

Making History on the Patuxent

Fred Tutman, the only African American Riverkeeper on the job
By Sandra Olivetti Martin



Waterkeeping has become a regular part of environmental conservation in Chesapeake Country, where 18 riverkeepers protect their local waters from the Atlantic at Assateague to the Shenandoah in the Appalachians, from the James at the mouth of the Bay to the Middle Susquehanna at its source.

In that commitment, we're in good company. From New York's Hudson River, where riverkeeping began, the movement has spread across the nation, giving us some 250 waterkeepers.

Internationally, too, there are waterkeepers, numbering some 350.

"There's a big, growing international effort," says Betsy Nicholas, executive director of Waterkeepers Chesapeake. "There are not so many in Europe, but Latin America and China have quite a few, and in Africa, the number is growing."

Among all those waterkeepers, the keeper of Maryland's own Patuxent River is unique. Fred Tutman, who grew up on the river he guards, is making history as the world's only African American waterkeeper.

Does that distinction make a difference?

Read on for his answers.

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**Bay Weekly** A riverkeeper does what?

**Fred Tutman** We spur citizen-based advocacy. We're watchdogs on our waterways. In Chesapeake Country, we're educators, researchers, scientists, lawyers. In our purest form, waterkeepers challenge polluters and aid people and communities in building better, more environmentally healthy communities and getting better enforcement of environmental laws.

**Bay Weekly** What background and skills do you bring to riverkeeping?

**Fred Tutman** I was a law student two and a half years immediately prior to riverkeeping, and before that I spent 25 years as a journalist in video, films, satellite communications and radio. I worked around the world with CBS, NBC CNN and BBC among others. I had an office in Rome and covered the Falklands War in the mid 1980s. I was in Cuba twice and lots of other places. I also ran a project for the Ford Foundation in West Africa.



I grew up living and working alongside the Patuxent River. My family's farm on Queen Anne Road was in walking distance. The river was our playground as kids, where we got food and fish, and we drew water to irrigate our crops. The more I started doing conservation in my own home neighborhood, the more I realized it wasn't just a neighborhood problem. It was a problem upstream, a problem statewide and a problem that affected the whole watershed.

**Bay Weekly** As an African American, what perspective do you bring to the job?

**Fred Tutman** I'm especially interested in bringing in lots more people who look like me because I want to be as relevant in black communities as I am in other communities. I want to be a part of a movement serving any and all — regardless of race, creed, class, etc.

In the environmental movement, expectations are generally not high for black people. It's assumed we don't care about the environment. But many of us do; in fact we have a heartfelt and soulful connection to land, water and open space. We're a very specific interest group with separate problems in our communities, so sometimes we can feel that white people are talking to each other not so much to us.

I'm trying to be a riverkeeper open to all and serving all. To me black folks are not an afterthought. But I don't want to offend anybody or exclude anyone. My mission is to do what I

can to get out that message of inclusion that all are welcome and any of us can make a difference.

**Bay Weekly** Does your being on the job reinforce African Americans' long history working the land and the water?

**Fred Tutman** More than reinforces, it validates it as normal. The Fed Ex guy who'd been making deliveries to our office for a year finally asked what we did. *I didn't know white people let us do that*, he said. I was stunned by that crack. I think what he meant was that the usual expectations are different for white and black people.

Sometimes people are skeptical of black environmentalism because it hasn't occurred to them that we could be leaders, innovators and change agents and not just followers or maybe second fiddle in somebody else's environmental orchestra. They wonder, *Why are you someplace we wouldn't expect you to be?* So we need to broaden the expectations.

We're one of the most diverse watersheds in regions, so we work on making our membership, our board of directors and our program work as inclusively as possible and keeping our focus on what's relevant in communities that are black, brown, white, native, poor, rich — you name it.

**Bay Weekly** How do you do that?

**Fred Tutman** By listening to what folks need and starting our help exactly where they are. By taking our cues from the grassroots.

For example, Eagle Harbor near the Chalk Point Power Plant in



southernmost Prince George's County is Maryland's smallest municipality. It's a long-standing black town, and some residents are waterfront homeowners. With only 70 people, mostly retirees, it doesn't have a big population or taxable base or a lot of municipal funding. It has a different reality and different needs that start with economic realities.

We asked them what they wanted, and we took it to heart. They needed help raising money to improve the town's environmental infrastructure. They wanted to fix an old artesian well that went back to when the town was founded by people in mixed marriages and who were multi-racial in an era of segregated beaches.

When usual sources of environmental funding didn't want to get involved with an old well, they found a source outside the environmental network. Then we helped them get a state grant to fund a visioning process. We did not tell them what to do; we helped them work toward their

own vision. We wrapped up that process in December and are now fundraising for implementation.

**Bay Weekly** Former state Sen. Bernie Fowler, another well-known advocate for the Patuxent River, has the Sneaker Index to keep him on course. How about you?

**Fred Tutman** I have a deep spiritually connected sense of the river. Chesapeake bard Tom Wisner taught me that if you want to solve a problem, you should sit next to the river and talk to her (He always used the female pronoun.) I feel that nature's rhythms are wired into us. The river speaks to me in subtle tones and inspires me in ways that help me be more myself, and she teaches us to be better advocates for the river-related communities we serve.

**Bay Weekly** Tell us about the Patuxent ...

**Fred Tutman** It's our largest watershed entirely in Maryland and the first and only river in Maryland to be significantly cleaned up in the 1980s — only to see all the gains lost again. Back in the 1980s, citizens from Maryland's southernmost counties stood up on their hind legs and started screaming about all this upstream pollution. They started filing lawsuits to make the government enforce the Clean Water Act. Maryland's Chesapeake Bay Program ultimately came about because of the activism on the Patuxent as other rivers followed in our tracks. But if we can't clean up any one river, how in the world will we clean up the whole Bay?

**Bay Weekly** How do you evaluate its health today?

**Fred Tutman** Terrible. It earned a D- on the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science record. There is no lucid, realistic or detailed plan to clean it up that I can put my hands on as much as there are lots of promises, compacts, agreements and guidance documents.

**Bay Weekly** What happened?

**Fred Tutman** I think the Bay movement ran out of activist momentum and got distracted by the green jobs, oysters, living shorelines and other stuff that costs money, that are a good start — but not proportional to a solution on their own.

The way you clean up these waters is to (a) stop polluting them and (b) enforce the laws. Rain barrels and trees don't seem to have the desired effect without that added dimension. Key to success in cleaning up rivers is the energy that flows from the bottom, not top down. You have to have grassroots energy, and you have to require cleanup. An army of paid professionals protecting their careers is not nearly as effective as a team of determined citizen volunteers working the other side of the equation. I think that is what the living history tells us.

**Bay Weekly** What can each of us do?

**Fred Tutman** The most important thing we can do is be very critical of both corporate- and polluter-funded avenues. They make people feel good without really addressing the underlying structural problems. The biggest problems on the Patuxent and the Bay are large-scale forces that go underregulated: industrial inputs from things like Big Coal, Big Chicken and Big Real Estate, for example.

It's up to the citizens to get busy holding feet to fire and to demand not small weather-sensitive signs or gains but Big Progress for a change.

**Bay Weekly** How can we get involved with the Patuxent Riverkeeper?

**Fred Tutman** We're about to re-start new water-testing programs in the north of the watershed. Spring cleanups. And we're doing a lot of on-the-ground work with local communities. We want to restart the Patuxent Roughnecks who keep up the water trails and establish new amenities so people have more access to the water and the watershed. We're training six advocates we call barefoot lawyers, basically paralegals who go out into watershed to help communities protect their environment. We have a Visitor's Center located on the Patuxent waterfront and lots of fun stuff too, including rental kayaks and scheduled trips.

**Patuxent Riverkeeper Center: 17412 Nottingham Rd., Upper Marlboro; 855-725-2925;  
<http://paxriverkeeper.org>**