

Paddling the Anacostia – Washington, D.C.'s Forgotten River

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Figure 1: Kayaking on Kingman Lake

The first time I paddled on the Anacostia River, it was a mess. It was hard to enjoy the lush greenery that buffered the river from development and gave certain portions a secluded oasis-like feel because of all the trash floating on the water, hanging from downed trees, and piled up on the shore. That was 2003, the same year that the much-needed [Anacostia Waterfront Initiative](#) Plan was created to revitalize the area. Urban renewal was beginning in many neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and I wondered if similar efforts could transform the Anacostia into a shining example of how an urban waterway could go from polluted to pristine.

Sixteen years later, in the summer of 2019, I launched my standup paddleboard (SUP) from the [Anacostia Park boat ramp](#) and paddled my way through what might be the most picturesque spot in the Anacostia River watershed. Once considered one of the most polluted rivers in the United States, Washington D.C.'s "[forgotten river](#)" is making an amazing comeback. In fact, the area that I paddled was actually declared [swimmable](#) at the time of this writing. As I paddled through these scenic wetlands filled with a multitude of wildlife, it was obvious that efforts to protect and restore the watershed are heading in the right direction.

It started in 1918, when legislation was enacted to preserve the now 1200-acre Anacostia Park. A century later, the \$25 million [Anacostia River Tunnel](#) was completed, reducing sewer overflows by at least 80%

and improving water quality. That same year, Washington, D.C. mayor Muriel Bowser declared 2018 the “[Year of the Anacostia](#).” Clearly, the city is committed to improving the river.

When I arrived at Anacostia Park that morning, I couldn't help but notice all the people walking, running, and bicycling on the 20-mile-long [Anacostia Riverwalk Trail](#). There were also people using the park for group fitness classes and folks rowing on the river. Signs at the park announced family skate night, concerts, historic bike tours, family fishing days, and dance performances. This park is a true mecca for recreation in the Washington, D.C. area.

With a little help from the morning [flood tide](#), my wife, dog, and I paddled upstream on the Anacostia River to the [National Arboretum](#). Along the way, I spotted what first appeared to be a log but turned out to be a very large snapping turtle sticking its head above the water. I also saw several cormorants and numerous eastern painted turtles. At mile 2.35, we pulled over at the [Arboretum's floating pier](#). After securing our SUP and kayak, we ventured on land and explored the trails and flora in the Asian Collections section. We were tempted to make our visit an all-day activity by exploring the rest of this 446-acre horticultural wonderland, but instead we chose to resume paddling.



Figure 2: Cooling off under a Japanese Maple at the National Arboretum

[High tide](#) passed while we were at the Arboretum, so we paddled downstream with assistance from the [ebb tide](#). Rather than retrace our route, we decided to circumnavigate the man-made [Kingman Island](#) by taking a detour via [Kingman Lake](#). Paddling under a small bridge at the lake's north entrance, we noticed its supports were covered with skins shed by dragonfly nymphs that had molted as they transitioned into adults. The north side of this lake features a gorgeous tidal marsh where we saw about a dozen great egrets. We took our time soaking in the natural beauty of the area, meandering between various small islands lined with cattails, spatterdock, and wild rice. But Mother Nature's stopwatch was ticking and we needed to leave the area before it got too shallow. Plan your visit to the north side of Kingman Lake within 90 minutes of high tide.



Figure 3: Great egret on Kingman Lake

Passing under Benning Road, we encountered a floating debris boom which traps floating trash to be recorded for research and monitoring. Most kayaks and canoes can easily cross this obstacle by getting a running start and paddling over the middle part of one of the rounded sections. SUPs and boats with fixed rudders will find this a little more challenging.

Paddling south through Kingman Lake, we landed at a [floating pier](#) between [Kingman Island and Heritage Island](#) at mile 3.85. There, we ran into Lee Cain, Director of Kingman Island, as he prepared to lead a group on an [Anacostia Watershed Society](#) canoe trip. This organization, along with the [Anacostia Riverkeeper](#), [Living Classrooms](#), and thousands of volunteers, support conservation and recreation efforts in the Anacostia River watershed. After tying our SUP and kayak to the pier, my wife, dog, and I walked about a quarter mile to the Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Stadium to check out the farmer's market, new sports fields, and fresh landscaping built as part of the Anacostia revitalization efforts.



Figure 4: Anacostia Watershed Society canoe tour on Kingman Lake

Continuing south on the lake, I remembered exploring the trails on both islands during a previous visit and seeing signs listing the various activities that take place on the larger Kingman Island. Its most popular attraction is the [Kingman Island Bluegrass and Folk Festival](#), which draws about 15,000 attendees to what one critic calls a “can’t miss event.” I’m definitely adding that to my bucket list.

We completed our circumnavigation by returning to the Anacostia River near the remains of a bridge foundation. A short distance later, we landed at Anacostia Park to finish our 4.85-mile paddling adventure.

As I unloaded gear at the boat ramp, a local approached me and asked about our trip. He inquired about the amount of trash on the water. I replied that it was noticeable but nowhere near as bad as it was in 2003. He was in total agreement.

So, what does the future hold for the Anacostia River watershed? The [Waterway to 2025](#) vision hopes to restore the Anacostia to a fishable and swimmable healthy urban river by 2025. Some people think this is a lofty, unrealistic goal, but after seeing firsthand how far we've come, I am optimistic.