



# New River CURRENTS

*the Newsletter of the New River Group  
of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club*      *Fall 2007*

## Letter from the Chair

Dear Fellow Sierrans:

It has been almost three years since I agreed to be chair of New River Group. It has been a fascinating time. I have met some great people and had some good times with them outside. Our cleanups were rewarding. We have won a few victories, getting the Montgomery Board of Supervisors to vote unanimously against selling National Forest land, joining our voices to beat the prison on New River, and most significantly, getting Blacksburg Town Council to vote in Cool Cities. Green is going mainstream. Tree-huggers are not portrayed as nuts, but instead everyone on the stage wants to show how environmentally responsible they are.

But as Tom Friedman recently pointed out, the "green" is often just show. Fossil fuel use continues to rise, inappropriate development pops up regularly, and "business-as-usual" is the standard for American living. Politicians avoid the hard choices.

One "hard choice" I would like to see more people make is to get involved. I am tired of playing defense and am ready to go on offense. Instead of fighting what we don't want, we need to build what we do. The prison, the transfer station, the South Main development, and now the Giles County fly ash dump take the time and energy of activists. We need our members to be aware of laws and plans and head off dumb plans at the pass. We need to shape the world we live in.

I have felt encouraged by the extent to which environmental education has penetrated mainstream government institutions. Still the good people there need the support and prodding of the citizenry to keep going in the right direction. I feel discouraged by the divisions I see in the environmental movement. We are an individualist bunch. Folks have their favorite group. Some people think others are too far left or right for their taste. The result is a lot of needless duplication and a loss of focus. I believe in a group where core members become expert in the field of their choice and can inform and bring the whole group along when needed. I want to see a group where members with a few hours a week can see their knowledge, vision, and efforts multiplied 400 times. Please come on out November 28 (General Membership meeting at 7pm at Blacksburg Library) as we prepare for a new year of fun outdoors and an activist agenda of meeting the three goals of Sierra Club: Building safe and healthy communities,  
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## NR Group Elections

Elections for officers of the New River Group will be held at the next general meeting, November 28 (7 p.m., Blacksburg Library). Voting will be by mail-in ballot or in person. Write-in nominations of New River Group members are welcome; please note them on the ballot, and they will be recorded and announced on the listserv. To vote by mail, cut out the ballot, circle your choices, and mail to New River Group, Sierra Club, PO Box 927, Blacksburg, VA 24063.

### Election Ballot

Chair: David Bernard

Vice-Chair: Maria Bowling

Excom members\*:

Anton Baudoin

Thomas Hoffman

David Jenkins

\*The chair and vice-chair also serve on the executive committee (excom).

## Coal to liquid conversion

Coal-to-liquid conversion (CTL) is a process that converts coal to a liquid fuel that could be used in conventional engines. It is promoted as a means to gain energy independence from foreign sources. However CLT would not produce any benefit for greenhouse gas emission. And there are environmental problems associated with the requirement of large amounts of water and the removal of mountaintops. With its large coal reserves, southwestern Virginia is being considered as a site for plants using CTL technology. Congressman Rick Boucher, representing southwestern Virginia, is listed as one of 31 co-sponsors of the Coal-to-Liquid Fuel Promotion Act of 2007 (H.R. 370).

According to an article by Beth Wellington, published July 27, 2007 on the Law and Technology Resources

website, the energy bill proposed by Nancy Pelosi does not include a coal-to-liquid (CLT) component. However fellow Democrats from coal and auto industry states, as well as members of the "Democratic Blue Dog Coalition", are promoting the inclusion of measures such as CLT that would promote the domestic production of fossil fuels. Coal companies are lobbying Congress for CLT subsidies in order to increase the value of coal deposits and preserve market share against other energy resources. The program would have a large impact on communities in southwestern Virginia.

For more information, see Beth Wellington's article at [www.llrx.com/extras/coaltoliquid.htm](http://www.llrx.com/extras/coaltoliquid.htm)  
To generate a letter to legislators, see [www.ilovemountains.org](http://www.ilovemountains.org).

# Finding Flavor with a Walk in the Wild

(original version published in the Native Plant Society of New Jersey newsletter, winter 2002)

## Nancy Adamson

Knowing where to find fresh berries, fragrant leaves and flavorful twigs can make a walk in the wild not only a feast for the eyes, but also a delight for all the senses. Such a sensational walk could also be a source of healing. Around here, touching plants poses few dangers (other than poison ivy, poison sumac, and nettles; one need only be aware of thorns), while eating wild plants or making herbal remedies from them requires *great care*. Below is a brief list of note-worthy books for folks interested in exploring with their fingers, noses, and tongues, or adding a native plant remedy to a pantry stash.

A wintertime walk in the mid-Atlantic can include more than the smells of decaying leaves or the sight of graceful trunks. Evergreen teaberry (*Gaultheria procumbens*), with its red wintergreen-flavored fruit, is found growing close to the ground among the huckleberry and blueberry heaths. Its leaves are single and nearly quarter-sized, rather than paired and dime-sized like the partridge berry (*Mitchella repens*), whose fruit is also red, but not tasty. Look in bogs to find cranberries on their fine foliage, evergreen, but turned ruby for the winter. Look in the driest spots to find prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia humifusa*), though foxes may find the red fruits if you don't. You may also find sassafras roots and branches (*Sassafras albidum*), or twigs of black birch (*Betula lenta*), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) and bayberry (*Myrica pennsylvanica*) — all have fragrant volatile oils which can refresh a winter walker. In summer, their oils are also readily released when you crush their leaves. Most winter berries are best left for the birds (and other critters):

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winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) and American holly (*Ilex americana*), red and black chokeberry (*Photinia arbutifolia* and *P. melanocarpa*, previously *Aronia* spp.), or the waxy berries of bayberry or juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*), spicebush, bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), green brier (*Smilax rotundifolia* or *S. glauca*), or coralberry (*Smilax walterii*). Sumacs (*Rhus typhina*, *R. copallina*), too, still carry their fruit in winter, but the bright red vitamin C-laden coat has usually been washed off by early winter, so if you have a fancy for sumac tea, best to harvest fruit in fall, along with persimmons (*Diospyros americana*), pawpaws (*Asimina triloba*), elderberries (*Sambucus canadensis*), rosehips (*Rosa* species), and grapes (*Vitis* species, which send out a sweet fragrance in fall). If smell is all you're after, skunk cabbage blooms in late winter, radiating heat and the smell of carrion from its green and burgundy folds to attract fly pollinators.

Come spring and summer, you can find some sweeter smells and a lot more to eat or to harvest for tea. Since we're all familiar with the summer berries, I'll just mention a few plants that make good teas. Best to drink these in moderation unless you thoroughly understand their chemistry (see references below). Teas can be made from the shrubs mentioned above using twigs and leaves: sassafras (though this has been linked with a cancer), spicebush, bayberry, and birch. Oswego tea and beebalms (*Monarda* species) and mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum* species) make delicious teas that combine well with the imported mints and lemon balms in many herb gardens or the chamomiles that now grow as naturalized weeds. The shiny leaves of sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*) have a slight scent of licorice, delicious fresh or as tea. New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) is purported by Cecil Still

to be medicinal and not particularly tasty. Violet leaves and flowers, other than the yellow ones, can be eaten fresh or sugared to decorate cakes. The list is endless. Whether you want to explore on your own or share a more sensational view of the world with a loved one, may you find time to see, touch, smell, and taste the native abundance around you this year and beyond.

A few books on edible and medicinal plants, or uses of plants (there are many, many more):

- Still, Cecil C. 1998. *Botany and Healing: Medicinal Plants of New Jersey and the Region*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey. This is a terrific text, organized by plant families, providing detailed information on the chemical properties of native species and related plants from around the world.
- Foster, Steven, and James A. Duke. 1990. *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants: Eastern and Central North America* (Peterson Field Guides). Houghton Mifflin, Boston. A compact, encyclopedic field guide packed with brief descriptions, including uses and habitat.
- Medve, Richard J., and Mary Lee Medve. 1996. *Edible Wild Plants of Pennsylvania and Neighboring States*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania. This has a lot of recipes.
- Brown, Deni. 2001. *New Encyclopedia of Herbs and Their Uses*. DK Publishing. This text, sponsored by the Herb Society of America, is my favorite reference for plant uses, native and otherwise.
- Cox, Beverly, and Martin Jacobs. 1991. *Spirit of the Harvest: North American Indian Cooking*. U.S. Media Holdings. This lovely cookbook has recipes from all over the United States, including the northeast.
- Tucker, Arthur O., and Thomas

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# Transportation

Business and civic leaders brag about the New River Valley being a great place to live and work. And in many respects it is: two fine universities, magnificent scenery, and ample opportunities for outdoor recreation.

However, in one area, public passenger transportation, the valley is seriously deficient. It wasn't always that way. In the 1950s, Roanoke and Christiansburg were at the center of the Norfolk and Western Railway's system. You could catch a through train to Norfolk, Washington, New York, Cincinnati, Columbus, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Birmingham, Memphis, and New Orleans. One by one, the trains disappeared until there were none left by 1971.

At that time, you could also catch commercial flights out of New River Valley Airport outside Dublin. Today, the closest airport is Roanoke. NRV Airport is still there, but you need your own plane or a charter to use it.

Bus lines blanketed the area on virtually every main highway. Now the only Greyhound service runs from Roanoke to Wytheville and Bristol via I-81. All the smaller towns in between have lost their bus service, and so has Giles County. It is hard to believe that a university the size of Virginia Tech cannot be reached by any means other than private automobile. Tech is one of the largest universities in the South. At one time, college students comprised Greyhound's bread and butter. (No one bought ME a car when I was going to college.)

The new Smart Way busline has done a little to remedy this situation. It connects Virginia Tech with Roanoke. I have not read any ridership statistics on this operation lately. I have not ridden it myself, primarily because I seldom go

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Tom Hoffman is a member of the group's executive committee. He is a resident of Pearisburg who enjoys hiking. He is retired from a government position in Washington, D.C. and has been a Sierra Club member for 30 years.

to Roanoke at all. (And when I do, my destination is generally Vinton or outer Williamson Road, nowhere near Campbell Court where the Smart Way ends.)

The Smart Way bus does not run on Sundays, which is when many college students would want to return to campus. At least some trips now serve the airport, and service to eastern Montgomery County has improved (some buses now stop in Shawsville). Detailed information may be had at [www.smartwaybus.com](http://www.smartwaybus.com) <<http://www.smartwaybus.com>>

Other than the Smart Way, the only transportation in the entire valley is Blacksburg Transit. It serves Blacksburg itself quite well, and a few trips operate to NRV Mall and Christiansburg. BT is, however, an insular system that does not connect to the outside world. Details are at [www.btransit.org](http://www.btransit.org) <<http://www.btransit.org>>

The troubling thing is that no one seems to care about public transportation here. When Greyhound pulled out of the small towns on the I-81 corridor, it was not even reported in the *Roanoke Times*, which is otherwise a decent newspaper.

But with gas prices increasing, oil supplies decreasing, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions causing global warming, something needs to be done. It is next to impossible any more for private enterprise to make a profit from carrying people, by any mode. So any new transportation (like Smart Way) must rely on public funding. The government found a way to pay for the Smart *Road* project, which sits empty. The money spent on it would have bought a lot of bus service.

Every now and then, you'll hear something about the Trans Dominion

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## Letter from the Chair

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protecting and restoring our wild heritage, and creating a clean energy future.

— David Bernard

Express, a proposed rail passenger service that would go through the New River Valley. Any such service, though, would require the co-operation of Norfolk Southern Railway, whose sole interest lies in carrying freight. Public funding would have to be found for large infrastructure improvements, such as additional tracks, before NS would allow any passenger trains.

But there needs to be political will to improve transportation in this valley. In twenty or so years, the enormous baby boom generation will start getting too old to drive. How will they get around? That's an issue you never hear discussed.

— Tom Hoffman

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## Virginia Wilderness

The U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands heard testimony on the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act (H.R. 1101) on May 10, 2007. The Act will create seven new Wilderness Areas and two new National Scenic Areas, and will expand six existing Wilderness Areas in southwest Virginia. Virginia Senators John Warner and Jim Webb and Congressman Rick Boucher sponsor the bill. More information is available at <[http://www.safc.org/campaigns/va\\_wilderness\\_bill.php](http://www.safc.org/campaigns/va_wilderness_bill.php)>

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## Finding Flavor

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DeBaggio. 2000. *The Big Book of Herbs: A Comprehensive Illustrated Reference to Herbs of Flavor and Fragrance*. Interweave Press, Loveland, Colorado. This is a good reference for cultivating and harvesting herbs (for tea).

## Fly Ash Disposal Site in Giles County

A fly ash disposal site has been proposed in the flood plain along the New River in Giles County. The ash from AEP's power plant at Glen Lyn is what remains after coal is burned. According to Tim Thornton, Growth and Environment Reporter for the *Roanoke Times*, the ash contains varying amounts of toxins, including arsenic and lead. Howard Spencer, who is a proponent and Chairman of the Giles County Board of Supervisors, claims that the project will bring jobs to the county. But local citizens have expressed concern about the environmental effects of the ash. On behalf of the New River Group, Chairman David Bernard has requested that Virginia's Department of Environmental Quality withhold approval of the project until the citizens of Giles County and other New River residents can be satisfied of the benefits of the project.

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## Outings:

**Sunday, November 11.** Veterans Day hike to Audie Murphy Monument

**Friday-Sunday, December 7-9.** Camp, hike, and/or paddle in Congaree National park in South Carolina

For more information about these trips, contact David Bernard, 540-392-5096

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## Campaign to Stop Wise County Coal Plant

A coalition of citizen and conservation groups has launched a campaign to challenge the building of a coal-fired power plant in Wise County proposed by Dominion Virginia Power. According to a press release of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, the power plant will worsen global warming, accelerate mountaintop removal, and encourage the construction of new transmission lines. The coalition plans to appear before environmental regulators and the State Corporation Commission to oppose the project.

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## New River Group Listserv

The New River Group maintains a listserv where we post information about meetings, activities, and environmental issues. To subscribe to the list, send an email to: [LISTSERV@LISTS.SIERRACLUB.ORG](mailto:LISTSERV@LISTS.SIERRACLUB.ORG)

Leave the subject line blank, and type the following message:

SUB VIRGINIA-NEWRIVER-NEWS YourFirstName YourLastName

This will be the name you will be known by on the list. You will receive an email from the Sierra Club to confirm your joining the listserv.

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