

Promoting the Beauty of Nature at Conowingo Islands

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Big Chestnut Island

Dwarfed by dramatic rock formations protruding up to 200 feet above the water on at least 30 islands on the Susquehanna River, I paddled my stand up paddleboard (SUP) with my dog, Daphne, in a wonderland the Lancaster County Natural Heritage Inventory describes as having one of Pennsylvania’s most unusual and picturesque riverine landscapes. As we meandered through the maze of erosional remnants comprised of schist and gneiss metamorphic bedrock, I couldn’t help but think I was paddling hundreds of miles further north at the Bold Coast of Maine. Unlike the rest of the 400+-mile-long and 300+-million-year-old Susquehanna River (aka the “Susky”), the uniquely beautiful scenery on this section just south of Holtwood Dam has earned it many names: Conowingo Islands, Holtwood Gorge, the upper part of the Conowingo Reservoir, and my favorite... “the Boulders.”

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Some say the Conowingo Islands have changed little since the Native Americans resided here. The first inhabitants were hunters and gatherers who arrived in the Susquehanna Valley near the end of the last Ice Age, over 12,000 years ago. Eventually, the domestication of plants around 1000 A.D. led to permanent settlements along the Susquehanna River where the region’s first farmers grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. Around 1575, the fur-trading Susquehannocks took control of this land, and by the 1690s, after fighting for ten years with the Iroquois Nation, the Susquehannocks joined other refugee peoples to form the Conestoga Indians. The Conestogas gradually declined in population until a group of frontiersmen annihilated the last of them in 1763.

I learned a great deal about the history of the area around Conowingo Islands during my visit to the [Indian Steps Museum](#), which stands just over three miles upstream of Holtwood Dam. Built as a memorial to the Native Americans that dwelt in the vicinity, this museum was constructed by Judge John Edward Vandersloot, who named it after a fishing rock on which natives had carved footholds to climb down to the water. Following the completion of Holtwood Dam in 1910, this rock became submerged in the resulting Lake Aldred.



Figure 2: Indian Steps Museum

Inspired by Indian relics, lore, and legends, Vandersloot became active in a movement in his day called Pan-Indianism, which promotes unity among various Native American tribes. This led to the creation of a fraternal group called the Tipi Order of America who lived by a set of commandments, one of which was to “Promote beauties of nature.”

Such beauties can be experienced directly across the museum road at the Ulmer-Root-Haines Trail, which winds through a 26-acre recreational area dedicated in 1961. Only a quarter mile long, the trail’s reward

is a small but scenic unnamed waterfall at the turnaround point which may only be a trickle unless it has rained recently. In the spring, you'll find a violets and numerous trilliums along the trail, the latter of which was once valued by Native Americans for its medicinal qualities.



*Figure 3: Unnamed trickle of a waterfall near the Ulmer-Root-Haines Trail*

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History can also be found adjacent to the Conowingo Islands at the [Lock 15 Interpretive Park](#) which recognizes a time when our country's road system was still immature and rivers were often the most practical way to transport supplies and people. Since some natural waterways were unnavigable, a network of canals had to be constructed such as the Susquehanna (Pennsylvania) and Tidewater Canal (Maryland) which together covered 45 miles along the west shore of the Susquehanna River between Wrightsville, Pennsylvania and Havre de Grace, Maryland. This roughly 50-foot wide and 6-foot-deep canal operated from 1841 until it was abandoned in 1894 due to financial failure.

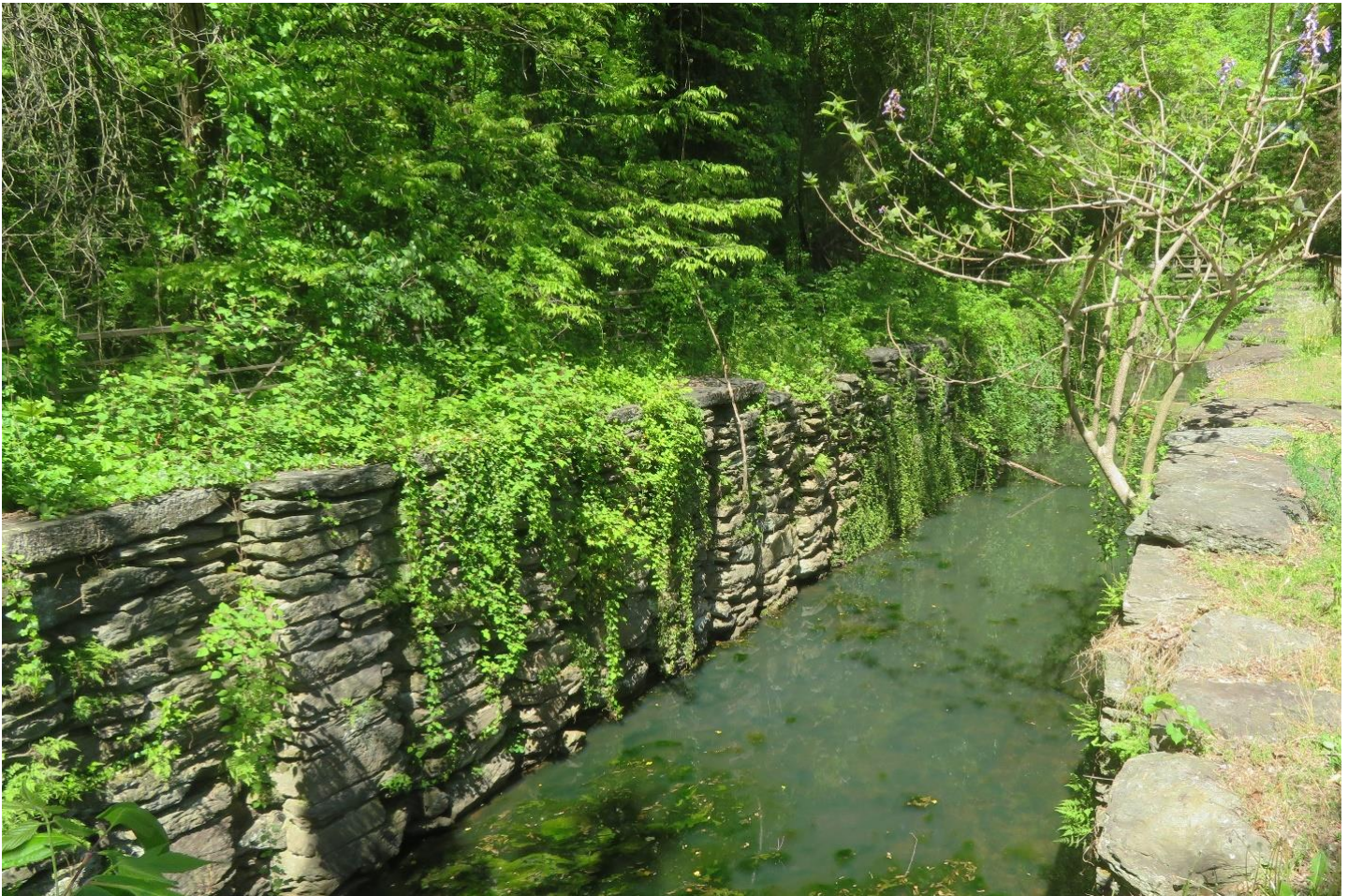


Figure 4: Susquehanna Canal at Lock 15 Interpretive Park

Visiting the park, we walked on the mayapple-lined blue-blazed trail, which runs between [locks 12](#) through 15 on a segment of the [Mason-Dixon Trail](#). Remains of the canal bed, the towpath, two lift locks, and some building foundations can still be seen. You'll also find a few modern conveniences: porta-johns, picnic tables, grills, and parking for about 15 vehicles. Some sources talk about launching a kayak here but there is a sign posted stating "Boat launching is not permitted at Lock 15 Park."

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Eager to get out on the water, I parked and put in at [Muddy Creek Access](#) which lies near the south end of the Lock 15 Interpretive Park trail. This location, just west of Conowingo Islands, has a porta-john, paved boat ramp, and parking for 50+ vehicles. A fee must be paid prior to launching either [powered](#) or [unpowered boats](#) (e.g., canoes, kayaks, SUPs). Those who don't mind paddling a little further to reach the islands can avoid the fee by putting in 1.5 miles downstream at [Cold Cabin Park](#) which also has a porta-john and paved boat ramp, but significantly less parking...maybe room for 9 vehicles.

Because paddling conditions vary widely on this stretch of the Susquehanna River, many factors should be taken into account before launching:

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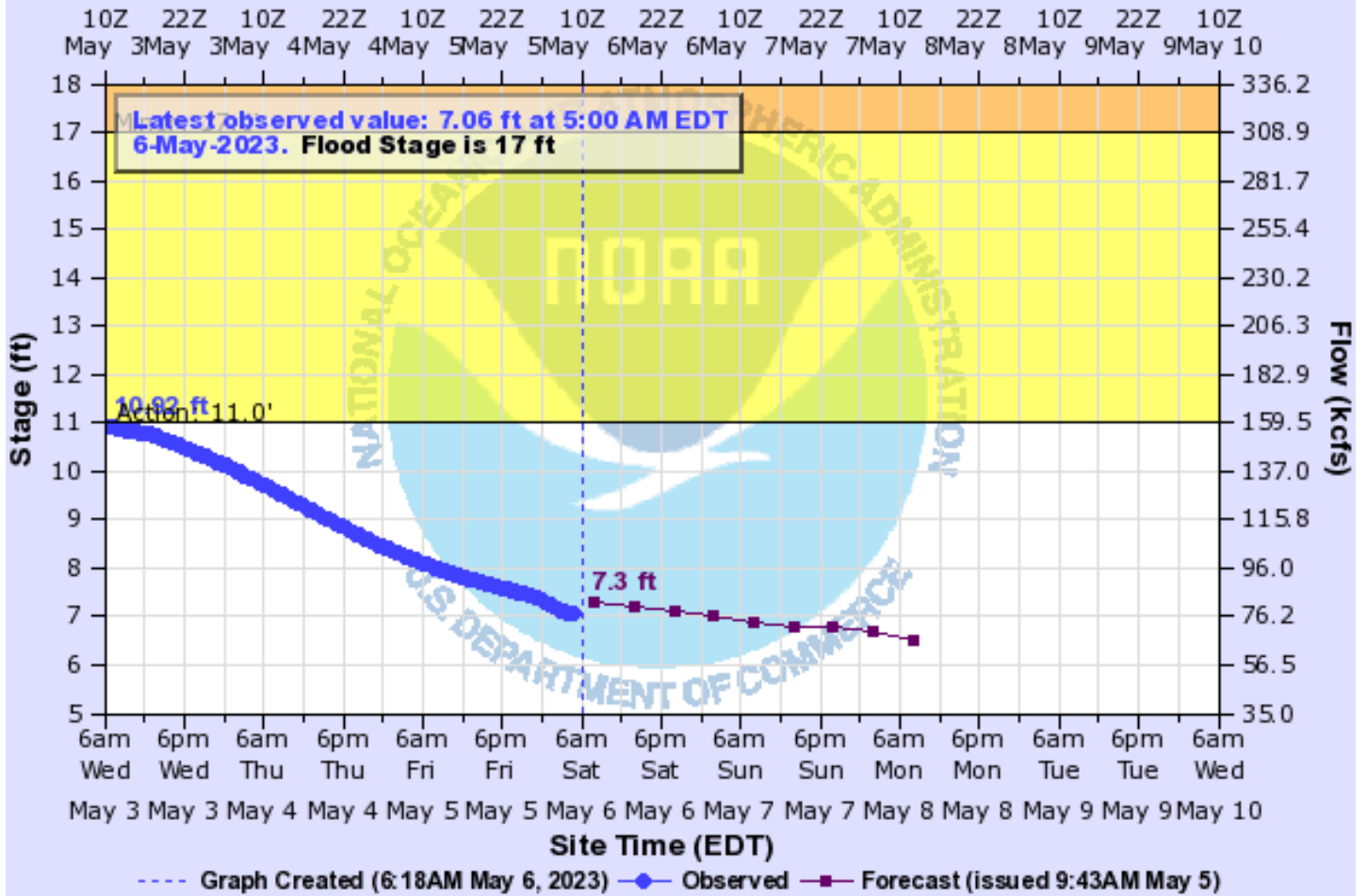
## WATER LEVEL

I spoke to a longtime resident and owner of a local kayak shop who told me to check the [National Weather Service – Susquehanna River at Harrisburg](#) website to get water level information. If it reads 5.6 feet, then I could expect lake-like conditions in much of the vicinity while 8 feet will yield a very strong flow.

On May 6, 2023, I went out when the site read 7.3 feet. At Muddy Creek Access, the current was about 1.5 mph, but a mile upstream between [Peavine Island](#) and [Upper Bear Island](#), the river was moving at 5 mph...rather challenging. Slightly north of that but south of [Crow Island](#) was whitewater. The gap between Upper Bear Island and [Lower Bear Island](#) was also whitewater. Not prepared for those conditions, I stuck to more sheltered waters.

# SUSQUEHANNA RIVER AT HARRISBURG

Universal Time (UTC)



HARP1(plotting HGIRG) "Gage 0" Datum: 290.01' | Observations courtesy of US Geological Survey

Figure 5: I paddled when the stage read 7.3 feet

I returned on May 18, 2023, when the site read 4.2 feet. Not surprisingly, the water was much slower, though the current still managed to get to 2.5 mph on some parts north of Crow Island while south of Upper Bear Island, it was calm.

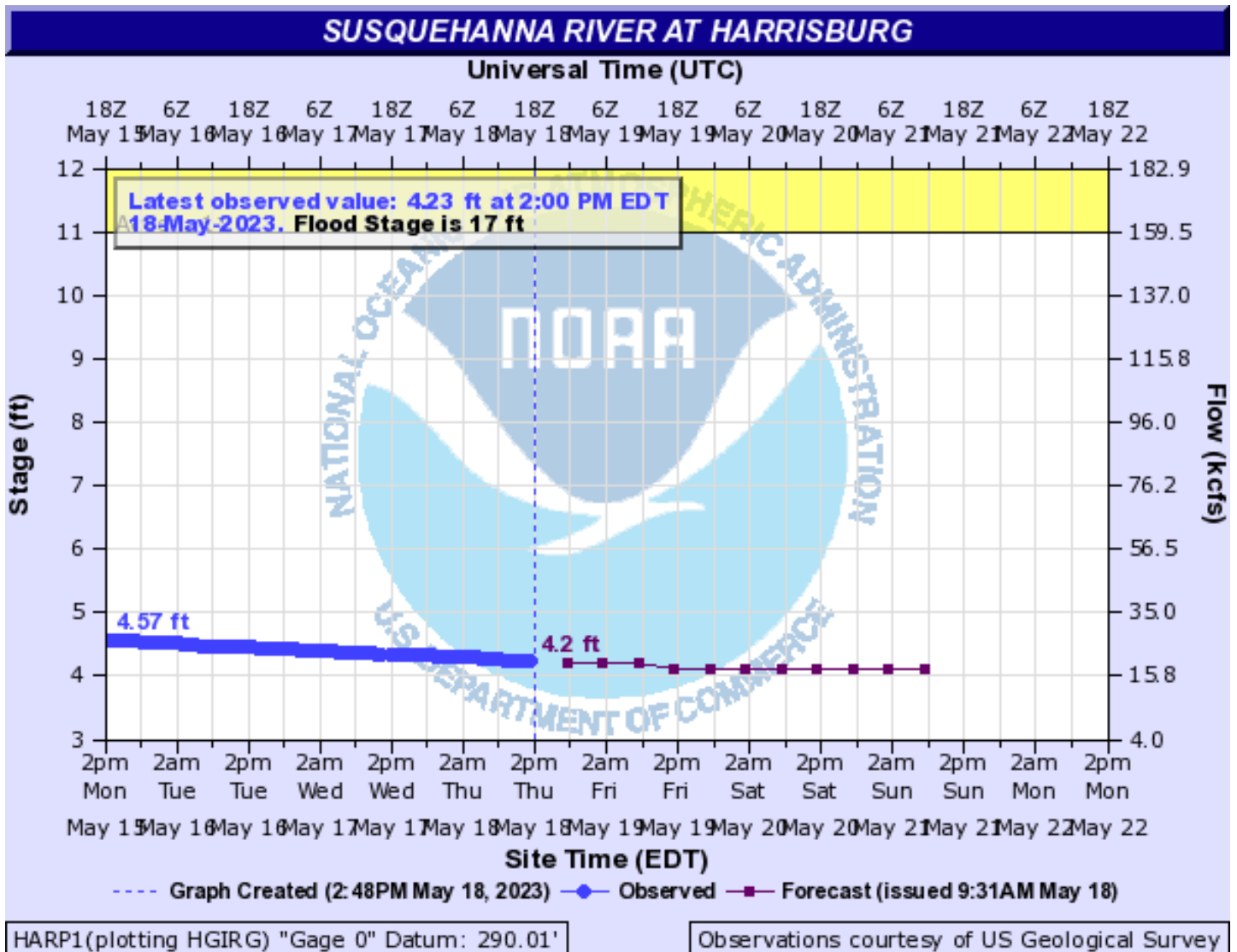


Figure 6: I paddled when the stage read 4.2 feet

One should also consult [Safe Waters – Holtwood](#) to determine when water is being released from the dam. In general, the closer you are to the dam when water is being released, the stronger the current. Factoring in the rocky nature of the underwater terrain and how it affects the river, you'll find it is best to at least be familiar with whitewater conditions in places where the current is fast. I do not recommend such spots for beginner or novice paddlers.

## OBSTRUCTIONS

Because boulders just below the surface are common, I don't recommend paddling any watercraft with a long non-retractable rudder or fin. Also, be aware that the rocky terrain both above and below the water will easily scratch boats and can be difficult to avoid.





*Figure 7: Expect rocky terrain both above and below the water*

Paddleboarders should be experienced, confident, and have an excellent sense of balance since rocks are very unforgiving to those who fall.

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## WIND

The wind will be less obstructed if it blows from the northwest or the southeast, and if this is the case, you may want to plan your trip to avoid strong headwinds, especially on the return. If it comes from the northeast or southwest, then the higher elevation at the edges of the Susquehanna will provide some protection.

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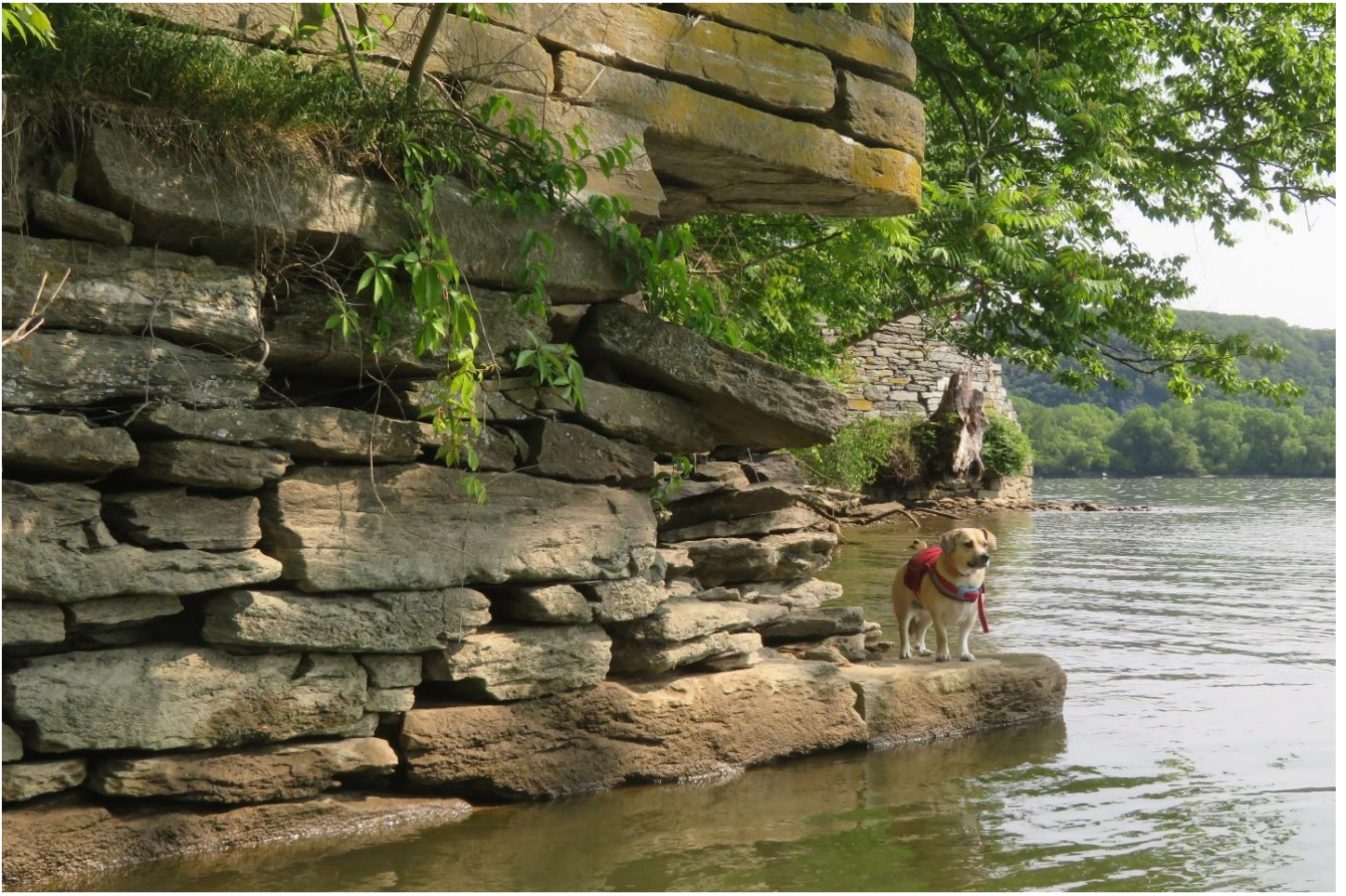
## ROUTES

The strip [west of Peavine Island](#) will almost always be calm and suitable for beginners. I've been able to get about a mile upstream starting from Muddy Creek Access.



*Figure 8: Snapping turtle next to Peavine Island*

Just 0.75 mile downstream from Muddy Creek Access or one mile upstream from Cold Cabin Park is the [mouth of Muddy Creek](#), where I've paddled 0.6 mile upstream without portage. This is another place that is often suitable for novices and sometimes beginners, depending on the current. Keep an eye out for the stone structures marking where the Susquehanna Canal once flowed into the creek.



*Figure 9: Daphne standing where the Susquehanna Canal once flowed into Muddy Creek*

If the water is high enough at some spots on the west side of the Susquehanna River just north of Muddy Creek, you may be able to paddle into short sections of the Susquehanna Canal.



Figure 10: Paddling in the Susquehanna Canal

The [islands just south of Lower Bear Island](#) (what I call the “south islands”) have some of the most dramatic views, are easy to reach, and are suitable for less experienced paddlers, assuming the water flow is mild and the wind is moderate. These are also a short distance from either Muddy Creek Access or Cold Cabin Park...0.25 mile and 1.2 miles, respectively. Several of these islands are home to private residences so avoid landing unless you are certain you are on public land.



*Figure 11: Hennery Island*



*Figure 12: At the south islands*

Some of the uninhabited islands further upstream make great places to pull over for a break, exploration, or deep contemplation. High atop the rocks looking down, I try to visualize how, unlike most islands in the Susquehanna which were formed from silt, the Conowingo Islands were created through eons of erosion from bedrock. What did the islands look like when the first people arrived?



Figure 13: Norman Wood Bridge (Route 372) in the background

I reemphasize that the further you go upstream, the more likely you'll feel the effects of the current. Skilled paddlers might appreciate the challenge of faster moving water closer to the dam while experienced whitewater kayakers will enjoy getting out on the Susky when the water spills over the dam or “playing” at [Holtwood Whitewater Park](#).

As with any paddling, know your limitations. Water released from the dam and rocky conditions that cause turbulence can make paddling at Conowingo Islands considerably rougher than many places in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, but as long as you choose an appropriate route, paddle under conditions suitable for your ability, and use good common sense, you should be fine.

It is easy to only focus on the giant stone structures when you're paddling, but there is much more to this area. The Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program rated the Conowingo Islands as “exceptional” based on its value in relation to ecological resources such as plants, vertebrates, invertebrates, natural communities, and

geologic features. This rich environment also supports old growth trees, 17 plant [species of concern](#), and three animal species of concern. Additionally, the Nature Conservancy considers the islands “highly significant” for maintaining biological diversity in Pennsylvania.

If John Edward Vandersloot were still alive, I suspect he would be pleased to know that at Conowingo Islands, great work is being done to promote the beauty of nature. Some of this is accomplished by preserving, protecting, and making the area accessible for recreational use while other efforts are being made to recognize and maintain its ecological significance. It took thousands of years for Mother Nature to sculpt the huge rocks that comprise the Conowingo Islands; let’s hope they’re around for a few thousand more.



*Figure 14: Upper Bear Island*



For more information see

[Bay Journal – A rockin’ paddle at Conowingo Islands](#)

[Pennsylvania Wilds – The Susquehanna: One of the Oldest Rivers](#)

[Uncharted Lancaster – Lancaster’s Darkest Chapter: The Massacre of the Conestoga](#)

[AltNature – Trilliums, Birthroot, Beth Root](#)

[American Whitewater – Holtwood Dam – Susquehanna \(PA\)](#)

[Susquehanna Greenway Partnership – Conowingo Reservoir Loop](#)

[Exelon Generation – Conowingo Hydroelectric Project FERC Project Number 405](#)

[Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program – Conowingo Islands](#)

[Susquehanna River Basin Commission – Conowingo Pond Management Plan, Publication No. 242](#)