

OP-ED

A feast for city eyes [Commentary]

By Patricia Schultheis
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I have city eyes. Apparently I was born with them. Whenever my parents and sisters exclaimed about the beauty of a beet plucked from our Connecticut garden, I would think, "Mmmm ... a beet ... cousin of the sugar beet, source of that white powder sprinkled on those twisty crullers from Howland's Department Store. I really do like a good department store."

Even now, decades later, my nature-loving friends seem to regard my preference for bricks and mortar over field and stream as a genetic defect, but I can't help myself. As opposed to nature's landscapes, my eyes see beauty in man-made environments: the farmer's market under the Jones Falls Expressway; the Christmas displays on 34th Street in Hampden, a geranium on a Charles Village windowsill. For me, that geranium is nature enough — you've got your dirt, your basic green, your splotch of red. What more do you need?







Along with my city eyes, however, I also have an abundant curiosity. So, this fall I decided to see what stirs such a tizzy in my nature-loving friends and signed up for a hiking course offered by the Community College of Baltimore County. A sunny Saturday found me, our instructor and one other classmate in a parking lot off Belair Road at an entrance to Gunpowder State Park. There, I watched a group of Koreans gather, form a prayer circle, then swing down an incline, through a culvert under Belair Road and into the park. We soon followed. Fifty yards in, Belair Road was out of sight; 200 yards in, it was out of earshot. We were in the woods.

And they were beautiful.

Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of United States presidents and keen observer of 19th century America, confesses in his memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*, to being struck low by the "overpowering beauty and sweetness of the Maryland autumn." Oh, Henry, I agree!

Somehow the angle of Maryland's autumn light blurs colors so the golds and yellows and reds and browns and purples burn brightly in the center but soften around the edges — as if some kindly painter has gifted us with a canvas that's especially easy on the eyes. Here, the autumn colors don't compete with each other, rather, like potluck dishes at a neighborhood dinner, they blend with and complement each other.

I've been in 46 of the 50 states, and each has its wonders. Grand Canyon, Teton, Big Sur, they inspire, awe and humble, but they do not dust an onlooker with the poignant sweetness Henry Adams experienced in his long ago Maryland autumn. Toward the end of our hike, my classmate, Linda, stopped to take a picture of the Gunpowder. "Look," she said, "look at that." And, there on the river, silver sunlight shimmered and danced in a grand display of dabbled abandon. What a gift to these old city eyes.

While the aftereffects of my hike were still resonating in my muscles, I read with great interest that Maryland hopes to make a considerable addition to its wildland acreage. Wildlands are state-owned areas that have retained the character of wilderness, or which are home to rare or vanishing species. Currently Maryland designates 44,000 acres as wildland, and this new plan will add an additional 27,000 acres, all of which will be available to anyone wanting to take a walk in the woods. Like state parks, wildlands provide opportunities for hiking and fishing, although they offer fewer other amenities.

Since I moved to Maryland in 1965, the state's population has increased by nearly two and a half million, roughly 68 percent. During my hike, I saw some of the newest members of that increase. Like miniature potentates, they surveyed the landscape while riding high in carriers on their parents' backs. Those babies will be a shade shy of their thirtieth birthdays when the state's population will have added another million-plus, so they'll need every bit of public green space possible. I hope they get it. Even if they grow up preferring urban grit to sylvan streams as I do, someday, perhaps they'll step into the woods and discover a wondrous new feast for their city eyes

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