

Environmental Stewards Awarded for their Volunteerism

CU Maurice River is dedicated to protecting the watershed of the Maurice River and the region known as *Down Jersey*, thereby enabling current and future generations to enjoy the environmental, recreational, cultural, and scenic resources of this Wild & Scenic global treasure.

At CU Maurice River, we build friendships around the important goal of growing community-based conservation within *Down Jersey*. At CU Maurice River, everyone can find a way to put their abilities to work to make a difference. During the year, programming staff coordinates a multitude of volunteer opportunities. On average, 300 gifted volunteers donate 9,000 hours annually to drive our mission forward.

A shortlist of projects includes returning horseshoe crabs to the safety of the bay, sampling dragonfly larvae for air quality studies, maintaining osprey and bluebird nesting structures, conducting wetland vegetative community surveys, and growing best-management projects. Meanwhile, outdoor learning excursions are made possible by a team of retired teachers, outdoor educators, naturalists, and nature enthusiasts who volunteer their skills and time to connect kids with natural wonders. In

addition, our community is growing due to the dedication of CU Ambassadors; those members who represent our mission by inviting community festival goers to participate.



Figure 1 This year's Ah Why Knot Award, a confidence decoy, was carved by Alex Hascha.

CU Volunteers all have something in common. They appreciate *Down Jersey's* outstanding natural and cultural resource values and

take initiative to protect the great out-of-doors. Our volunteers keep showing up to maintain and improve the natural health of Cumberland County's national treasure of international importance, the Wild and Scenic Maurice River. Each year on the third Saturday in May, CU Maurice River celebrates the community of volunteers who contribute to environmental conservation in *Down Jersey*.

This year, CU's Big Day and "Ah Why Knot" Award Ceremony was hosted on Saturday, May 17. It's a day of recognizing the people and organizations that engage in community-based conservation in a

significant way. The award name derives from members' responses when asked to lend a hand, "Ah - Why Knot?" As a sign of CU Maurice River's appreciation, each recipient receives a wood carving of the nationally threatened shorebird species called the red knot. This year the decoys were carved by Alex Hascha.

2025 Ah Why Knot Award Winners

CU Maurice River is pleased to share with you the 2025 Ah Why Knot Awardees. The Ah Why Knot Awardees listed below have each volunteered in a multitude of conservation projects and initiatives, dedicating hundreds of hours to community and environmental health.



Figure 2 Above from left to right CU Board President Jane Morton Galetto, Ah Why Knot Award Winner Tom Deckman, and CU Executive Director Karla Rossini

Tom Deckman was originally from New York. His family moved to Port Norris when he was a child. He graduated from Millville

Senior High School. In his youth, he and his father spent their free time boating along the

Bayshore and fishing the creeks. At the ceremony, he explained that his sense-of-place was built upon the stories of *days-gone-by* that the old time watermen would share with him. He credited the Hollingers, Robbins, Hickmans, Jamisons, and others with sparking his curiosity for the Delaware Bay's natural and cultural history. The older generation took him under their wing; and, as a result his love of *Down Jersey's* outdoor spaces was kindled. He feels that volunteering is a way of life when you come from a small, close-knit community. He states that as long as we are working to protect the natural resources of Commercial Township and Cumberland County, he will keep showing up.

As a CU Maurice River volunteer, Tom has had a significant positive impact as a shorebird outreach volunteer collecting information on eco-tourism visitation during the horseshoe crab spawning and shorebird migration season. He has mapped invasive aquatic flora species within the Wild and Scenic Menantico River. And, he is a major force to be reckoned with on a cleanup!



CU Ah Why Knot Award Winners Terri Ballas (left) and Patti Kears (right) pose with their red knot decoy.

Terri Ballas lives in Millville. She has recently retired from a career as a mental health therapist for children, teens, adults, and elderly populations. This past winter CU Maurice River led a book circle on *Chatter* by Ethan Kross, which in part explores the positive impact spending time in the natural spaces has on mental health. Among her various other forms of involvement, Terri volunteered by lending her professional expertise to the discussion as a co-moderator. She reports that since retirement she is enjoying having more time to be involved in activities with CU Maurice River.

As a CU Ambassador at community events, she likes to convey just how much one can learn, and how much fun there is to be had. When she accepted her Ah Why Knot Award,

she shared some of favorite moments with CU Maurice River. ▪ The brightness of a white and cold winter sunrise over the Maurice River on her way to the Cumberland County Winter Eagle Festival. ▪ The humbling feeling of smallness against some giant old trees in Natural Lands Bear Swamp Preserve. ▪ The spectacular intricately patterned plumage of ducks of all kinds, dabbling and diving, here in their wintering habitat. ▪ The goosebumps and spooky haunting feeling of treading on pine needles and fallen leaves in the woods in total darkness with no light except for the bright full moon, on the hunt for the Jersey Devil. ▪ Viewing the Northern Lights at CU's Autumn Fundraiser from the deck of Union Lake Sailing and Tennis Club. ▪ The stunning whirls and dips of the masses of Purple Martins staging for migration on the Maurice River.

Patti Kears is a lifelong Millville resident. Moreover, generations of her family have been in Cumberland County since 1750. Patti's love of the outdoors was passed down from her father, who was an avid outdoorsman and a history buff with a special interest in the Lenape tribe. He would take young Patti on long nature walks along Berryman's Run and Menantico Creek where he shared his knowledge and passion of the natural world. After graduating from Millville Senior High School, Patti attended Rider

University. In 2010, after 35 years of service in the community, Patti retired as the Director of Cumberland County Board of Social Services. Patti says getting involved with CU Maurice River has allowed her to reconnect with the lessons from the long walks with her father and her passion for the natural world.

You can meet her at any number of local community events where she volunteers as a CU Ambassador. The help she lends the staff in the office is essential to the completion of large mailings and many, many other miscellaneous administrative tasks. The best part of her participation is that she always brings her kind disposition and thoughtful guidance with her.



Figure 3 Mary Beth and Fred DiMeglio pose with their Ah Why Knot Award.

Mary Beth and Fred DiMeglio moved from Delaware County, Pennsylvania to Maurice River Township in 2021. They had been looking for a house on the water in a rural setting. They found their spot on the Wild and Scenic Manumuskin River. Mary

Beth says it was the scenic value of the Manumuskin that drew them to *Down Jersey*. "It is a place that relaxes and grounds you," she said. When asked about what originally drew them to become environmental stewards, Mary Beth explained that she came from a family of campers. Fred relayed that growing up he was a Boy Scout and a "weekend-woods-warrior". As parents, they aimed to instill a sense of appreciation for the natural world within their children by continuing the tradition of camping; their daughter even becoming an environmental

engineer who is currently hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. The DiMeglios became involved with CU Maurice River when they first moved to the area. While Fred remodeled their new home, Mary Beth looked for a way to connect with like-minded people who valued and respected the river as they do. An internet search turned up CU Maurice River's Spring Events Calendar and her interest was sparked.

In 2025, CU Maurice River will be starting a wetlands restoration project on the Manumuskin River. The project requires the engagement and support of well over 30 riverfront property owners. Mary Beth and Fred assisted in creating a welcoming atmosphere and representing our mission at neighborhood meetings. Mary Beth and Fred have also assisted in surveying invasive, native, and rare wetland flora species on the Manumuskin.



Joan Lawrence Rhoads

lived in Woodbury where she graduated from high school before continuing her education at American University. In the 1980s, when there were only two pair of nesting ospreys on the river, her father helped CU Maurice River erect the organization's first nesting platform. As a child, her family owned a weekend

home on the Wild and Scenic Maurice River in the village of Bricksboro. After almost 40 years of dedication, Joan retired from a career as a sales representative within the plastics industry. Upon her retirement, Joan moved to the family's river home where she is now a permanent Maurice River Township resident. Joan is an outdoor recreation enthusiast who enjoys skiing, biking, kayaking, and hiking.

Over the last years, Joan has become an active volunteer with CU Maurice River. The osprey management project is one of her

Figure 4 Joan Lawrence Rhoads volunteering at the Mauricetown River as a CU Ambassador.

favorite programs. She often enquires about the status of the Maurice

River's osprey population and the success of the season's nests. She assists staff in

leading outdoor experiential learning days like field trips and Wild About Cumberland.

International Shorebird Scientist Team Awardee

At CU's Big Day we also celebrate the work of the International Team of Shorebird Scientists who study the migration and population trends of federally threatened red knot. They take up residence at Reeds Beach for an approximate 30-day period during which time they dedicate full days to their research efforts. At the head of the team is Dr. Larry Niles and Dr. Amanda Dey. This year the team recognized the efforts of Susan Linder.



Figure 5 From left to right Jane Morton Galetto, Dr. Larry Niles, Ah Why knot Awardee Susan Linder, Dr. Amanada Dey, and Karla Rossini

Susan Linder is a wildlife biologist with Wildlife Restoration Partnerships who specializes in horseshoe crab

conservation. As a partner organization of the Horseshoe Crab Recovery Coalition, she measures the density of horseshoe crab eggs

during the spawning season along Delaware Bay in New Jersey. She trains organizations in other states to conduct egg surveys to expand the surveys coastwide, creating a more robust dataset. Other projects include shorebird conservation and beach habitat restoration projects for horseshoe crabs and shorebirds.



Figure 6 Presidential Award Winner Deborah Ein poses with her glass vase created by local glass artist Peter Galetto.

Presidential Award –

Deborah Ein

grew up on a family farm and always benefited from an interest in all things outdoors. She holds degrees in

communications and in Forestry/Natural Resource Management from Rutgers University. She has been working as a consulting forester since 1980. Currently, she is the editor of the weekly SNJ Today. It covers CU Maurice River events and runs a column penned by CU Members called The Great Outdoors. Deborah also worked at

SNJToday's predecessor the Grapevine, as well as New Jersey Outdoors, American Forests and Lapidary Journal an earth science/paleontology. She recently finished a biography of Mary Treat, a 19th century naturalist whose letters (including some from Charles Darwin) were archived at the Vineland Historical and Antiquarian Society. Mary Treat was an accomplished botanist who published articles and studies. We are grateful for all the ways that Deborah helps to get out the word on southern New Jersey's happenings in both natural and cultural history.

Executive Director Award –



WheatonArts & Cultural Center is a designated CU Eco-leader, a business that is actively protecting water resources and providing habitat in support of the Wild and Scenic Maurice River Watershed's health. In 2015, CU Wildlife Management Director and

volunteer Allen Jackson began working with WheatonArts on the removal of the small gauge railroad that once ran through the campus' wooded area. While he was working with WheatonArts he educated staff on the benefits of utilizing large tracts in support of wildlife species. WheatonArts was interested in lending a hand and allowed for the installation of bluebird boxes, purple martin gourds, vernal ponds, and a snake hibernaculum. With a grant from the National Park Service Foundation, CU Maurice River installed interpretative signage that would highlight these same stewardship projects and enhance the educational value of the trail.

In 2021, CU Maurice River and WheatonArts teamed up again, but this time with the help of Rutgers Cooperative Extension Water Resources Program. The goal was to reduce water accumulation at the main gate by transforming the entrance circle. Funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, this revitalization project protects the local drinking water source, the Kirkwood Cohansey-Aquifer. Complete with three upland pollinator gardens and four interconnected raingardens, this installation improves water filtration and percolation of approximately 990,000 gallons of stormwater annually. This "urban oasis" provides much needed habitat and improves

food availability for pollinator and bird species at the site. WheatonArts receives up to 60,000 visitors a year, making this one of *Down Jersey's* most notable eco-friendly land management demonstration sites. WheatonArts is helping to shift landscaping paradigms away from unsustainable habits and toward more eco-friendly alternatives.



Figure 7 Executive Director Sue Gogan accepts the Executive Award on behalf of WheatonArts and Cultural Center and their staff.

WheatonArts and CU Maurice River use these green areas to host a variety of outdoor learning programs including field trips for the

Millville Child Family Center and our joint Nature Journaling Summer Program. This award was presented to WheatonArts in recognition of their outstanding contribution to environmental conservation; their willingness to serve as a demonstration site for sustainable land management practices; and their drive to inspire younger generations to explore the wonders of nature using creativity as their vehicle. Executive Director Sue Gogan accepted the award on behalf of the WheatonArts & Cultural Center

and their staff who have lent their support in ability and energy to the creation of these projects.