



Man Among Bogs

At home in the primordial ooze, Keith Underwood is cleaning the local waters one muddy step at a time.

KEITH UNDERWOOD LEADS THE way through a hardwood forest along the south shore of the Severn River. The canopy of towering oaks and maples give way to an opening where the plants are human-sized and the ground gets soggy. The mud begins to suck at our feet and water soaks through our sneakers. The fifty-year-old Underwood, dressed in khaki shorts and a Ralph Lauren shirt, stops and begins to bounce up and down on the spongy earth beneath, laughing and grinning like a kid as the bushes and trees around him shake. Rapid-fire, he goes on to point out all the plant species on a tiny hummock in the

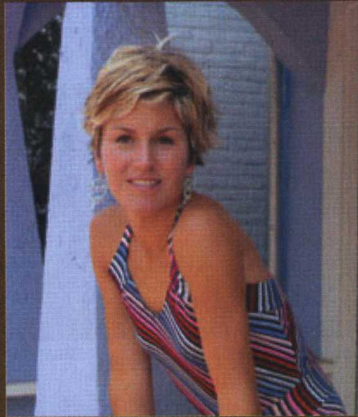
midst of the muck—many of them rare. This pitcher plant bog is basically a mat of decaying plants, thick enough to walk on, floating over a pool of groundwater.

“You see?” he says, demonstrating the first lesson in basic bog. “We’ve got sun dews and hypericum and pitcher plants and sphagnum moss and cranberry and some grasses and leather leaf. Pretty incredible, huh?”

Underwood, a landscape designer by trade, has earned the moniker “Bog Man” of Anne Arundel County. He’s spent the last decade plus doing his part to bring back the cleansing bogs of the region, and the native rare



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species that go along with them.

Bogs are inland versions of tidal marshes and perform many of the same ecological functions. They slow and help filter stormwater run-off before it reaches the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. But Underwood says they do a better job than tidal marshes:

“Tidal marshes are frequently called the kidneys of the Bay, and if that’s true, then bogs are the ‘super kidneys’ of the Bay that deliver drinking-quality water to the Bay.”

Stephen Barry, who runs outdoor education programs at nearby Arlington Echo, says Underwood is so wedded to these environs he probably



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Long-gone species are now returning to the bog, such as the rare bog orchid.

has webbing between his toes. "His enthusiasm is phenomenal," Barry says. "When I came here, I wanted to be more relevant in what we were doing. I kind of opened the door to him and he pulled me in. And he pulled the county government in, too." Now, Underwood and Barry are partners with their environmental lessons.

County officials were skeptical when, ten years ago, Underwood tried to convince them that expanding a nearby park would create a run-off problem that would ruin this bog. "Our first meetings were a little rocky," says Dennis McMonigle, project manager with the Department of Public Works. "I wasn't sure he knew what he was talking about." But Underwood, a garrulous man with a seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of plants, showed them the importance of the bog. After the expansion of the park was halted, he went on to design a stormwater system to protect it.

Since then, he's been hired to work on restoration projects throughout the county, some publicly funded, others paid for by environmental groups, and he's expanding to the Eastern Shore. He's deep in negotiations on a project to restore 8,000 acres of peat land in Delaware for the Corps of Engineers. In fact, he's gotten so busy with wet-

land restoration, he barely has time for landscaping jobs anymore.

Underwood, who was born in Georgia but grew up in Arnold, has a background in horticulture and landscape architecture—he often uses ponds in his designs. He became interested in bogs about a dozen years ago after reading about them and going on a trip through the Southeast with a friend from the International Carnivorous Plant Society. "After that trip, I was hooked. And then I came back and found out there were pitcher plant bogs here."

He successfully lobbied to save the bog off the South River that shall remain nameless (in order to protect the endangered plant species from poachers), then got a huge break in 1997. The Severn River Association asked him to repair Howard's Branch, a muddy stream valley between two waterfront communities that once had been the bottom of a reservoir for the community of Sherwood Forest. The dam that created the reservoir had blown out seventeen years earlier, and the sediment had washed into nearby Brewer Creek, damaging beds of underwater vegetation. The site was a "weedy mess," Underwood says.

He and his team hauled in tons of white sand, which serve as the basis for the bog. They re-channeled the rushing water to create pools, where it would slow down, and they planted a thousand Atlantic white cedars, endangered in this area. Five years later, nature is beginning to do its thing, he says, pointing to sphagnum moss creeping from the edges of one of the pools. "They said it would take years for that," he notes, thrilled. It's an indication that the system is taking hold more rapidly than expected. And there are rare sun dews and pitcher plants and even a rare bog orchid. That bodes well for the Delaware project, which would involve many of the same steps.

Underwood says he isn't pretending that simply restoring bogs is the answer to problems in the Chesapeake Bay. Just restoring all the damage on the Severn River would be a daunting task. "So, I'm happy with an Atlantic white cedar forest and pitcher plants and sun dews and knowing that there's at least the potential of a refuge for them here." □ —JOEL McCORD



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