

***Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award
Nomination for Twyla Cheatwood, NOAA Fisheries Service***



This award is established in memory of Dr. Melissa Laser who passed away unexpectedly on April 27, 2010. Melissa was a biologist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources where she worked tirelessly to protect, improve, and restore aquatic ecosystems in Maine and along the entire Atlantic Coast.

NOAA Fisheries proudly nominates Ms. Twyla Cheatwood for the Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award. Ms. Cheatwood champions restoration of fish passage for Atlantic Coast diadromous fishes by leading partnerships between federal, state, local entities. Ms. Cheatwood led detailed examination of American eel passage at Roanoke Rapids Dam, including comparisons to other dams in the northeast, identifying environmental variables agencies now use for optimizing eel passage within Roanoke Basin. If not for Ms. Cheatwood, the utility's monitoring data would have been misapplied, but now is available to guide others. Ms. Cheatwood leads state and federal agencies in a multiyear effort to establish fish passage for American shad, Atlantic sturgeon, and other species at Juliette Dam in the Altamaha River Basin. FERC revoked the project license in 2014 leaving few options. Ms. Cheatwood accepted this challenge and worked with NGOs to make fish passage their priority, including initiating studies documenting the ongoing, deleterious effects of the dam on Atlantic sturgeon. Lastly, Ms. Cheatwood leads state and federal agencies in their efforts to reestablish fish passage for American shad at Emporia Dam on the Meherrin River. Ms. Cheatwood is particularly adept at leveraging FERC's authorities to force the facility operator to take actions. As a result of her efforts, fish passage this season greatly improved over previous years and FERC is requiring additional actions for coming years. Ms. Cheatwood is an effective and strategic champion for diadromous fishes and riverine habitats, and she inspires others to join the effort.



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Wildlife Resources

Travis Voyles
*Secretary of Natural
and Historic Resources*

Ryan J. Brown
Executive Director

June 16, 2023

Pace Wilber, PhD
South Atlantic and Caribbean Branch Chief
Habitat Conservation Division
NOAA Fisheries Service
331 Ft Johnson Road
Charleston, SC 29412
Pace.wilber@noaa.gov

Re: Letter in support of the nomination of Twyla Cheatwood, NOAA Fisheries Fishery Biologist, for the Laser Award

Dear Mr. Wilber:

I am writing this letter in support of the nomination of Twyla Cheatwood, NOAA Fisheries Fishery Biologist, for the ACFHP Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award. The Emporia Dam fish passage project has a long history of less-than-ideal passage of target anadromous fish species. This has been a long-term problem for both VDWR and our federal partner agencies due in part to the FERC Exemption changing hands several times along with challenging conditions at this very old dam. Non-compliance by the current Exemption holder is problematic. About two years ago Twyla reached out to us at DWR to begin tackling this problem. We formed the "Emporia Resource Agency Fish Passage Team" consisting of NOAA, VDWR and USFWS fisheries biologists and fish passage engineers. Twyla assumed the leadership role of our group and has been keeping everyone on track to make progress. She has been doing a great job coordinating efforts with FERC, writing numerous letters to either the licensee, FERC or both concerning non-compliance issues and comments on the project's operation and maintenance plan. Twyla has helped organize and attend several site visits with the agencies and licensee as well as a meeting with the City of Emporia (owners of the dam). She has also organized and led several resource agency team meetings to keep us all moving forward toward solutions. Her efforts to see that fish passage is improved at Emporia Dam are much appreciated by VDWR and will ultimately benefit the resource.

"Twyla's leadership and coordination in two years have upended decades of negligence at the fish passage structure at Emporia Dam. There's still a long way to go, but she has demonstrated great patience and dedication to providing effective fish passage here and elsewhere," said Clint Morgeson, VDWR Regional Aquatics Manager. Twyla is also an active member of the Virginia Alosa Task Force. This further expresses her interest and dedication to seeing that anadromous fish resources are improved and protected in Virginia.

Pace Wilber
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For all of these reasons, Twyla has demonstrated that she is deserving of the Laser Award due to her extraordinary dedication to improving anadromous fish resources. Thank you for the opportunity for those of us at VDWR to provide this letter of support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L. Alan Weaver". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

L. Alan Weaver
VDWR Fish Passage Coordinator/VATF Chair

Cc: Clint Morgeson
Eric Brittle
Fritz Rohde

Equal Opportunity Employment, Programs and Facilities



16 June 2023

Mr. Pace Wilber
Habitat Conservation Division, Southeast Regional Office
National Marine Fisheries Service
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

Letter of Support for Twyla Cheatwood - Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award

Mr. Wilber,

It is my pleasure to write this letter in support of Twyla Cheatwood's nomination for the Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award from the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP). I was the biological lead for Dominion Energy's hydropower relicensing efforts at the Roanoke Rapids and Gaston Hydropower stations and had the privilege to deliberate and collaborate on the many complex ecological studies that the Diadromous Fish Restoration Technical Advisory Committee is tasked with solving.

Twyla was instrumental in leading the detailed analysis of upstream American Eel passage at Roanoke Rapids Dam including comparisons to other impoundments in the northeast with a goal of identifying the environmental variables responsible for triggering upstream migrations. Her leadership, effective communication, and tenacious attention to detail throughout this analysis were critical to the success of capturing and illustrating the monitoring data we have been collecting for years into peer-reviewed published literature. This publication is now available to guide other hydropower facilities and agencies seeking to develop new or to optimize existing eel passage facilities.

As mentioned above, she is a very effective communicator, and I would like to bring attention to her dedication and enthusiasm which were contagious for this effort and continue to percolate into the other ongoing collaborative ecological projects at Roanoke Rapids and Gaston. She embodies the heart of the ACFHP vision as well as the spirit of Melissa Laser by having an exceptional ability to be an active listener and tremendous facilitator during complex conversations while maintaining a focus on the ecological restoration and protection of the Roanoke River watershed. Awarding this honor to Twyla ensures the legacy of remarkable individuals remains intact with attention focused on the horizon of ecological conservation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pete Sturke", written in a cursive style.

Pete Sturke
Environmental Consultant

Scott Cuppett – Hudson River Estuary Program, NY

Scott's early life shaped him to work tirelessly to remove dams and improve culverts throughout the Hudson Valley, New York. Scott was born in Johnstown, PA and he saw firsthand the devastation of the Laurel Run Dam collapse – he knew families that lost members and was able to see the destruction in the town for years after. As a teen, he became passionate about kayaking. This passion made him appreciate the value of a wild, natural river and, combined with his early experience with a dam collapse, set the stage for his life's work.

Scott has worked for more than twenty years as the Watershed Team Leader for the Hudson River Estuary Program. Through his work there, he has envisioned and shaped many projects to improve the aquatic connectivity of the Hudson Valley. Accomplishments of particular note:

- Forged partnerships with a suite of local advocacy groups to raise public awareness about the benefits of dam removal – and removed dams!
- Was instrumental in the removal of dams on the Wynantskill, Furnace/Jamawissa, Quassaick, and Wappingers Creeks, as well as the development of design and engineering work on dozens of additional dams.
- Oversaw the development and implementation of a culvert project that assessed the impact of thousands of culverts on aquatic connectivity – approximately 3200 square miles of watershed. These assessments have been incorporated into 38 municipally based RSC management plans, generated design drawings for dozens of culvert improvements and results in the replacement of many culverts with designs that are more friendly to aquatic organisms.
- Was recently selected to co-chair a DEC dam removal workgroup that spans 8 DEC Divisions that aims to develop policy, funding, and educational recommendations that address obstacles to the removal of dams in New York State.

Scott's quiet determination and personable approach has made him very effective at working both within New York State government and with external partners including federal agencies and NGOs. This low key style is very effective, but does not always lead to acknowledgment of important contributions to the aquatic systems of the Hudson Valley. Granting Scott the Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award would acknowledge Scott's impressive contributions to the Hudson River Estuary.



Scott Cuppett was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a small town that bears the ignoble distinction and visible scars of two catastrophic dam failures and several large-scale flooding events that claimed the lives of many. The Johnstown Flood of 1889 is considered the fourth largest civilian casualty event in United States history. During this event, the South Fork Dam collapsed and subsequently caused 2,208 people to perish, though it is believed that hundreds more transient, impoverished people who lived anonymously in shanties alongside the creek were also believed to have died. With that staggering death toll, 396 children also perished during the raging torrent. Then in 1977, the Laurel Run Dam failed and the attendant flooding caused another 78 persons to perish with an additional 50,000 rendered homeless. Johnstown was also inundated by epic flooding in 1894, 1907, 1924 and 1936 as well as the previously mentioned incidents. Point Park in Johnstown lies at the confluence of Stony Creek and the Little Conemaugh Rivers, and bears an eternal flame that burns in memory for all the flood victims.

That eternal flame also burns bright in Scott Cuppett's memory. Scott Cuppett's life is a living testament to the infamous dam failures and epic flooding that is permanently etched in his hometown's history and is surely imprinted in his work. Scott witnessed the devastation caused by Laurel Run Dam failure firsthand and had friends who lost family members. With rivers flowing through the center of his hometown, and through the center of his heart, Scott became a passionate kayaker, angler, and conservationist, all of which made him appreciate the fundamental value of wild, free-flowing rivers and set the stage for his life's work.

Scott Cuppett has forged a life tirelessly working to restore the flow and functionality of rivers to benefit both human societies and the ecological communities. Scott has been the silent vanguard at the NYSDEC who helped break the New York's inertia around dam removal by helping to generate incipient energy and build the momentum to remove obsolete dams in the Hudson Valley that no longer serve a viable purpose, but now only block migratory species and native freshwater species from accessing ancestral freshwater habitat. Scott has resolutely worked on furthering dam removal in NYS and often anonymously in the shadows of the sidelines to generate public knowledge and stakeholder interest in removing obsolete dams and rectifying misaligned culverts throughout the Hudson Valley, and main-streamed the concept. Scott cheered for those who received awards and received recognition without complaint or grumble. He has doggedly pursued a challenging mission, because the Hudson River is unceremoniously recognized as the largest superfund site in the United States due to a dam removal gone awry, which mobilized PCBs downstream into the river's ecosystems. Consequently, while other states were moving ahead in dam removals, New York lagged behind. Thankfully, those days are largely behind us, as New York State fully recognizes that dam removal when properly planned has extraordinary benefit to stream ecology, fluvial function, migratory fish passage, and sometime even human communities. However, it is the unsung work of people like Scott Cuppett who endorsed dam removal as a viable prescription for riverine restoration and an effective means to help restore migratory fishes and native, imperiled freshwater species. In my opinion, no single person in NYS has been more instrumental in the field of dam removal, riparian habitat restoration, and improving the lives of historically marginalized people living under a threat of flooding than Scott Cuppett.

Scott has worked for more than twenty years for the NYSDEC Division of Water Resources as the Watershed Team Leader for the Hudson River Estuary Program. Throughout his career at NYSDEC, Scott



has created the inspiration, forethought, and fulfillment to shape wide array of projects that have improved habitat integrity and aquatic connectivity of the Hudson Valley. Scott has spoken up often against the bureaucratic grain as an ardent supporter of dam removal and has worked to streamlining the removal process for low-head dams and at times potentially jeopardized his career in doing so. Despite potentially impacting his career potential, Scott has spoken up to support dam removal and streamlining dam removal policies, because he knows that ecological justice and environmental justice are often intersectional and by staying silent reinforces the status quo.

Some of Scott's accomplishments of particular note:

- Instrumental in brokering the deal to remove of the first dam on a Hudson River tributary expressly for fish passage.
- Pivotal point person in securing state funding and necessary permits the for dam removal projects on Hudson River tributaries: Furnace Brook/Jamawissa Creek, Quassaick Creek, Wappingers Creeks, Moodna Creek, Claverack Creek, Mill Creek, Cedar Pond Brook, Sprout Brook, Fishkill Creek, Wappingers Creek as well as the development of design and engineering work on dozens of additional dams.
- Envisioned establishing a dedicated person employed by Riverkeeper to become an outspoken voice for dam removal, fish passage, habitat restoration, aquatic conservation, riparian habitat connectivity, and other restoration opportunities in the Hudson Valley.
- Forged a partnership with the advocacy group Riverkeeper to raise public awareness about the benefits of dam removal – and removed dams!
- Oversaw the development and implementation of a culvert assessment project in the Hudson Valley.
- Studied the ecological impacts caused by an estimated 20,000 culverts, and discovered that approximately 60-percent are misaligned, causing extensive impacts to aquatic connectivity.
- Facilitated training programs to instruct the instructors
- Fostered the replacement of misaligned culverts with habitat-friendly designs that are hydraulically more efficient
- Selected to co-chair a DEC dam removal working group spanning 8 NYSDEC regions that aims to develop policy, funding, permitting, and educational recommendations that address fundamental obstacles and streamline the process to the remove dams in New York State.
- Created and engaged task forces of stakeholders, NGOs, federal agencies, state agencies, community partners, watershed alliances, sportsmen's groups, and county soil and water agencies to address improve aquatic connectivity in the Hudson Valley, which for the second largest estuary on the East coast of the United States.

Scott Cuppett is an extraordinary person and dedicated environmentalist whose physically robust appearance blends perfectly with his unassuming confidence, and stalwart adherence to moral convictions, especially those in restoring habitat and improving the lives of others. Scott is also an amazing family man whose incredible son's will are continuing in his footstep as they are actively engaged in scholastic endeavors in the aquatic ecology. Scott's quiet determination and personable approach has made him very effective at working both within the intricacies of New York State government and with federal agencies,



and a litany of partners. Scott's restrained style is very effective, but unfortunately does not result in him receiving the proper acknowledgment for his important contributions to the aquatic ecosystems and environmental justice communities in the Hudson Valley. In my honest opinion Scott Cuppett has done more for habitat restoration, climate justice, fish conservation, fish passage, aquatic connectivity than any other person in NYS. Granting Scott the Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award would at least acknowledge Scott's impressive contributions to the Hudson River Estuary and towards the mainstreaming of the concept of dam removal and culvert efficiency. I assure the above statements are true, and because of his prescient vision, I was the person hired by Riverkeeper to help remove dams and restore aquatic habitat in the Hudson Valley. In the Hudson Valley, we now have a slew of high-priority dams waiting for funding in order to remove them. These dams' existence are severely threatened because Scott Cuppett had a creative and self-less vision for the Hudson River's ecological potential and community resiliency.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Respectfully,

George Jackman

Habitat Restoration Director
Riverkeeper, Inc.
20 Secor Road
Ossining, NY 10562
718-736-3991

Andrew Button of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission has been key to the successful implementation of oyster restoration, fishery management, and aquaculture initiatives in Virginia. Although his work spans a multitude of activities with an array of stakeholders throughout the Chesapeake Bay region, I am nominating Andrew for his work in oyster restoration.

Andrew has coordinated an extensive oyster restoration program to meet the five tributaries goal of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement and exceeded that goal by restoring a sixth additional tributary, the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River.

Andrew's work on the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River is perhaps most impressive because few others saw this tributary, which had been described as the "lost branch" due to lack of past restoration efforts, as worthy of restoration. Andrew's willingness to work in this tributary was key to the construction of over 20 acres of oyster habitat.

Andrew has served as a leader for oyster restoration efforts, including the largest oyster restoration project in the world, in the Piankaintank River. Andrew's successes in the Piankatank include construction of over 100 acres of reefs funded through federal, state, and non-profit organizations. He provided similar results in the Great Wicomico River with completion of 24 acres of reefs.

Currently, Andrew is overseeing completion of oyster restoration efforts in the Lower York River which includes approximately 150 acres completed in 2022 alone.

Perhaps most importantly, Andrew is always willing to share his experience and expertise with a wide range of audiences to move oyster restoration and wise oyster management forward.



June 16, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my honor to recommend Andrew Button, Deputy Chief, Shellfish Management Division Head, Conservation and Replenishment, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, for the 2023 Dr. Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award. Andrew has worked with the Elizabeth River Project on a number of oyster reef restoration projects which have shown significant success over the last three years. Because of his leadership and willingness to partner with not-for-profits, Virginia is on a path to achieving its oyster restoration goals by 2025 under the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. There are few goals in this agreement which will be met, however the success of oyster restoration in Virginia can be attributed to Andrew's willingness to develop deep and meaningful partnerships with the oyster community.

In 2020 Andrew partnered with Elizabeth River Project to restore over 18 acres of oyster habitat in the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River. Elizabeth River Project was able to guide \$1.5 M from a Natural Resources Damaged case on the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River to Virginia Marine Resources Commission in 2019. Andrew was quick to meet with us and together we selected locations for the reefs and laid out means and methods for creating these new habitats. Andrew included us throughout the entire process and within one year he developed a contract, procured a marine contractor, and oversaw the construction of the reef. As a result of this effort the Eastern Branch became another tributary in Virginia to be fully restored for oyster habitat. In addition, current monitoring by Andrew and this staff has shown that the reefs are meeting the required success criteria for oyster restoration in the Chesapeake Bay.

This past year Andrew worked with Elizabeth River Project and Norfolk Southern to install a new three acre reef on the Mainstem of the Elizabeth River. Again, Andrew showed his leadership by coordinating efforts with Elizabeth River Project and partners and we expect reef construction to start in July 2023. This new reef will serve as a significant structure for oyster recruitment while also attracting fin fish.

As you can see Andrew has shown the key characteristics which the Dr. Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award was developed to showcase. I hope the ACFHP can see the significant conservation, restoration, and enhancement work that he is leading in the Chesapeake Bay.

Sincerely,

Joe Rieger
Joe Rieger

May 30, 2023



To Whom It May Concern:

It is my pleasure to provide the strongest recommendation in support of Andrew Button, Deputy Chief, Shellfish Management Division Head, Conservation and Replenishment, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, for the 2023 Dr. Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award. Andrew Button is a consummate professional held in the highest regard by partners in the oyster restoration field in Virginia, Maryland and globally. Over the past decade, Andrew has led the largest oyster reef construction project on the planet in the Piankatank River, Virginia and has set Virginia on a path to achieving its oyster restoration goals by 2025 under the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.

Andrew, through the habitat restoration work led by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, has partnered with The Nature Conservancy, The US Army Corps of Engineers, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and with local waterman and the oyster industry to successfully establish more than 400 acres of new oyster habitat in Virginia's waters. Reefs constructed by VMRC under Andrew's leadership are managed as sanctuaries with some constructed for managed harvests.

And the investments made under Andrew's leadership have been successful. From 2016-2018, researchers from Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Environmental Studies and Rice Rivers Center documented the activity of fish populations at newly established oyster reefs in the Piankatank River. The studies documented utilization of reef resources by recreationally and commercially important fish species. Some of the most valued fish resources from the Chesapeake Bay were shown to have a strong connection to oyster reef habitats either as nursery habitat, for young to feed and grow while utilizing the protection that reef habitats afford, and as feeding grounds for adult species regularly visiting the reef. Visitors to the newly constructed reefs included Gray Snapper, Sandbar sharks, Striped Bass, Cobia, Bluefish, Summer Flounder, among others.

VCU stated that continued habitat enhancement efforts of this scale will likely benefit the entire ecosystem of the lower Piankatank River and into the Chesapeake Bay. Increased habitat complexity will improve habitat availability to young and developing fishes, increase potential food resources for juveniles and adults, and support the existing diverse community present.

I have had the privilege of working with a number of habitat restoration specialists around the globe, and Andrew Button is far and away the most positive, collaborative, dedicated practitioner I have had the opportunity to work with. Andrew pursues his passion and love for oyster restoration and management with a smile and in a spirit of cooperation toward large-scale system-level success. I look forward to continued work and partnership with Andrew. It is my sincere hope that his steadfast efforts in restoring the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population will be recognized.

Sincerely,

Andrew D. Lacatell
Virginia Chesapeake Bay Director
The Nature Conservancy
Richmond, Virginia
alacatell@tnc.org

Date: June 19, 2023

Reply: Dr. Chris Elkins, North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF)

Through: Dr. Wilson Laney, NCCF Representative on the ACFHP Steering Committee

To: Simen Kaalstad, Director, Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership

Re: Recommendation for Jack Spruill for the ACFHP Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award (Jack is not associated with ACFHP)

Projects: We were both involved with oyster shell recycling. Jack and volunteers collected millions of pounds of oyster shell. The recycled shell served multiple reef projects, partnering with PenderWatch & Conservancy to construct reefs in waters off the ICWW. He is donating his family farm to permanent conservation. This project will constitute a huge contribution to NC and the US. See:

<http://www.spruillfarm.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/spruillfarm/>

Jack also advocated for Atlantic Sturgeon federal listing via the Endangered Species Act. Listing the sturgeon in 2012 provided protection from gill nets in the Albemarle Sound/Roanoke River ecosystem which contains the largest NC reproducing population.

Jack has participated in conservation efforts benefitting estuarine and marine ecosystems, including salt marsh restoration and protection, and most recently advocacy for NC hardwood forests. These NC forests are being clear-cut and used to generate electricity in the UK and Japan through wood pellets manufacture. Some of this advocacy work is done in London. In May he and two fellow UK advocates twice met with Baroness Jenny Jones, a member of the House of Lords, to offer her help in her very outspoken opposition to the subsidy the UK government is paying. See:

<https://twitter.com/greenjennyjones/status/1659585720644673537?s=46&t=t85W2M-xrGvJ6Ljjh9PZHA>

Relationship to ACFHP Mission and Vision: Jack's work clearly accelerated the conservation, protection, and enhancement of habitat for native fish species through partnerships and maintaining healthy, thriving habitats.

Personal Qualities: Jack's unique blend of passion, energy and dedication have inspired many of his volunteers, not to mention the value of the educational component of his work.

Respectfully Submitted, Chris Elkins PhD, NCCF Member