Ragged Mountain Natural Area

Comments of the Rivanna Conservation Alliance

July 20, 2016

The Rivanna Conservation Alliance (RCA) was established on January 1, 2016 through a merger between the Rivanna Conservation Society and StreamWatch. The organization’s primary focus is the health and beauty of the Rivanna River.

RCA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit watershed organization created to provide the community with a set of tools and programs specifically designed to help clean and protect the Rivanna River and its tributaries.

Our Vision: A healthy, thriving community that values its rivers and streams.

Our Mission: Protection of the Rivanna River and its tributaries through community involvement, conservation, education, recreation, restoration, water-quality monitoring and reporting.

RCA endeavors to find that delicate balance between environmental protection, public use and recreation.

The current debate on the types of activities to be authorized at the gorgeous Ragged Mountain Natural Area (RMNA) is a priority for our organization because of RMNA’s uniqueness and because it is a part of a larger philosophical community debate as to the best use of our open spaces. This becomes critical as the urban area expands and more dense.

As the City of Charlottesville comes to a decision on how best to utilize the Ragged Mountain Natural Area we encourage the political and professional decision-makers to achieve this balance by denying pets and bikers from utilizing this nearly pristine location.

**The Ragged Mountain Natural Area should remain natural.**

Our community is blessed with an abundance of soccer and softball fields, many sports programs, water parks for children and other facilities that provide a host of outdoor family friendly activities. We recognize that these are important and highly desirable amenities, especially for a growing community. At the same time it is important to ensure the protection of highly vulnerable areas - those that bring silence and solace to our citizens.

To this end, we believe that there are places where pets and bikers are to be welcomed and there are places where, by the nature and environmental importance of the area, restrictions should be maintained.

RCA is encouraged by recent decisions that clearly demonstrate the City’s appreciation for both parks and recreation. The replacement of the golf course in McIntire Park with the botanical garden is but one example.

With that said, RCA would like to see an emphasis on a third category – that is to serve a large constituency not seeking merely recreation or a walk through a pretty garden, but unspoiled locations of peace, serenity and natural beauty.

This community is extremely fortunate that a century ago the City of Charlottesville voted to preserve this land as a reservoir site. To have such a large expanse of mature forest so close to the city is unique and should, from our perspective, be treasured and protected.

The Ragged Mountain Natural Area is not a park or a recreational facility. It is a relatively unspoiled demonstration of piedmont forest harboring a great diversity of plant and animal species. And it is of sufficient size to sustain that diversity if carefully managed and wisely used by visitors.

And, while most of the RCA members are dog and bike enthusiasts, they strongly believe that the RMNA is a regional treasure in need of protection. This position is clearly articulated in the current regulations and the recreational use guidelines governing the area for most of the past century.

**The Ragged Mountain Natural Area should remain a pedestrian-only, bike free and dog-free zone.**

Protecting the community's huge investments in a high quality reservoir water supply should remain the paramount objective of RMNA management.  We believe that these goals are quite compatible with ongoing low-impact recreational uses of the area.  We greatly value and have frequently enjoyed the peace and relative solitude available on RMNA trails and believe that this experience would be substantially altered if the trail system were opened to bikes.

RCA finds it hard to imagine how the rugged topography of the existing trail network could be adapted to bikes without causing either rapid trail erosion or requiring substantial earthmoving to create stable trails for wheeled use; either scenario would pose unnecessary and unacceptable risks of sediment pollution of the reservoir.

**The need to minimize fecal contamination of the reservoir from pet wastes should be self-evident.**

Some within the RCA leadership promote opportunities to improve the convenience and safety of bicycle access between Charlottesville and RMNA along existing public roads or creative easements for new auto-free lanes across public and private lands. From this perspective, improved bicycle access to and from RMNA would be desirable, so long as cyclists park their bikes at the RMNA trailheads.

The Ragged Mountain Natural Area provides this community with unique opportunities to observe and enjoy nature in its pristine state and we oppose any changes that could threaten our water supply or endanger the health and scenic value of this beautiful location.

In summary, we ask that the City of Charlottesville;

1. Have as its first priority, the security and health of the water supply,
2. Maintain and expand the excellent trail system easy to maintain for foot traffic with minimal impact on environment,
3. Exclude pets and cyclists from the Ragged Mountain Natural Area.