

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT – June 2020

HAYWOOD WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION

Eric Romaniszyn, Executive Director of [Haywood Waterways Association](#), shares about his organization’s work, his role in aquatic conservation, and why he and Haywood Waterways Association participate in the TRBN. Thanks for sitting at the table with us, HWA!

What part of our freshwater aquatic ecosystem do you really admire?

That it is not the two-dimensional plane we see at the surface; its three-dimensional space full of life that you can’t fully appreciate until you immerse yourself in it.

What is your role with Haywood Waterways Association?

I started with Haywood Waterways in 2004, first as Project Manager before becoming Executive Director in 2010. My responsibilities are to manage the organization and implement the strategies of the Pigeon River Watershed Action Plan, which include public education, community engagement, water quality monitoring, fostering partnerships, and finding the technical and financial solutions to address our nonpoint source pollution issues.

What is the mission of Haywood Waterways Association?

Our mission is to maintain and improve surface water quality in the Pigeon River Watershed of Haywood County, North Carolina. We accomplish that through two objectives directed at reducing nonpoint source pollution:

1. Educating and engaging the public in promoting the watershed as a natural, economic and recreational resource to be conserved and enhanced for this and future generations; and
2. Working with public agencies, conservation interests, businesses, community groups, and public and private land owners to implement water quality improvement strategies.

How did Haywood Waterways Association come about?

Our beginnings trace back to 1994 with a small group of citizens concerned about an illegal trash dump on the Upper Pigeon River. Our official formation didn’t come until 1998 as a response to the creation of the Pigeon River Fund, which was a condition of the FERC relicensing of the Waterville Dam hydroelectric facilities. Many of our founders were instrumental in the Fund’s establishment. They wanted to ensure



that a Haywood County entity existed that could develop projects that would effectively use PRF monies for the purposes specified in the relicensing agreement. We received our non-profit corporation status in September 1998 and 501(c)(3) status in January 1999.

How can people get involved or connected with Haywood Waterways Association? What type of assistance could they provide to you (volunteering, citizen science etc.)?

Memberships and volunteers are the two best ways for citizens to get involved. Like many organizations in TRBN, we rely on memberships for our base support. Not only do they provide financial support, they also comprise much of the labor force in our volunteer army.

As a small staff of three, we rely heavily on volunteers to succeed. They act as citizen scientists to collect water quality information. They also plant trees, pull invasive plants, stencil storm drains, pick up trash, and help with our education and fundraiser events. Anyone wishing to volunteer can contact us at info@haywoodwaterways.org or 828-476-4667. They can also check our website calendar for upcoming events and follow us on Facebook.

The last way people can help is to talk with their family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors; not only about our organization but also about what individuals can do on their property and in their everyday actions to help protect clean water.

What has been your favorite project?

That's a tough question as we've had many good ones. I'd say the first is our Kids in the Creek event, the education program developed by TVA. This was our 22nd year hosting the event that exposes every 8th grade student to aquatic ecosystems and water quality issues. Every year we give a pre-event pep talk, and every year many of these cool 8th graders are spaced out the window, head on the table, or passing notes back and forth. But every year, once they get in the water, the response is the same – "Wow – this is so cool!". Part of the program is also documenting measurable results, so we give a pre and post-event student survey to gauge what they knew and learned. The results are always positive and demonstrate improved environmentally responsible behaviors. We've also added a t-shirt design contest as every participant gets a free shirt to remember the event, and a winter Plunge fundraiser, so we get a lot of educational mileage out of the event.

What has been your proudest moment for your Haywood Waterways Association?

We've had many so this is also a tough question but two do stand out. Our goal is to improve water quality and there's no better result than a stream coming off the state list of impaired waterways, and we've had two of them in Haywood County. We can't take all the credit, though. It takes strong partnerships, a concerned community, financial resources, and willing landowners all coming together to make that happen.

Anything special happening this year?

The coronavirus pandemic certainly put a damper on our group events this year but we are adapting and have several exciting projects in the works, two in particular. We are a partner in an effort to start a Youth Conservation Corps that would focus on propagating and planting streamside vegetation. While the main focus is to improve water quality and stream habitat, it also addresses climate change, youth engagement (particularly underserved youth), and workforce development, all of which are hot topics in our current state of affairs. There's a lot of community interest and we're starting to see action, so I'm confident we'll have positive results by the end of the year.

We're also part of the broader French Broad River Partnership, a partnership of 70+ conservation groups, local businesses and state and federal agencies working to maintain and improve stream health within the FBR watershed for environmental and economic benefits. Thanks to the Community Foundation of WNC, we received funding for an Economic Study of the Value of Water. When the study is done later this year, we expect the results will document the significance of clean water to the region's economy, which will help our public officials and Chambers of Commerce attract new businesses that promote environmentally sustainability.

How did you hear about the Tennessee River Basin Network?

It was back in 2015 when a supporter forwarded a notice about the annual meeting and awards program. We didn't win that year in Chattanooga but it was our introduction to the group. It was a great experience and we've attended most of the annual meetings since, and also served on the Steering Committee for a short while.

Why do you participate in the Tennessee River Basin Network?

Haywood County is a headwaters county, meaning no water flows in, only out, which means our citizens have sole responsibility for their water quality, as well as what we send downstream. There's a saying that conservation starts at home, so you might consider us a "home" for the Tennessee River, and we will do everything we can to make sure what we send downstream is clean. Also, like all nonprofits with limited resources, we have to be efficient and not reinvent the wheel, so the TRBN is a great place to develop partnerships and new ideas, as well as sharing our own.

How could Haywood Waterways Association support others in our Network?

In our 22-year existence, we've learned a lot about what it takes to develop and implement water quality improvement projects, not only through the successes but also through the failures. We are happy to share what we've learned to groups starting out as well as the veterans, we're never too old to learn. We've already helped several groups establish their own Kids in the Creek program. Anyone seeking help is welcome to contact us anytime.