



Rappahannock citizens talk about potential partnerships with scientists from the Smithsonian Institution and faculty members from the William & Mary Institute for Integrative Conservation. *Photos by Woodie Walker*

Environmental Committee hosts forum with Smithsonian, William & Mary

Memories of dipping and preserving “salt fish” were the featured menu item at the Rappahannock River Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Conference Saturday, Oct. 23, at the Tribal Center in Indian Neck. About a dozen tribal citizens were able to attend the event, focused on ways the community can help scientists better understand the near-total loss of river herring in the Rappahannock River watershed and the Chesapeake Bay.

River herring (technically known as Blueback herring and Alewife), grow to about 10 inches and were a plentiful food source for Indigenous communities for thousands of years, but in recent decades their numbers have plummeted. Scientists from the Smithsonian Institution’s Working Lands and Seascape (WLS) Group are researching the problem, which Dr. Henry Legett says mostly stems from late-20th century construction of dams across many Bay tributaries. These smaller streams were historically the spawning grounds of river herring, and now the dams block their upstream migration. Legett and others want to know what Indigenous communities can add to their knowledge of these fish, especially where there were found in more recent years.

Rappahannock Assistant Chief Mark Fortune kicked off the event with stories of dipping and salting herring with his father and others. Some days they could catch as many as 400 fish, said Fortune. Some of the fish were made available to other community members. Some were sold. Their loss is a blow to Rappahannock culture, and Fortune hopes the tribe can help with their recovery. “We want our young people to be able to experience this part of their heritage, just like we did,” he said. Faculty from William & Mary were on-hand to discuss how they can help record and preserve stories like Fortunes as oral histories.

Smithsonian and W&M representatives presented a gift of tobacco to Fortune at the beginning of the conference. Jerry Fortune, chair of the tribe’s environmental committee, closed the event with a prayer to the Great Creator.



An intern with the Smithsonian WLS Group, left, discusses watershed conservation ideas with Chad Fortune and Skylar Tilley.