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## CLOSE TO HOME

# Our Creek Died Before Our Eyes

*Stream Offers a Lesson  
In Suburban Ecology*

A creek runs along the outskirts of my neighborhood in Chevy Chase, Md. It bubbles up from a spring in the middle of the Chevy Chase Country Club golf course, flows under Wisconsin Avenue and comes out beneath a small concrete bridge. I pass over it often as I walk to the Metro or nearby shops in the District. Some days I see mallard ducks paddling in circles.

The stream then travels through a stand of trees, over rocks and around boulders, past back yards and the backsides of buildings, and by a pool. The creek is called Little Falls Branch because it drains into Little Falls Creek and eventually into the Potomac River.

The presence of ducks and the stream's moments of natural beauty, however few, are deceiving.

I first walked along Little Falls Branch five years ago with Sarah Morse, a neighborhood mom who had been trained to monitor creeks by the county and by the Isaak Walton League.

In turn, Morse was educating fourth-graders from our school about this habitat. The day I was with her and my daughter's fourth-grade class, we dragged out water samples to see what lived there. We stooped over buckets, magnifying glasses, microscopes and slides. We found macroinvertebrates and cray-



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY LAURA HAMBLETON

Sarah Morse of Chevy Chase and her dog, C.J., near Little Falls Branch in Montgomery County. Morse has monitored the brook for years.

fish. Morse happily noted that so many lived in the stream.

After the outing, I felt almost warm and cozy, as though we were living in some kind of balance with nature or that nature was adapting in a perverse way to the endless development around us.

I was wrong. With each passing year, Morse has found fewer and fewer creatures in the water. Last year, she found none.

This year, she changed the focus of her talk from what lives in the creek to what used to live in the creek and what killed it.

"Forget global warming," she said to my youngest child, now in fourth grade, and his classmates a few weeks ago. "We've killed a habitat in our own back yard."

I've repeated her words to friends. They've

put a chill on many a conversation.

Little Falls Branch is fed by the spring, by rain and, mostly, by storm runoff. Therein lies the issue. As more and more of the surrounding area has been paved and storm water has been diverted through sewers and tunnels and funneled into the stream, the sheer volume of water has overwhelmed any small creatures, killing them, Morse said.

Macroinvertebrates like to live under rocks just below the waterline to catch any nutrition as it floats by. As ever-increasing amounts of water flow into the stream, more silt and mud are left behind, smothering any chance of life. Large volumes of water also erode the banks of the creek and destabilize root systems.

As the fourth-graders walked the stream, jumping over it at times and staying close to

its banks, Morse pointed out exposed tree roots and the foundation of an apartment building slowly sliding into the stream.

We stopped at a small pool of water that had turned an iridescent blue. The source of the pollution wasn't immediately clear, but it was surely a byproduct of our lives.

Although the children and I walked away that day with a better idea of how this water system is interconnected, that understanding paled next to my feeling of loss: In the five years since my daughter and I first visited our neighborhood creek, it had died, right under our gaze. And we did nothing about it.

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