

MOUNTAINS

Save salamanders: Don't stack rocks



Word from the Smokies
Sue Wasserman
Guest columnist

The more you know, the more you care, the better you can do. It's a naïve thought, but it's what I choose to believe, especially in my capacity as Great Smoky Mountains Association's 2022 Steve Kemp Writer in Residence.

I shared this thought with an Illinois family I met on a late summer hike to Baskins Creek Falls in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We initially spoke when I let them know I was going to pass them on the challenging hillside.

The young son looked at me curiously and asked why I was using poles. I explained how they helped me keep my balance on rutted and rocky trails like this, especially, I laughed, as I was ever so much older and more injury-prone than he.

I could tell my response made no sense to him. Fate, however, intervened, and he slipped, sliding less than gracefully on his tush. (Nothing like a little real-world experience to create clarity.) We laughed for a moment as his father said, "Now do you see what she meant?" I walked away, chuckling under my breath.

We met again at the falls as I was quietly bemoaning the rock cairns that had been erected on several creek boulders. Thanks to conversations with park rangers and scientists during my residency in the Smokies, I had become fully aware that the movement of stones can not only destroy the tiny ecosystems of aquatic creatures like salamanders and caddis flies, but they can also alter the water's flow and lead to erosion.

Since this was the family's first visit to a waterfall, I offered to take a group shot of them in front of the falls to spare them a more limited "selfie" view. As they were moving into position, I asked the young boy and his sister a favor.

Pointing to the cairns, I made the request of them not to copy what they saw. I then asked if I could explain why. Somehow asking permission versus telling them felt important.

A sense of relief whooshed through me as both the mom and the kids appeared eager to learn. I do believe I had them at "salamander."

Xavier, the little boy, looked at me with wide-eyed, tiny-tot innocence as



Alex Pyron examines a salamander in a plastic bag full of water, a safe way to observe the animal closely without drying out its skin. PROVIDED BY JASON COLSTON

he asked what a salamander was. After my initial shock wore off – somehow, I thought all little boys simply knew about salamanders by virtue of being little boys – I showed him a picture I had taken the day before. He was, of course, as astounded as he was delighted.

I went on to share what I had learned – that the presence of salamanders, because they are sensitive to change, shows that an environment is relatively healthy. I added the fact that the Smokies are known as the salamander capital of the world and are home to some 30 species of them. Having read about this trail in "Waterfalls of the Smokies," a pocket guide published by GSMA, I told him we were likely to see them here.

As I was talking, Xavier's older sister asked if she might help take the cairns down. I happily accepted the offer. Between the children, their mom, and me, we were able to respectfully return the rocks to the water within a few minutes.

Nature was clearly grateful. No sooner had we finished our simple task than Xavier excitedly announced that he'd

found a salamander! Sure enough, there, with its tail nestled beneath a rock and its head poking out into the creek, was Xavier's first salamander.

Thanks to the salamander program I had participated in during the annual Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage in the Tennessee section of the park, I was able to pass along my understanding of how to cautiously lift one side of a rock to check for salamanders as well as gently place it back down to minimize any habitat disturbance. I also had brought, per the Pilgrimage leader's direction, a handy dandy plastic sandwich bag in my backpack to safely catch one for a quick view. (A plastic bag containing water is a scientist-sanctioned way to observe these creatures up close without drying out their skin.)

For the next 20 or so minutes, we kept our eyes peeled for salamanders. Although we spied a number of them, each of which brought squeals of delight from Xavier, we were never able to "land" one in the bag. Xavier didn't care; the search and discovery was more than



Rock cairns are neither Zen nor artistic sculpture, but instead they are a detriment to the aquatic environment. PROVIDED BY SUE WASSERMAN

enough fun for him.

When it was time for me to go, I asked if they wanted my plastic bag should they find others. They did, and understood the bag was only to be used to take a closer look before returning the salamander to the same place they found it. The parents thanked me for the impromptu lesson, while Xavier, who told me he would miss me, asked if he could visit me next time. His words felt like a warm hug.

Although I was ever so slightly bummed to be moving on, I left hopeful, fairly certain that they, like me, would, somewhere down the line, make the leap from student to teacher, from unknowing wanderer to mindful steward. That thought alone lightened my step as I made my way back to the trailhead.

Sue Wasserman is the 2022 Steve Kemp Writer in Residence hosted by Great Smoky Mountains Association, which is accepting applications for the 2023 residency through Nov. 1. The residency is designed to help writers connect with Great Smoky Mountains National Park in meaningful ways that will inspire some of their best work. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org/writers-residency. Wasserman is the author of "A Moment's Notice" and "Walk with Me: Exploring Nature's Wisdom." She lives in Bakersville.

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TODAY'S BONUS CODE

NC Senate candidates to meet in likely only televised debate

ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH – The two major-party candidates seeking to succeed retiring North Carolina Republican Sen. Richard Burr are meeting for what is likely their only televised debate.

Democrat Cheri Beasley and Republican Ted Budd agreed to a one-hour debate being held Friday night at a cable television studio in Raleigh.

Budd is a three-term congressman from Davie County who received the endorsement of former President Donald Trump over a year ago. Trump again campaigned on his behalf two weeks ago in Wilmington.

Beasley is a former chief justice of the state Supreme Court and would be the first Black senator for North Carolina if elected. The election outcome could decide which party takes a majority in the current 50-50 Senate.

Budd has said Beasley would push



Budd



Beasley

President Joe Biden's agenda that's led to inflation and unchecked immigration. Beasley says Budd would seek extreme abortion restrictions and has voted against efforts to rein in health care costs.

While Beasley's campaign has out-raised Budd's, national Republicans have already spent over \$20 million on advertising opposing Beasley. Democrats in Washington haven't been as generous in fighting Budd.

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Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve by Gannett Media Corp., 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 5830, Augusta, GA 30916.