



## Upper Bucks' 'slice of heaven'

By: **THERESA HEGEL** (Sun, Jun/01/2008)

Cooks Creek is much more than just a scenic waterway that curls through rural Upper Bucks.

To the many people involved in preserving the creek, which runs the length of Durham and well into Springfield, it's a critical natural resource, and its 30-square-mile watershed provides a tangible link to the county's past.

Heritage Conservancy, a Bucks-based nonprofit dedicated to preserving natural and historic resources, has helped secure development rights to about 1,000 acres in the watershed, said Jeff Marshall, the organization's vice president.

He called the watershed "a little slice of heaven."

"If you don't stop and take a deep breath and say, 'This is beauty,' then you don't have a soul," he said.

What people across the nation imagine when they think of Bucks County is what they still find in the watershed region: rolling hills, thick woods, clear creek waters, working farms and old stone houses, he said.

Though there's beauty throughout the county, it's rare these days for so many acres to be untouched by development, he said. Natural areas are being subdivided into smaller and smaller pockets.

Heritage Conservancy has applied for about \$500,000 in federal funding to offset its quest to fill in gaps between patches of preserved land with more conservation easements, Marshall said.

"Contiguous open space has greater conservation value" than parcels that are unconnected, he said.

However, proposed budget cuts to the Highlands Conservation Act could impede that funding. If that happens, the conservancy "will have to be a little more entrepreneurial" and look to other sources for funding, Marshall said.

The Highlands are a heavily forested and mountainous region that stretches across Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey; they're nationally significant because of the species they support, the drinking water they provide to surrounding urban areas and the recreational opportunities they afford, according to the U.S. Forest Service's Web site.

The Cooks Creek Watershed is considered one of the most critical regions to preserve in the Highlands, Marshall said.

The high quality of the creek water has also helped to advance preservation efforts.

Cooks Creek is recognized by the state Department of Environmental Protection as having water of exceptional value — the highest classification Pennsylvania assigns.

Less than 4 percent of the approximately 86,000 miles of streams in the commonwealth have received such a distinction, said Tony Shaw, a water pollution biologist with the DEP.

Such a designation forces close scrutiny of permit applications, said Shaw of the DEP.

“The result of a project must not change stream water quality,” he said.

Cooks Creek, which received exceptional value status in 1991, was one of the first streams in the state to earn that distinction, said W. Scott Douglas, president of the Cooks Creek Watershed Association.

You must petition for the status, and surrounding townships must show through their ordinances that they are committed to protecting the integrity and quality of the stream, he said.

Both Durham and Springfield have done so, making creek preservation an integral part of their zoning plans, Douglas added.

Bartley Millett, chairman of the Durham supervisors, said Cooks Creek is vital to the township, calling it “one of our best-kept little secrets.”

“We work very diligently to protect it,” he said.

The creek boasts Bucks County's only wild brown trout and native brook trout fishery, according to the CCWA's Web site. The watershed provides shelter to rare reptiles, amphibians and other endangered species.

The creek's cold water means it holds more oxygen and thus can support more wildlife, said Douglas.

His volunteer group maintains a number of gauges in the creek that measure water levels and temperature. The group also sponsors a watershed-wide cleanup every year and coordinates a number of educational activities.

That it's a “natural breeding stream for trout” is a good indicator of Cooks Creek's water quality because they are a species notoriously intolerant to water changes, said Marshall.

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