

Who's Watching the Watchers?

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Last week I had the edgy and unwelcome task of informing an elderly resident in Gambrills that our testing of her well water revealed huge amounts of Thallium, Barium and Aluminum. This was most likely caused by a nearby former coal waste disposal site. This gentle soul whom I suspect has lived in the same home and consumed the water there for her entire life, has lately been living with cases of bottled water sitting on her porch provided courtesy of some energy company.

But she still does not have justice.

Bottled water does not come close to compensating for something that really cannot be replaced. Furthermore, she has not been informed by the authorities or anybody else of how to protect herself and the grandkids sitting her living room from the tap water that they use to boil rice, brush their teeth and bathe in. So I called the [Anne Arundel Health Department](#) to see if they could provide technical and information assistance to this elderly resident and others nearby with similar concerns. Instead of getting a prompt return call, three days later my lawyer got a letter from the County demanding that I cease and desist any further direct contact with the health agency because my [Riverkeeper](#) organization is a party to legal action to compel a clean up of the coal ash mess. The problem here is not whether I can talk to health officials in a county I don't even live in, the question is whether the county health authorities in the intervening three days did a single thing to alleviate the risk or the potential health threat posed by a problem that is apparently quite well known to them? Plainly there is no obligation for the county to speak to private advocates like me, but how about informing the citizens who pay their salaries?

This is not the first time I have encountered this scenario—this weird disconnect between those whose job it is to protect the public health and safety and the needs of everyday people who sleep in their beds at night assuming that somebody is looking out for them. Just a few months ago at the end of the summer of 2010 we had several reported occurrences of a flesh eating bacteria in the Patuxent that was affecting swimmers and watermen. It is known as [vibrato vulnificus](#) and was life threatening. It appears to be an inert presence in shellfish ordinarily but becomes toxic when acted upon by high heat in the water and nutrients. We had several cases in the Southern areas of the Patuxent in a short span of time and again, I called the [Calvert County Health Department](#) and was informed that they were disinterested in collecting the information we offered to share with them and we were further told that this was perfectly normal with no need to inform the public or disseminate health information. Ironically, that agency only got interested in

responding when the matter finally appeared in the local newspapers. Then, amazingly, the agency did not zealously attack the public notification problem. Instead they attacked the Riverkeeper organization on listserves and in the press for letting the proverbial cat out of the bag!

But the problem is deeper. A couple of years ago several of my [Waterkeeper](#) colleagues were in a meeting with state regulators who made the point that they resented the persistent efforts by Waterkeepers in the region to draw attention to the regulatory deficiencies at their agency. They explained that citizens rely on the authorities to keep them safe and information to the contrary makes people feel unsafe, creates agitation and makes the work of the regulators harder to do. It's an interesting point. Take the case of our former kayak guide who in a burst of candor told the truth to a paddler near the base of the [Conowingo Dam](#) when she asked what happens if she were to fall out of her boat to be sucked into the undertow? He said without hesitating, "Sometimes when nature wants you she will take you." We dubbed this guide Dr. Death from that day forward. The inquisitive paddler never got on the water after hearing his stoic prescription. Instead, she hailed a ride and headed to the nearest bar in [Port Deposit](#) where she raised a glass to a benevolent mother nature. The overall theme here is that with good information people will often do the best thing, even if it is not good news. The state of our regional waterways is as bad as they have ever been and yet we mostly hear upbeat and hopeful news from those in authority.

Obviously there are political and social reasons why we would not want to create panic, why we want to act prudently and why we have acculturated to a pattern of sharing only the good news with the public, so they will not be upset or depressed by the growing litany of bad news about the environment. We prefer not to tell people that the fish they eat most likely contains harmful industrial chemicals, that the water flowing from their tap might contain poisons or endocrine disruptors, and that any rate there is a growing scarcity of drinking water, that the occurrences of dead zones in the Bay and our rivers has increased, that the federal government is dithering over whether or not coal ash really is hazardous and countless other growing concerns and issues that all point to a bleak future of human suffering from environmental causes unless we reverse the current trend. Sadly, in a society built on the backbone of property rights and ownership, most people are more concerned about what is their own well water instead of ensuring whether or not all well water is safe and potable. The culture of ownership has completely contorted the moral principles of good stewardship, but the culture of butt-covering by government is alive and well. Most people, conditioned to respect and obey authority, assume that the authorities err on the side of caution and public safety. The sad truth is too often they err on the side of politics and protecting their jobs. Environmentalists (who usually do not represent authority) likewise tend to work on problems they can find funding for. That is typically couched in hopeful or good news, no finger pointing and diffuse messaging that somehow implies that nobody in general is accountable and everybody in particular is responsible. It weakens democracy, dilutes clear courses of action and normalizes problems. This is a business as usual scenario—until somebody gets sick, things become too awful to ignore or things break down altogether. When that happens there is usually plenty of blame to go around.

I think the first call of grassroots environmentalists should be to relieve human hardship and suffering from environmental causes. That's our job. We serve both people and the environment. Government should be our partners in this noble cause and often that is the case. But too often, the system breaks down. The majority of the work being done in the region on behalf of the environment appears to be devoted to protecting the property interests of people with very different stakeholder interests than the lady in Gambrills who has poison in her tap water put there by a polluter who had State permit. Public and local governmental indifference serves to perpetuate the initial injustice. I assure you there would be an immediate response if the well water was contaminated in an upscale subdivision.

I think that morally, if we don't work day and night to protect those who cannot protect their environment for themselves, a clean Chesapeake Bay will elude us. We will just keep deferring the problems.

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