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Keeper keeps dream in mind

If an outdoors enthusiast has a favorite 'environmentalist,' a fisherman or hunter might like the work of Upper Neuse Riverkeeper Dean Naujoks protecting the waterway for future generations

Javier Serna, Staff Writer

Before he was a Riverkeeper, he was a fisherman, a hunter, an outdoorsman.

For Dean Naujoks, 37, the transition was natural. He grew up in eastern Pennsylvania, and the outdoors was a big part of his life.

"I know it sounds silly," he said, "but a lot of those experiences, just being around freshwater and freshwater ecosystems and understanding hydraulic flows -- it almost feels like I've been training my whole life to do this job."

In 2001, Naujoks became Upper Neuse Riverkeeper for the Neuse River Foundation, the nonprofit organization that sponsors Naujoks' job. It's a position with a varied job description, according to the foundation's Web site: "Each Riverkeeper is part investigator, scientist, lawyer, lobbyist and public-relations agent."

A four-letter word

In essence, Naujoks is an environmentalist.

That word rarely is a term of endearment among hunters and anglers, especially in today's polarized political climate.

These days, environmentalists have been lumped together with extreme animal rights



James Keith, left, and Upper Neuse Riverkeeper Dean Naujoks seek a place to hook a chain for pulling a rusted-out Volkswagen Beetle from Crabtree Creek.

Staff Photo by John Rottet

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AWAY FROM THE WATER

groups such as People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, who have run campaigns attacking sportsmen.

"Most sportsmen consider themselves environmentalists, but not necessarily that word," said Vernon Hunter, a friend of Naujoks and an avid duck hunter. "We need to have another word."

Where Hunter is concerned, Naujoks is fighting for the rights of anglers and hunters, preserving the habitats needed for fish and wildlife to survive.

He can relate to outdoors enthusiasts because he, himself, is one.

"There's a balance between economics and preserving our resources," said Steve Wilson, a Wendell businessman who enjoys bird hunts and fishing. "I have a difficult time with the reactionary far left and people who have a total lack of concern on the far right who are in it for one thing -- the buck."

And he wasn't talking about a male deer.

"I don't put Dean in either of those categories," Wilson said. "If we don't keep a balance, we're going to lose an outdoors activity or sport that many people have been enjoying for generations. We need people like Dean to maintain that for us."

Naujoks relies on hunters and anglers because sometimes they see things that he doesn't.

Last year, an angler on Crabtree Creek noticed grading had taken place right next to the creek, in an area protected by state law.

He called Naujoks, who alerted city and state authorities. A state agency fined the offenders and made them plant back the vegetation they wouldn't have been able to remove in the first place.

An avid deer hunter, Dean Naujoks took two bucks on the Jordan Game Land this past season. When asked for a favorite recipe, the Upper Neuse Riverkeeper laughed and said, "Are you serious?" Pressed further, he e-mailed one of his favorite ways to prepare venison.

RIVERKEEPER VENISON PARMESAN

- * Cut two venison backstraps (with the grain) into half-inch steaks. Pound cuts nice and thin with a meat hammer.
- * Rub with garlic powder and black pepper.
- * Dip meat into egg wash (two eggs whipped and mixed with a little water).
- * Cover with bread crumbs.
- * In a frying pan, heat Canola oil on medium high.
- * Fry battered steaks in oil until lightly brown on both sides.
- * Pat with paper towel to remove excess oil.
- * Place cooked meat into baking pan and cover with mozzarella cheese (and parmesan, optional) and any favorite tomato sauce.
- * Finish cooking in oven at 350 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes.
- * Remove and serve.

JAVIER SERNA

RIVER CLEANUP

An outdoorsman first

From the start, Naujoks was a child of the woods and waters.

"I grew up on top of a mountain," Naujoks said. "You could see for 20 miles. We had black bears in our trash cans, skunks, deer and raccoons. It was a great environment for a kid to grow up in."

The Delaware River was only a stone's throw down the mountain.

"Some of my earliest childhood memories were getting in a boat with my dad and floating down the river and camping out on an island and fishing into the night," Naujoks said.

Naujoks' grandfather also would take him trout fishing in the northeast Pennsylvania mountains, where they would catch brown, brook and rainbow trout.

He started out using spinning gear and later got into fly-fishing.

His uncle also would take him flounder fishing in Delaware Bay.

And he and his father always have shared a love for deer hunting, something that continues.

"I try to stock my freezer every year," said Naujoks, who killed two bucks on the Jordan Game Land this past fall. "We try to fill it and eat venison all year round."

A late start

Although he always has loved the outdoors, it took a while for Naujoks to become a Riverkeeper.

In 1991, he began working for the N.C. Wildlife Federation as a canvass director and a part-time student at N.C. State.

Volunteers are needed to help clean up the Neuse River this weekend, an event organized by the Neuse River Foundation.

UPPER NEUSE

Canoes and kayaks are the main means of collecting trash. Free shuttle service will be available for those with their own boats; free canoe rentals will be available.

WHEN: 8 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday (rain or shine)

WHERE: Canoe launch below Falls Lake dam (free rentals available only here), Buffaloe Road canoe launch, Poole Road canoe launch, Mulburnie Dam canoe launch, Clayton Elementary School, Smithfield Commons

INFORMATION: Dean Naujoks, Upper Neuse Riverkeeper, (919) 856-1180

LOWER NEUSE

Paddlers are needed on the water, and walkers are needed to work the banks. Kinston Parks and Rec and Little River Tours of Goldsboro will provide 15 canoes, and the Neuse River Foundation will provide several kayaks.

WHEN: 8 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday (rain or shine)

WHERE: U.S. 70 boat ramp to N.C. 55 (Oak Bridge) overpass, Kinston

INFORMATION: Larry Baldwin, Lower Neuse Riverkeeper, (252) 637-7972

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He did that until 1999, when, at age 30, he decided to take classes full-time to finish a degree in environmental policy and sustainable development, a major he created.

"I figured if I didn't get back to school and finish up this degree, it wouldn't happen," Naujoks said.

In 2000, Naujoks finished his degree, but he had trouble finding the right job. He worked as a landscaper until 2001, when he was hired as the Upper Neuse Riverkeeper.

On water, behind walls

As a Riverkeeper, Naujoks is equipped with a boat, a canoe and hip waders.

Much more of his time, though, is spent behind government walls, speaking before the Raleigh City Council; working on state, county and city committees; or sitting behind a desk, writing grants, all in the name of water protection.

On a recent day, Naujoks and James Keith, an N.C. State graduate student, floated a section of Crabtree Creek, above its confluence with the Neuse River.

For a few years now, the Neuse River Foundation has organized a river clean-up day, not just removing the little things such as soda bottles and tires but also large items such as sunken cars.

"This is the next focus," Naujoks said, referring to the creek. "We've gotten the river pretty good."

Now that the event has grown to about 300 volunteers, Naujoks plans on shifting some manpower to Crabtree Creek, which has its share of pollution.

It also has two vehicles, a rusty, crushed, red Volkswagen Beetle and another car that to the untrained auto eye appears to be a late 1980s American make.

A towing company has vowed to help Naujoks remove at least one of the cars during this year's event, which is scheduled for Saturday.

"The towing company said they wanted a challenge," Naujoks said. "They got one."

April will bring a lot more water time for Naujoks. He will spend three weeks floating the Neuse River in its entirety, from Falls Lake to the Pamlico Sound, meeting local officials along the way to bring awareness to the river.

So a kid can eat fish

On Neuse River Foundation stationary is the phrase, "We speak for the river."

When asked why he had taken on the role as Riverkeeper, Naujoks brings up John Cronin, who was appointed the nation's first Riverkeeper in 1983, watching over New York's Hudson River.

The Neuse River Foundation is a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, which bears a sturgeon on its logo. More than 100 Waterkeeper programs exist nationally and internationally, and not all are Riverkeepers. Some go by Lakekeeper, Baykeeper, Coastkeeper and others.

The Neuse River has two Riverkeepers -- Naujoks and Larry Baldwin, who shepherds the lower Neuse River from Goldsboro to the Neuse estuary on the Pamlico Sound.

Naujoks brought up the PCB contamination of Lake Crabtree, a body of water that was created by the Wake County commissioners and later stocked with fish. Because of the contamination, it's now catch-and-release only.

"That's been stolen from them," Naujoks said. "Cronin put it best.

"He said, 'I realized that Riverkeeper was really about the right of any child to cast a line in the river and catch a fish for the family dinner. Of all the complex issues we would endeavor to solve -- power plants killing fish, landfills destroying wetlands, sewage treatment plants polluting drinking water -- none would prove a greater challenge than that small, simple dream.' "

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