

# Meet Fred Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper

SUSTAINABILITY By [Thien Vinh Nguyen](#) May 23, 2019 [2](#)



Image by Fred Tutman used with permission.

Fred Tutman is the Patuxent Riverkeeper, one of a global network of 343 people who advocate for individual rivers. He's also the nation's only African-American Riverkeeper.

Locally, there's a Potomac Riverkeeper and an Anacostia Riverkeeper; there are Riverkeepers (or, for non-rivers, other Waterkeepers) [from Argentina to Vietnam](#).

Born and raised along the Patuxent in Maryland, as with seven generations before him, Tutman founded the Patuxent Riverkeeper organization in 2004. Having spent 27 years in media, television, and radio, along with a stint as a late-life law student, Tutman traded in his law books and reporting expertise to protect his home river.

I spoke with Tutman to learn more about his work and to get his perspective on the most pressing environmental and equity issues facing our regional rivers.

## Can you tell our readers what a Riverkeeper is?

A Riverkeeper is an advocate who has a license. It's a capital letter first of all. It's a proper noun. We're Advocates. We are expected to protect water quality and build a movement around the protection of water quality on the exclusive jurisdiction that we're licensed for.

In my case, that's the Patuxent River. It's a geopolitically significant river in the state of Maryland. Citizens along the Patuxent were literally suing before the Clean Water Act was

enacted. In fact, the origins of the Save the Bay movement are entirely from the impetus or the example set by Patuxent advocates.

### **Why did you become a Riverkeeper?**

I worked in media television and radio for 27 years. I lived overseas and in Massachusetts for a while, but the Patuxent's my home river. So as a citizen activist it never occurred to me you could make a career out of protecting a river until I learned about the Riverkeeper movement. That really brought onto my radar screen that you could be a gadfly or an irritant as a citizen activist and actually make a living doing that.

At the time [in 2002] I was in law school. I was the late life law student. I hadn't decided what to do with a law degree actually and ultimately I didn't finish. I actually stopped in the last year of law school, but along the way I learned about the Riverkeeper movement, and it just consumed me.

I was so excited by the idea that you could do this work: The work of working with communities and activating communities by doing really dissent-based work to try and make things better. That struck me as a much more attractive proposition than covering the news which was mostly bad news. Maybe I'll make some good news, I thought.

### **Profiles and podcasts about you acknowledge, for better or worse, that you're the only African-American Riverkeeper.**

I believe that's still true.



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**I know you've said that we shouldn't increase diversity for diversity's sake when it comes to environmental stewardship and that it's an environmental equity issue. Can you elaborate for me what you mean?**

I have never seen or experienced a black or brown community that was seeking "diversity." The problem is that diversity is not really an expression of equity or equality. Once you wear the label of diversity, then there is a perception that you're diverse and the expectation is that the presence of black or brown folks endorses the mission or the goals or the organization itself. But it doesn't really provide a platform from where people of color can bring to the organizations' attention issues that are vivid and particularly real in black communities and communities of color. So I think diversity is a trap.

**Have you seen an increase in people of color who are environmental leaders, similar to you as a Riverkeeper?**

They've always been there. I think they're invisible to white folks [who run mainstream environmental groups]. They have to actually invest in these communities: invest their time and their presence in these communities to be credible and to pick up these burdens. If they think they're going to clean up the environment with only white folks in charge, they're nuts because, believe me, there's a lot of ingenuity out there in all of these communities.

**What do you see are the biggest environmental issues that are facing our metropolitan rivers and the Chesapeake Watershed today?**

In a big picture sense I know there are lots of little problems and lots of little issues and some of them are mushrooming but I would believe that the green movement generally I think has kind of lost its focus on advocacy. I think the funded work that's easier to find is restoration work, which is reactive. After somebody wrecks an area we can get some environmentalist to come in and clean up the mess and we can pay them.

I think proactive work involves actually conserving these resources which means taking a position occasionally against a particular project or an adversarial position with someone who has a financial interest in some activity or another.

We've also got a heavily corporate funded movement surrounding it. The only thing I've ever seen that works predictably about reducing pollution in the Patuxent is litigation. The power of uncertainty through litigation provides us with a little extra power to influence a favorable outcome.

**I saw recently that Maryland passed the [Clean Energy Jobs Act](#) which included and classified trash incinerators as a renewable energy source. Can you clarify to our readers the relationship between trash incinerators, waste management, and the waterways?**

Well sure, there's a waste stream associated obviously with air discharges often enough. It's certainly true of coal burning power plants but incinerators too. The particulate matter enters into

the air. CO2 and other emissions eventually gets disposed over the waterways. I think we're robbing Peter to pay Paul. We're moving the burden from direct water discharges into air streams instead.

In other words, we're not reducing the total amount of pollution. We're just reallocating it. We're redistributing it. So [Zero Waste](#) solutions, which are harder to attain, at least raise the bar for performance than simply moving the waste stream over to a different selection.



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**I'd love your perspective on the state of our metropolitan rivers and waterways. How are they, from the Patuxent to the Potomac to the Anacostia?**

I primarily work on the Patuxent. I have the impression that the Bay movement is failing. It has sick-on-contact waters [waters with waterborne diseases, which can be transmitted by drinking, eating raw shellfish and their juices, or through open cuts and wounds]. In parts of my river, people in the summer can get flesh eating bacteria, [Vibrio vulnificus](#), for coming into contact with water.

You also have dying fisheries in these rivers that will no longer support spawning of fish because of all the construction impacts. The flow has changed considerably in some of these rivers and the sediment that's washed into them left at the bottom.

In effect, I do think that trend towards water quality has been going down for some years. And the movement that's been charged with protecting it which is very heavily funded doesn't have the toolbox to actually attack the underlying problems. They believe on one hand that the growth is inevitable and so they're trying to get green growth rather than looking at the carrying capacity of these rivers, which are finite.

**What are the effects of human induced climate change on our waterways?**

So the sea rise factor or the rising level of the available water around us is something that's already on the radar screen of the real estate community. Some of them have been divesting in

areas where they can no longer get flood insurance, we have others who want to be bailed out. I don't think people are aware of this, but tax monies are being used all the time to redeem land investments in very tenuous areas. I think if we're buying easements with public monies, we should not be paying full market value.

Also, did you see the press yesterday on the deep dive into the Marianas Trench? I think it's the deepest underwater dive in human history, 33,000 feet. They dived into the Marianas Trench, and found plastic trash on the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Can you imagine why this most inaccessible part of the ocean is full of plastic trash. Oh my god!

**Given these very grave environmental concerns, do you see any positive spotlights, are there are more inspired efforts that you would like to highlight?**

I believe it's the energy that lives in local communities: white, black or indifferent. It is the local people with no financial interest in the outcome of these resources who only want to be able to swim in it, fish in it, sit next to it, and enjoy its positive energy.

Those are the folks who are the best advocates in the world. They are essential citizens are essential to keeping these movements honest. They are the antidote. We are the antidote to corporate influence to government dithering to unrequited government promises that have been going on for as long as I can remember. It really takes dissent. It takes activism from citizens. It takes engaged well informed citizens.

**Are there any organizations or groups movements that you would like to highlight aside from Riverkeepers?**

So we do partner with and work with organizations to share our values. Some that we've encountered that share our values are certainly the [Waterkeeper Alliance](#), which is at its heart at its soul, is primarily a grassroots movement. Also, [Food and Water Watch](#), because they see the environment through the lens of consumer stuff. We also love [Earthjustice](#); it's a nonprofit law firm so it takes on the issues and concerns of its clients.

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