carolina. I truly believe that.

I could literally walk down my driveway, down a hill, and be in a creek. I would be in there all the time. And fishing in Lake Ann. My grandparents had a house at Morehead, so I'd go down and get out on the boat and enjoy the coastal waterway there, and vacationing at my family's vacation at Ocean Isle. So it's going to the beach, and then vacationing with my dad and grandparents in the mountains, and enjoying those awesome little mountain streams. Going to high school, we'd have a "ditch day" or two, and we'd go out to Falls

Lake and hang out and swim and enjoy being out there. I was lucky. I had parents that wanted to take me outside, and I had a nice neighborhood, so they didn't have to worry about me playing for hours in the creek. I think that's all kind of what led to where I am today.

I started (college) at Lees-McRae, in Banner Elk. I was on a track scholarship there for a year, and then my coach got a job at East Tennessee State University. I followed the coach there for a year, and then came back to North Carolina and attended ECU, floundered around a little more, and then spent [six] years in the Army. I worked on Apache helicopters [in Iraq]. I did the avionics, electrical, and armament. Apache support ground forces, your infantry, your Special Forces, because they're flying tanks. They don't fly troops around. They don't bring supplies. They fly and then they blow stuff up. We got punched out to a whole bunch of smaller places because the Apaches were fighting support for the ground troops. It sounds like a really cool job, but it's just another job to support the troops on the ground that were doing the real work. I'm not an aviation geek. I don't care about flying things. When I joined the Army, I said, "I want to leave in the next two weeks. Whatever job you have open, that's what I want." So that's how I got into the Apache. They said, "Well, this one's leaving in four days." All right. Sign me up. In hindsight maybe I should've thought about a little more about what I wanted to do. But I was young, dumb, and ready to go.

Then [I] came back, finished my degree. I knew that I always had this passion for the environment and for particularly water resources. I really wanted to create change. I had no idea what nonprofits were all about. My family was fortunate enough to donate some money to nonprofits here and there, so I kind of understood a little bit about them, but had really no idea how they operated, so I did an internship with the Neuse River Foundation, and I loved it. For about two years, I did different jobs here and there. And then I just bugged them enough until a job opened up and I applied and thankfully got it [in 2012]. And there's no place I'd rather be. I hope that I can do this job until I'm seventy.

If you connect [with], understand, and respect the environment, we'll do much, much better in keeping it healthy. That's really damned hard. You look at the disconnect people have with the environment. We're a screen-first society now. One thing I try to do is really educate the youth, because they're not going to be passionate about protecting something that they have no idea about. Why would they give a damn about the Neuse River if they've never experienced it? Having that sense of respect, the understanding, changing how we act as a society. We're so far removed from where our food comes from, and where our water comes from. I mean, the Neuse River is just outside of downtown Raleigh, but if I ask fifty people on the street, "You know where the Neuse River is?" ten of them would probably [say], "What's the Neuse River?" And our schools talk about the water cycle and everything else, but maybe they get to spend a day on talking about how to protect the environment, or what our everyday actions do to either have a negative or positive impact on the environment. That basic education is just something we have to do a better job of. And we have to connect people with where their food and water comes from.

The mission of the Neuse River Foundation is to educate, advocate and protect. Lots of times, when I talk about protecting water quality, it seems like that's just an abstract, big-picture thing, like, "I'm not the president. I'm not the governor. What can I do?" But there's stuff in our everyday life that we can do. I think having people understand that their daily actions have a real impact on our water quality or water quantity is so important. Everything from turning off the water when you brush your teeth, to low-flow toilets. Why do we flush our waste with drinkable water? It makes no sense! You know, picking up your trash. If you walk by another piece of trash that's not too disgusting, pick that up and throw it away. It's not so difficult that it has to come from a highly important person. It's something that we can do every day. What are we going to accomplish if the next

generation is just like, "Ah, screw it"? I have completely failed if that's the case. No matter if I stop coal ash, if I stop sedimentation, if I stop [pollution from] these large farming operations, but then we don't educate the generation coming up behind us, then we've had a temporary reprieve. We're going to be right back in the situation that we're currently in.

I represent diehard Republicans. I represent diehard Democrats. So, in my professional riverkeeper role, I try to stay really open minded. Water quality should not just be a Democratic or a Republican issue. It should be an issue that every legislator cares about. Without clean water we've got nothing. North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing areas of the nation every year. It's always voted one of the best places to live. But if our water quality goes [bad], who's going to move here? Who's going to relocate their business here? Who's going to start their business here? Well, no one is. No matter how many tax incentives you give them. Clean water should be something that both sides of the aisle can agree is important to protect. We don't see that happening. And like I said, coal ash was here during Democratic control as well, which a lot of the Republican legislators like to point out, which I counter with, "Well, they didn't do anything, but now it's your turn to have the opportunity." My job is to hold people who have the power to affect change, no matter what side of the aisle they're on, to hold them accountable. I will remind people that, when they vote, to think about the environment and who's voted for what. If you're someone who believes that protecting the environment is important, look at what your current legislator has voted for, or not voted for. Unfortunately, right now, the environment is a partisan issue. Why? I don't know. I hear it's all in the name of business. But I do not understand why the environment has to be degraded in order for business to thrive. For the life of me, I hear what they're saying and I can listen to their explanation, but I will never understand. I do not understand why you must slash environmental regulations in order for you to believe that you can achieve a growing economy. I just do not understand that logic.

[But] I'm very hopeful that it's going to get better. If you look at the water quality of the early '90s, we've come a long way. We've had many—had being the key word—good, strong regulations to help us along the way, and we currently have some that I will fight very hard to keep in place. But I'm very hopeful the Neuse River will continue to become healthier. I know my dedication. I will not quit, and I will not stop. The Neuse River will continue to be fought for, and water quality in general. And so I am hopeful—I have to be—that [the Neuse River's water quality](#) will continue to improve. It's going to be a very, very tough job. And there's lots and lots of people working to protect water quality throughout the state. I could not be effective or do my job to the fullest of my ability, if I did not think it was going to improve. We'll get there through education, through fighting [pollution] or polluters and through legal action, outreach, creating that sense of connection that we were talking about earlier. I'm hopeful people will remember the environment when they vote. I'm hopeful people will speak to the legislators. I'm hopeful people will speak out against things that are unjust.

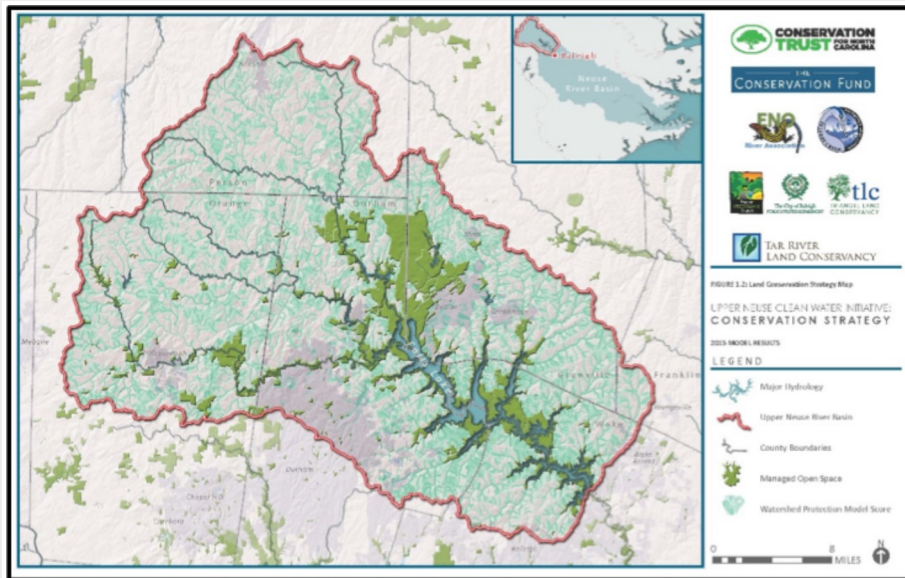


Figure 2. Upper Neuse River Basin

Source: Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative

If we could go out and paddle right now, right outside of Raleigh proper, there's a stretch of river, and there's an old dam on the river. It's the only dam between Falls Lake Dam and the coast, or Pamlico Sound. Old Milburnie Road is right there, and you can put in, and it's a ten-minute drive from here. If you put in there, you're still kind of in the heart of an urban setting, and you can float down the Neuse and not hear a car. It's a beautiful stretch of river. It's easy-going. It's a nice flow. There's lots of really cool [features] and wildlife. It's just a really awesome place to escape to. And it's right there. You maybe see one or two other people, floating down the river, and it's just you and the river and it's awesome.

The Neuse, it's so cool. It changes so much, from coming out of Falls Lake and some of the drier months when you can walk across it, to [becoming] the widest river in the United States at its widest point, when it enters the Pamlico Sound. There's so much to see, and being able to get out on that stretch right there at Milburnie Dam, man, it's awesome. Right outside of the city, you can get away and not see a car, not hear a car, not see a person, and it's instant relaxation. Putting in at Milburnie Dam and doing however long you want to do there—if we left right now, that's where I'd go.

It's important for people to remember where we've come from, what we did, and where we are—learning about the environmental justice movement that started in North Carolina, learning about [how] the Haw River used to change colors with whatever the [textile] industry was dying at that time. Remembering the things we've lost along the way—the chestnut tree, the longleaf pine, all these things. What are we going to lose now through inaction? What are we going to lose that people fifty, sixty, seventy, one hundred years from now, are going to look back and say we screwed it up for them? We have to understand what we've done and what we're doing, and how that is going to affect future generations. Maybe if people can say, "You know what, I do understand where we've come from," maybe that'll create change. Maybe it won't. But I think it's a tool worth having. Being able to connect people not only to the present but to our past, for them to have an understanding of why protecting the environment is important, as something that is a just cause.

— Robert P. Shapard (rpshapar@email.unc.edu) completed his Ph.D. in U.S. History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2017, with specialization in environmental history. He is a lecturer at UNC and a former SOHP field scholar. The full oral history interview with Matthew Starr will be available at sohp.org and the Wilson Library archives in fall 2017.

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