

# Opinion

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## OUR VIEW

# Thumbs up to Nanticoke Creek watershed project

## \$17.5M in grant money awarded to Earth Conservancy for work

By coincidence, two months ago to this day we published an editorial praising the restoration of Espy Run, bringing the lost creek back to the surface 70 or so years after it had been diverted to make way for strip mining. As noted then, it was a Herculean task that took more than 20 years from completion of a study identifying water quality problems caused by the diversion. To quote that editorial:

“That’s some 50 years ignoring the problem, 15 years figuring out what to do and how to pay for it, and nearly seven years to get it done. So, yeah, it’s worth understanding just how big an achievement this is, even if the sight of a little creek and some riparian forest for protection isn’t exactly the Grand Canyon, or even the Lehigh Gorge.”

The Earth Conservancy got the lion’s share of credit for this truly monumental restoration, and Tuesday’s paper included some good news from the organization about another, similar (and similarly important) project. President/CEO Terry Ostrowski announced Monday that the Conservancy has been awarded more than \$17.5 million in grant money for restoration of the upper sections of the Nanticoke Creek watershed.

“This grant will ensure Earth Conservancy can accomplish our goal of reconnecting the Nanticoke Creek headwaters to allow flow to once again reach the downstream areas of the watershed, while eliminating a major source of water to the underground mine pools which resurfaces as Acid Mine Drainage in the lower reaches of Nanticoke Creek,” Ostrowski said. “The grant highlights the partnerships and support we have had with federal and state agencies, as well as local municipalities and conservation organizations, without whom we could not have been able to accomplish such successful projects.”

As reporter Bill O’Boyle pointed out, the watershed is just 8.2 square miles of the much larger Susquehanna River Basin. Yet it endured multiple problems courtesy of King Coal, including obstruction, flow loss, dry streambeds and of course anthracite mining’s most depressing ecological legacy, acid mine drainage discharges.

All told, only 30% of the streams in the watershed have the hydrologic, ecologic and aesthetic qualities of a natural stream. All that should change thanks to the new grant.

Nearly 15,000 linear feet of permanent stream and floodway improvements are planned, much of it involving Nanticoke Creek and Leuders Creek. That’s more than double the linear feet of the Espy Run restoration.

And make no mistake, that successful work almost certainly improved the odds of getting this new grant. “Earth Conservancy has already proved it can successfully complete impactful work after its completion of restoring Espy Run,” State Department of Environmental Protection Deputy Secretary John Stefanko said. “The PA Department of Environmental Protection appreciates the opportunity to once again work with the Conservancy who will continue to exceed in its environmental healing efforts, this time by restoring the Nanticoke Creek and its ecosystems damaged from legacy coal mining.”

It is an old cliché that “success breeds success.” When it comes to eradicating the many ecological maladies mining inflicted on our waterways, here’s hoping for many more such successes.

— Times Leader



## THEIR VIEW

# Let’s stop insulting each other as ‘anti-science’

Peter Hotez, a vaccine scientist from Baylor College of Medicine, has been receiving a stream of hate mail. Much of it is unhinged, paranoid and threatening. He’s not alone — other prominent figures in public health have gotten hateful messages and death threats, especially since the beginning of the pandemic.

He describes the abuse in his new book, “The Deadly Rise of Anti-science — A Scientist’s Warning.” And he argues that an estimated 200,000 people in the U.S. who died from COVID probably would have survived if they hadn’t refused to get free, easily accessible vaccines.

He’s right about that, but throwing around the “anti-science” label isn’t helping bridge any divides. Take any scientific issue that involves political choices, from public health to climate change: All sides claim to be basing their concerns in science.

For example, further into the book, Hotez applies that anti-science label to people who opposed other mitigations like extended school and business closures and mask mandates. That’s too bad. Reasonable people can argue against the tradeoffs required by some of these non-pharmaceutical interventions.

The U.S. lost more people to this virus than most other developed countries where such restrictions and mandates were looser — suggesting much of what we asked people to do didn’t help. What we learn from our mistakes could help us continue to fight this still-circulating disease

and do better with the next public health crisis.

When I spoke to Hotez on the phone, he said one of the main messages he wants to convey is that much anti-vaccine rhetoric wasn’t “just random junk on the internet” but part of a coordinated, politically motivated effort — the thrust of which was that they’ll first force you to get vaccines, then they’ll take away your guns and Bibles. And conservative politicians and media outlets encouraged irrational paranoia about the vaccines.

The effect of that was deadly — as seen in statistics showing significantly more deaths in the least vaccinated states once the shots became widely available. But of course, there is no movement that calls itself anti-science. There are movements where people openly proclaim themselves anti-nuclear or anti-GMO or anti-abortion, but the term anti-science is an insult. It’s the kind of label used to cast aspersions on enemies and deride them as stupid.

And much of what the public heard from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the news media or their local governments was not scientific information but commands — don’t go to the beach, stay six feet from other people, wear a mask every time you leave your house.

In response to Hotez’s argument, risk communication expert Peter Sandman said he appreciates his concern over those 200,000 tragic deaths.

But he thinks public health carries some of the blame for fumbling public trust.

“The natural impulse of public health professionals to blame their critics for the public’s increased mistrust isn’t just mistaken,” he says, “It is self-defeating. It keeps public health people from assessing what they said and did during the pandemic that aroused that mistrust, apologizing for these misstatements and misbehaviors, and figuring out how to do better going forward.”

There is a political component to the divide over vaccines, he agrees, but he also listed a number of ways public health efforts alienated conservatives: Delaying the vaccine approval until after Election Day, deferring to teachers’ unions on keeping kids out of school, and “prioritizing health over all other values ... especially over freedom, which public health officials widely denigrated as a value not even worth considering.”

Barouch Fischhoff, a Carnegie Mellon University social scientist specializing in risk communication, said he sees a snowballing communication problem. People in public health communicated poorly, then they blamed the audience, he said. “Then these dedicated scientists and health officials become disrespectful and aggressive,” which further alienates parts of the public.

He was on a 2020 National Academies of Sciences Medicine and Engineering committee and his contribution was to find ways to communi-

cate facts and uncertainties — science — in a way that’s comprehensible and accessible. “Then you trust people to make their own decisions.”

He said that public health officials weren’t transparent about their goals or the evidence. That’s still a problem, especially with the ongoing booster campaigns. Is the goal to reduce transmission? Is the goal to protect against death? What’s the evidence a broad, annual booster campaign will achieve those goals? It’s hard to get clear answers.

“There’s no place to go to get facts and be treated as an adult,” he said. “People are stuck having to choose who to trust — and they all claim to be using science.”

So do the extreme hate mailers on the other side. Doctors and scientists with moderate views have told me they’ve gotten paranoid messages and even death threats from people who wanted longer lockdowns, permanent mask mandates and mandatory booster shots.

Scientists shouldn’t have to rely on blind trust; they can offer a logical, evidence-based argument for their claims. They have to express uncertainty, because that’s part of science, but honesty about what you don’t yet know can help build trust over the long term. And despite the wonders of modern science, infectious disease is going to remain a very long-term problem.

So please, let’s retire the term “anti-science.” It’s not persuading anyone on the other side.

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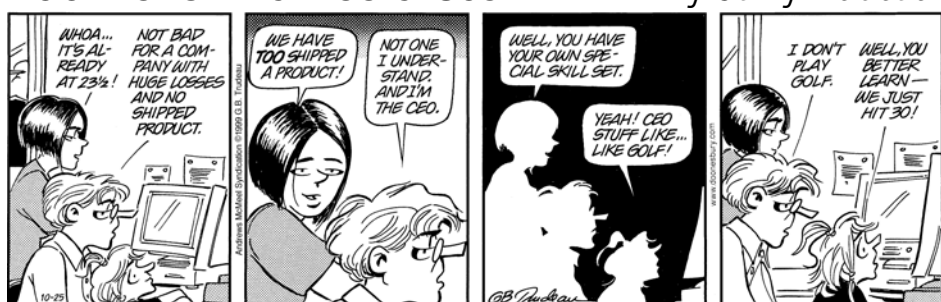
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