

## **Nomination Statement**

*Up to two pages describing the contribution, with details of the nominee's role and the extent to which the contribution has benefited Fairfax County.*

I nominate Meghan Fellows, Natural Resource Specialist and Invasive Management Coordinator for the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA), for the 2010 Environmental Excellence Award for county employees.

I am the Executive Director of the Earth Sangha, a local environmental nonprofit and the 2009 recipient of the Environmental Excellence Award for organizations. I have worked closely with Meghan for over seven years. During that time, I have also collaborated with many other FCPA employees, so even though I have never been a county employee myself, I believe that I have a reasonably accurate understanding of the context within which Meghan works. Meghan and I are usually in touch on a weekly basis and sometimes more frequently than that. This is because we have to coordinate our efforts on controlling invasive alien plants in various county parks, and on replanting controlled areas with natives. (The replanting is often done with stock from the Sangha's Wild Plant Nursery.) We also coordinate volunteer activities; for example, I sometimes refer volunteer groups to Meghan, if she needs additional labor for Park Authority projects. Meghan, in turn, keeps me abreast of plant rescue opportunities—she tells us about places where groundwork is going to disturb native plant communities, so that we can remove the most valuable specimens for replanting elsewhere on park properties. And finally, Meghan and I share information on unusual native plants that we encounter in our field work. Such information is important for Park Authority land management; it also helps guide our own nursery and restoration programs.

Over the years, I have grown more and more appreciative of Meghan's ability to function as an effective collaborator for the natural areas in the Park Authority's care. Meghan is meticulous; she obviously understands the spirit of conservation, but she is also very careful to keep conservation activities within the letter of Park Authority regulations. This may sound like kind of a no-brainer thing to do, but it can actually be quite difficult. For example, much of our progress at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, where we are clearing invasive alien plants and reestablishing natives, is the result of Meghan's ability to "package" our operations in a way that keep us within the regs, but that still allows the volunteers to own their progress. That's a hard balance to strike, but without it, I believe the project would have either collapsed or stagnated long ago; instead, we continue to make strong progress on our objectives for that park. Even though Meghan is not a gregarious person, she has formidable political skills.

But most of my reasons for believing that Meghan deserves this award have to do with her role in the FCPA Invasives Management Area (IMA) program. IMA is a volunteer-based invasive alien plant control program. It is designed to: 1) educate the public about the invasive threat; 2) train volunteers to remove invasives; and 3) connect trained volunteers, as IMA Leaders, to particular infestations in county parks, where they can work with the help of additional volunteers that the leaders themselves recruit. IMA is of critical importance to conservation in Fairfax County because invasives are probably the second-greatest threat, after habitat loss, to natural areas in our region.

As I understand it, Meghan was the driving force behind this program when it was begun in 2006. Although most people working on local conservation issues, both for the county and elsewhere, understood that invasives were a huge problem, it was Meghan who really put the issue on the county's political map.

Since then, Meghan has obtained grant funding for IMA, notably from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed program. The funding that she obtained was a crucial supplement to the start-up funding appropriated for IMA by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors under the county's Environmental Improvement Program. Although I cannot prove it, I am convinced that without Meghan's grantwriting, IMA would not have survived the recession. (I believe that county funding for IMA ceased in 2009.)

Meghan has personally recruited and trained numerous IMA site leaders, some of whom have now become influential local voices for conservation in their own right. For example, the IMA leader for the park closest to my house (Gregg Sykes, who works in Royal Park), not only conducts regular volunteer events at his site, but writes frequently about his work in the local community newsletter.

In addition to training volunteers, Meghan used some of her grant funding to hire paid interns, to work on some of the larger IMA sites. Our organization benefitted directly from this effort on more than one occasion, when Meghan sent her interns to help with our work at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve. And it was obvious from the way that the interns worked, that Meghan had succeeded, not just in hiring enthusiastic people, but in building a real team.

To advance IMA's public education objective, Meghan created a booklet on local invasives—a clever photo ID guide that covers the most common and troublesome species in our region. She even bought a camera and took some of the photos for the booklet. The booklet received a national award and has proved popular enough so that the Park Authority now sells it.

Meghan's work for IMA is not just a nine-to-five office thing. Meghan personally visits—and works at—IMA sites, often on weekends. And in collaboration with her colleague, Kathy Frederick, Meghan has developed a full outreach agenda for IMA. (Kathy has been with the Park Authority for about three years; I believe that she works exclusively on IMA.) Among other things, Meghan and Kathy speak to groups about the program, put out press releases, visit interested (or anxious) homeowners whose properties adjoin parks, and reach out to potential allies. This would be a full agenda, even if Meghan had nothing else to do, but Meghan actually has many responsibilities within the Park Authority besides IMA.

Thanks in large measure to Meghan's efforts, IMA is becoming a major force for local conservation. Some program statistics for 2009: 42 sites worked, of which 18 were over an acre; nearly 1,300 participants (up about one-third from 2008); over 3,000 volunteer hours logged (an 18% increase from 2008); and 20 plantings done (14 with seedlings and 6 with native grass seed). Since its inception four years ago, IMA has attracted over 3,650 volunteers, who logged nearly 15,000 hours—an equivalent of more than two years' worth of workdays. And IMA's effectiveness extends beyond its own immediate achievements. In ways large and small, IMA has helped advance our own work in Fairfax County parks; no doubt that is true for some other conservation nonprofits as well.

In summary, if I had to reduce my nomination to bullet points, I would say that Meghan deserves your consideration for five aspects of her work:

1. Vision. Meghan didn't just notice that invasives were menace to our parks—she figured out a way to do something about it.
2. Collaborative skill. Meghan knows how to build projects that will attract independent organizations like our own.
3. Ability to find independent funding. Invasives control is not exactly a glamor issue, so Meghan's successful grantwriting was a major achievement.
4. Effective program management. Often, people who do "vision" are not very good managers; the county is fortunate that Meghan has both capabilities.
5. Commitment. Meghan's willingness to devote a substantial share of her own personal time to our parks, year after year, has made her an increasingly important voice for conservation—and a trusted ally for nonprofits like us.