



DOUG KAPUSTIN : SUN STAFF

Canal Clipper III sits in disrepair between locks of the C&O Canal. A parks group says underfunding led to deteriorating conditions along Maryland's longest national park.

Neglect imperils 'a treasure'

C&O Canal: National park suffers from unrepaired flood damage and other ills, including a huge budget deficit.

By CANDUS THOMSON
SUN STAFF

When Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas challenged desk-bound journalists to walk the length of the C&O Canal 50 years ago, he sparked a crusade to save the dirt towpath from becoming an asphalt

highway.

Last weekend, 75 hikers set off to replicate the two-week hike from Cumberland to Georgetown, a part anniversary bash, part rallying cry.

Now, as then, the towpath is in danger of losing its way.

A report prepared by the National Parks Conservation Association reinforces that assessment, calling the towpath and its historic buildings "an American treasure in peril."

"It's a wonderful resource," says Christine Cerniglia, president of the C&O Canal Association, the volunteer group that is sponsoring the hike, which will [See Canal, 4A]

Neglect imperils C&O Canal

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end May 1. "But in places, it's a disaster waiting to happen."

The report, a copy of which was obtained by *The Sun*, says only 13 percent of the park's 1,365 historical structures are in good condition, staffing is "woefully" inadequate, deer are running amok and the annual operating deficit is \$13.7 million, or nearly twice the park's annual budget.

A segment of the towpath called "Big Slackwater" was washed away by floods and has not been rebuilt, forcing hikers of all ages to dodge traffic on local back roads in a five-mile makeshift detour.

Further, the report notes, two extensive floods in 1996 caused more than \$65.2 million in damage, but the park received just \$23.3 million for repairs. Tropical Storm Isabel added \$17 million in damage last fall.

"This is a park that's in serious jeopardy," says Quinn McKew, who wrote the report. "It has dire needs that aren't being addressed."

The C&O Canal National Historical Park has the distinction of being the skinniest national park, 200 feet wide, on average. At 30.6 square miles, it is slightly more than a third the size of Baltimore, but it stretches over 184.5 miles.

The park attracts an average of 3.3 million visitors annually, most of them concentrated from Georgetown to Great Falls in Montgomery County, who use it for hiking and biking, as well as for getting to rock climbing, fishing and paddling activities.

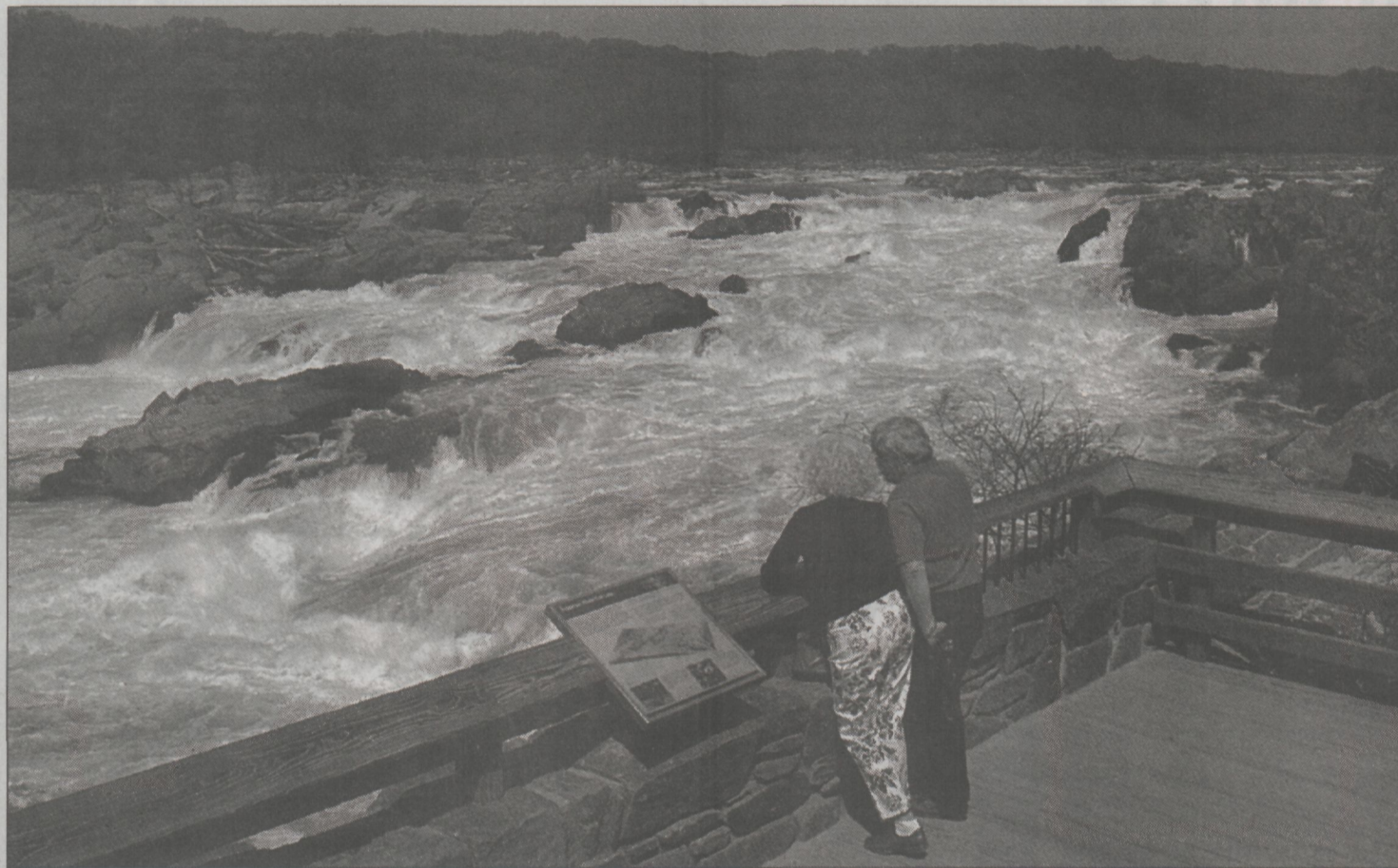
Michael Finley, who was superintendent of Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks before retiring to become president of the Turner Foundation in Atlanta, says that from his experience he knows that the C&O Canal staff is doing the best it can.

"They're very good at delivering services and keeping up the front of the house," he says. "But there's no money for the back of the house."

Started in 1828

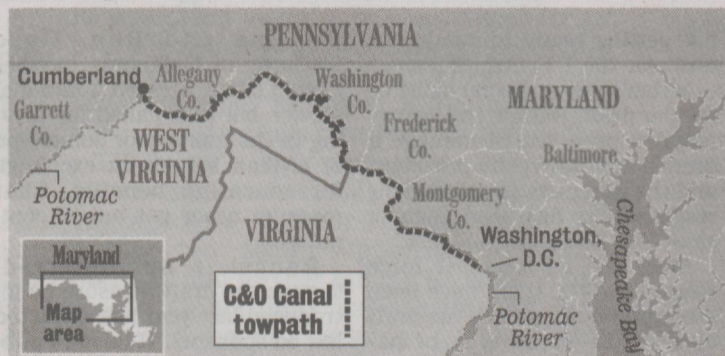
Almost from its groundbreaking in 1828, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was destined to be something else. It was promoted as a way to move raw materials from the Ohio River Valley east and finished products west. But the canal never made it past Cumberland. By the time it was declared finished in 1850, the B&O Railroad had already been moving goods and people for eight years.

In 1954, Douglas, an avid outdoorsman, issued his dissent to the opinions of the Washington press that the canal and towpath should be bulldozed for a two-lane parkway along the Potomac River.



Visitors watch the white water rushing by on the Potomac River at Great Falls. The vista is just south of the C&O Canal visitor center at the Olmstead Island overlook. Underfunding has caused deterioration along the national park, a group says.

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He wrote in a letter to the editor: "It is a refuge, a place of retreat, a long stretch of quiet and peace at the Capitol's back door—a wilderness area where man can be alone with his thoughts, a sanctuary where he can commune with God and nature, a place not yet marred by the roar of wheels and the sound of horns."

And he invited the writers to hike with him: "One who walked the canal its full length could plead its cause with the eloquence of a John Muir."

On March 20, Douglas, seven journalists and 50 other hikers set off from Cumberland. One by one the scribes dropped out. "I'm ready to die any time now," wrote George Kennedy of *The Washington Star*.

On the eighth day, the "Immortal Nine" arrived in Georgetown, waving their hats to the cheers of 5,000 supporters.

"It was quite exciting. They walked right by my house," says

Cerniglia, who was a teen-ager living in Cabin John, just upstream from Washington. "The attitude before was, 'We'll get rid of that old ditch.' Justice Douglas changed people's minds."

The hike halted talk of a parkway. In 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower named the towpath a national monument. A decade later it became a national park.

Usage increases

No one would argue that the C&O Canal looks much better than it did in Douglas's time. But its upkeep has not kept pace with its popularity.

"Increased usage puts greater stress on the park, [so] it's going to deteriorate more quickly," says Maryland Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes. "But greater use is a strong argument for increasing funding."

That's not happening. Across the country, chronic underfunding of the National Park Service



ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

In 1961, Justice William O. Douglas (left) met beside the C&O Canal with Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall (center) and Sen. Paul Douglas of Illinois.

by Congress has created a \$600 million shortfall in annual operating costs and a maintenance backlog of \$5 billion.

After reviewing the canal's business plan, the conservation association found that instead

of having a staff with the equivalent of 298 full-time employees, it had 128.

"Visitor center hours are being scaled back, and fewer interpretive staff are available ... some visitor centers have only

one ranger. If the ranger is not available to work, the visitor center does not open," it says.

Additionally, the park lacks both an archivist and a curator for its collection of 140,000 items. Without them, the report says, the bulk of the collection remains in storage and park displays are rarely changed.

The park lacks the staff and a management plan to handle the burgeoning deer population. Recent population surveys indicate the park has 98 deer per square mile, which exceeds the 20 to 40 deer per square mile preferred by wildlife managers.

The herds are defoliating swaths of saplings and native plants, giving invasive plants room to move in.

Kevin Brandt, superintendent of the C&O Canal park, says like his colleagues, he would love to have a budget increase.

"If you've got an old house, there's always something that needs fixed. Well, we're living in a house built in the 1800s," he says. "We still have an \$8 million budget, and there's a lot of wonderful things you can do for \$8 million."

This isn't the first time that the park's problems have been in the national spotlight.

In 1998, the Monocacy Aqueduct in Frederick County, part of the trail, was named one of the country's 11 most endangered places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The structure, with its seven graceful stone arches, carried canal traffic over the Monocacy River but was in danger of collapsing after years of being pummeled by floods.

Two years ago, work began on a \$6.4 million renovation, financed by the federal government and private donations.

"We have tremendous partnerships with 75 groups, from Cumberland to Georgetown," says Brandt. "There are parks that would die to have the kind of volunteer commitment we have."

Indeed, the association report notes that 1,847 volunteers put in nearly 45,000 hours last year, performing trail maintenance, restoring structures such as Lockhouse No. 8 in Montgomery County and overseeing safety as members of the Bike Patrol.

Sarbanes says that in Maryland, which has 15 properties administered by the National Park Service, the C&O Canal is hardly alone in its needs.

"The factual evidence for a massive infusion of cash is overwhelming," Sarbanes says.

The same is true for many other needy park service projects, says Finley of the Turner Foundation.

"The C&O Canal is competing for money against 388 other units of the park service," he says. "Congress and the administration are running a false economy with the parks, and we end up having to buy engines instead of paying for oil changes."

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