



**SIERRA
CLUB**

VIRGINIA CHAPTER

Virginia Sierran

The Official Newsletter of the Sierra Club Virginia Chapter
Summer 2026

Chat, is Generative AI Bad for Me? by Mai Kubin

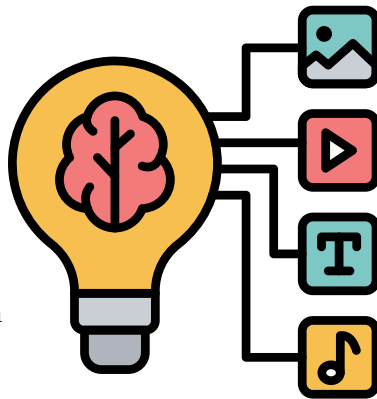
Great question! AI has been scientifically proven to be good for productivity and problem-solving in professional and personal lives.

Well, that's probably what a generative AI platform would say. And just as I'm skeptical of generative AI as a concept, I'm extremely wary of generative AI's prevalence in our society. Classrooms, corporations, non-profits, and government spaces are being encouraged every day to incorporate some form of generative AI. People use chatbots as a search engine or even to mimic human interactions. As if the world wasn't in a bad enough state already, we're now giving up what makes us human: critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity.

As a college student, the presence of generative AI in the classroom is a constant topic of conversation. Professors have to set clear standards in their syllabi and meticulously check that students' work is original. Similarly, students worry about false accusations of using generative AI on completely original work and suffering academic sanctions without any wrongdoing. At younger ages, generative AI stunts critical thinking through a phenomenon called "cognitive offloading." This is logically harmful to all ages, but for children who should be developing critical thinking skills, cognitive offloading will likely have long-term effects we cannot fathom.

Generative AI concerns are also felt in the media we consume. Stories, images, and videos circulate on the internet but are entirely fabricated. This can cause significant damage to individuals or organizations, like when Twitter's (now called X) AI generated inappropriate content based on women's and girls' photos. Almost everyone on social media has likely been fooled by an animal jumping on a trampoline or a similar AI-generated post. Similarly, creative/artistic spaces are struggling to compete with AI-generated images and songs. Art in any form is a difficult environment in which to earn a living wage, for dozens of reasons not strictly relevant here. But when anyone can create a song, video, or image for "free," artists' creative contributions to society are limited. Additionally, AI can set unrealistic standards even as inspiration because it lacks artistic flair and doesn't always align with reality.

AI chatbots are programmed to affirm prompts, which can cause significant psychological damage. Studies have found an increase in depressive symptoms across various age groups. There are multiple instances of individuals creating parasocial relationships with "their" generative



Save Our Roadless Areas by Sherman Bamford

Our roadless heritage is at risk of being lost unless we act together to protect it. The Trump regime has telegraphed its intention to eliminate protection for 45 million acres of roadless areas in the United States which have been protected for more than 25 years. Among these are 394,000 acres in Virginia, the largest acreage of any state east of the Mississippi River. Eight-four percent of this acreage is not protected otherwise, and could potentially be opened to logging, road-building, fracking and other development. An Environmental Impact Statement on this tragically harmful endeavor will soon be released.

On National Trails Day in early June, citizens gathered from across the Commonwealth to rally for the protection of roadless areas and hike the 27,000-acre Little River Roadless Area west of Harrisonburg. Both events were organized by the Shenandoah Group of Sierra Club.

At the June rally, Lynn Cameron of Friends of Shenandoah Mountain spoke of the 28 sensitive species found on Reddish Knob, several living nowhere else on earth. Ellen Stuart-Haentjens of Virginia Wilderness Committee pointed out that the headwaters of many rivers flowing to the Chesapeake Bay originate in roadless areas. Nationwide, the Forest Service has a \$6 billion maintenance backlog on its road system and building roads in roadless would only add to this deficit, according to Taxpayers for Common Sense. Visit www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2905372716475726 to view highlights from the Rally for the Roadless Rule.

The rally was followed by a 6-mile hike on the Timber Ridge Trail beginning at Reddish Knob, which is a breezy ridgeline trail that provided re-

spite from the heat, and several early summer flowers were still blooming along the way.

-Sherman Bamford



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Group Directory

Groups are organized to conduct the work of Sierra Club in local areas, cities and towns. The information listed below is for the chair of each group. Information for each groups' geographical area can be found on our website under [Find a Group Near You](#).

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This is Not a Plea for More Money

Don't be afraid to read further!

Thank you for supporting the important work being done by the Virginia Chapter. Without you, we wouldn't make progress on any of our initiatives, including: Pushing back against careless data center development; promoting solar, wind and other clean energy; persuading the

General Assembly to pass strong environmental legislation; fighting dirty gas plants; educating our community online and at protests and tabling events; taking people outside; and the list goes on... Your hard work, enthusiasm, networking—and, yes, dollars—are the key to our success. We appreciate you!

Those of you who donated so generously to our Chapter in the past—or are considering doing so in the future—did you know that by converting your annual contribution into a *monthly* contribution, you can do more to support our work without spending one more dollar? Become a monthly sustaining donor by dividing your donation into 12 monthly installments. (Should you choose to round up your monthly donation to the nearest \$10, \$50, or \$100, we won't object!) This is one of the most convenient (for you) and important (for us) ways you can support our work. No matter the amount, your monthly gift helps us plan our budget and our work, and provides a level of financial certainty at a time when environmental progress is under attack on so many fronts, including at the federal level.

Becoming a monthly donor is simple and easy to do online. Visit www.sierraclub.org/virginia/give and click "make a monthly gift." Gifts of all sizes matter and truly make a difference in powering our work. Join me in becoming a monthly donor to the Virginia Chapter. Thank you!

-Judy Gayer

Seeking Candidates for the Executive Committee

Would you like to have more influence over Sierra Club policies and actions as we work to create a cleaner, healthier future? We are currently accepting nominations for at-large delegates to the Virginia Chapter Executive Committee (ExCom).

Goal-setting and policy decisions for the Sierra Club are made by volunteer leaders, working with staff members we help to hire. The Virginia Chapter ExCom consists of eight elected at-large delegates and one delegate from each of our ten groups. The at-large members are elected by the general membership and serve two-year terms.

The nominating committee is seeking candidates for four at-large delegate positions to serve in 2027 and 2028. Responsibilities include: Attending five virtual meetings a year, participating in on-line voting when important issues arise, and maintaining an understanding of the environmental issues in our state. The deadline for submitting nominations is August 31st.

To learn more about becoming a Virginia Chapter ExCom member, please contact me at jcruckshank4@gmail.com or 434 973-0373.

-John Cruickshank, Nominations & Elections Committee

The Sierra Club is dedicated to diversity and equity and works to build leadership that reflects the communities it serves.



New Nonprofit Brings Solar to Unexpected Places by Ivy Main

Until now, renewable energy has been a rarity in underserved Virginia communities. Using funding from grants and donations, Norfolk Solar Solutions is installing free and low-cost solar systems on low-income homes and nonprofits in marginalized communities across the state.

Installations have been completed on the Higher Ground women's opioid recovery center in Lee County, the Oakwood Arts education facility in Richmond, and the residence of a low-income homeowner in Richmond. The latest project will use federal grant funding administered by the Virginia Department of Energy to provide a new roof, solar panels and a battery to the Peter Paul Development Center in Richmond's East End.

Norfolk Solar Solutions is the brainchild of Sierra Club member Ruth Amundsen, a retired NASA scientist and climate activist. Ruth spent years battling Dominion Energy over its failure to invest in renewable energy and eventually decided to do it herself. She learned how to use power purchase agreements (PPAs) to offer low-cost solar financing to schools, churches, and low-income individuals in the Norfolk area, then expanded efforts across the state.

Unfortunately, even low-cost solar may be out of reach for some customers. Many nonprofits operate on shoestring budgets, have little access to capital, and lack the know-how to navigate financing for big-ticket items like solar. At the same time, these organizations often provide essential services to lower-income, minority or other marginalized communities. Providing them with solar panels lowers their energy bills, freeing up additional resources to focus on serving their clients. These efforts also showcase solar energy and educates people about the benefits of renewable energy for their neighborhoods, Virginia and the planet.

With this in mind, Ruth and her business partner, Alden Cleanthes, recruited Sierra Club volunteer Ivy Main, and the three women launched Norfolk Solar Solutions to install solar for free or below cost wherever it can do the most good. Another Sierra Club volunteer, Tyla Matteson, provided a major donation to help fund the first projects. Several more are in the initial stages, aiding nonprofits in areas including Southwest Virginia, the Piedmont and Hampton Roads.

Ruth, Alden and Ivy are committed to running the nonprofit with

maximum transparency and minimum overhead. We plan to work with the environmental community, solar industry friends, other allies and donors to put solar on as many Virginia nonprofits as possible doing valuable work in their communities. We hope to install solar on residential homes in low income areas as funding allows.

Time is of the essence. Using PPAs as a financing tool gives Norfolk Solar Solutions access to federal tax credits, reducing costs of solar and allowing funds to go further. Unfortunately, the credits will be available only for projects completed before the end of 2027 thanks to the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. The race is on!

-Ivy Main

Norfolk Solar Solutions is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Donations are tax-deductible.

NORFOLK
SOLAR SOLUTIONS

Virginia Chapter Email Lists

Virginia Climate Movement: Join this list of people active in the Virginia climate movement to receive and send emails on climate-related news, events, webinars and actions going on across the state. Bi-weekly call on Thursdays at 10am. ☎️ Contact **Mary-Stuart Torbeck** at mary-stuart.torbeck@sierraclub.org

Sierra Club Virginia Chapter Equity, Inclusion and Environmental Justice: Join this list to work towards achieving environmental justice in Virginia. Our purpose is to identify environmental justice communities across the state, to develop EJ leadership, to provide room at the table for these organizations in statewide policy discussions and to share resources. This space is also for asking questions, voicing concerns and sharing ideas as we move forward in our work to create a more equitable environment and chapter. Contact **Robin Van Tine**, EJ Chair at 8greatblue@gmail.com ☎️

Richmond: Join this list to get updates about actions, events and ways to get involved in the Richmond metropolitan area. Contact **Tim Cywinski** at tim.cywinski@sierraclub.org.

Dominion Power and NextEra Merger Protest

On June 16th, nearly two dozen environmentalists from the Sierra Club, Friends of Chesterfield, and other supporters protested the planned merger of Dominion and NextEra in Henrico County near the site of the Virginia Energy Summit. The merger would create an energy megamonopoly with concerns about increased political power, potentially higher rates for customers, and concerns about an increased use of fossil fuels, which could worsen air and water pollution and slow our efforts to address climate change. The Sierra Club will continue to engage in ongoing merger related issues.



SHAYON PEACOCK

A group of environmentalists at the protest near the site of the Virginia Energy Summit

Virginia Sierran

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www.sierraclub.org/virginia

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Melanie Roberts

editorvirginiasierran@gmail.com

The editor welcomes editorial contributions, photographs and artwork. Submissions should pertain to Virginia's environment and/or climate change. Email the editor with questions on submissions.

Please contact member.care@sierra-club.org for membership and mailing issues and address.changes@sierra-club.org to change your mailing address.

Sierra Club Virginia Chapter 2026 Legislative Leader Awards by Corrine Ball

The Sierra Club Virginia Chapter is proud to honor the following lawmakers for their dedication and accomplishments benefiting the environment.



Senator Kannan Srinivasan

Senator Srinivasan (D-Loudoun) is recognized for advancing critical safeguards around Virginia's rapidly expanding data center industry. As chief co-sponsor of SB553, which passed, he secured a major transparency win: water providers must now report, through Virginia's existing water-use reporting system, the volumes of potable and reclaimed water they deliver to permitted data centers—giving

DEQ, the public, and regional planners real visibility into the water demands of the Commonwealth's fastest-growing industry at a time when groundwater supplies are dwindling. He also championed SB619, which would have required the State Corporation Commission to issue certificates of operation for large facilities, weighing grid capacity, ratepayer impacts, and environmental effects. Though it did not survive the House, his leadership laid important groundwork for future progress.



Delegate Irene Shin

Delegate Shin (D-Fairfax, Herndon) is recognized for a remarkably broad body of work on data centers, affordability, and solar. Her HB1360 passed, requiring utilities to disclose every hour they run money-losing "must-run" coal or oil units and barring cost recovery for imprudent commitments. HB1255 passed, raising the standby-charge threshold from 15 to 20 kilowatts to make residential solar

more affordable, and HB1439 passed, adding disclosures, contract protections, and a five-day cancellation right to shield homeowners from predatory solar sales. HB892 directs the SCC to investigate the load forecasts utilities submit to PJM, rooting out speculative data center demand. Her HB1515, a temporary pause on new data center approvals, did not pass but elevated essential planning conversations.



Senator Schuyler VanValkenburg

Senator VanValkenburg (D-Henrico) is recognized for advancing two major clean energy bills. As chief co-patron of SB347—signed into law—he helped establish a statewide framework for utility-scale solar siting that standardizes local ordinance criteria—setbacks, screening, decommissioning, and workforce standards—while

preserving local approval authority, a critical step toward unlocking the more than 5 GW of stalled solar projects. He also championed the FAST Act (SB508)—sincere passed—which directs Dominion and Appalachian Power to identify surplus interconnection capacity and pilot storage—and, where practicable, solar—at existing connection points. By using grid connections that already exist, these projects bypass the lengthy PJM queue.



Delegate John McAuliff

Delegate McAuliff (D-Fauquier, Loudoun) is recognized for addressing data center diesel pollution and solar on farmland. At the Chapter's request, he introduced HB507, which passed and will, for the first time, direct DEQ to withhold air permits from new data center facilities whose backup generators fall below Tier IV emissions standards—an important step in confronting the dirty diesel generators

near Virginia homes and schools. He also championed HB508, which writes a definition of “agrivoltaics” into the Code of Virginia, recognizing the co-location of farming and solar in ways that keep agriculture front and center while giving farmers supplemental income.



Delegate Amy Laufer

Delegate Laufer (D-Albemarle, Fluvanna, Louisa, Nelson) is recognized for her work on rural solar and PFAS contamination. Her HB1072 passed, expressly empowering localities to test and monitor land-applied biosolids for PFAS—the toxic “forever chemicals” found wherever sludge is spread—using EPA-approved methods, giving local governments a vital tool to protect soils, waterways,

and residents. She also introduced HB1091, which would have amended Virginia’s “right to farm” statute to include electricity from solar panels; though it did not pass, it sparked an important conversation about farmer-led agrivoltaics.



Delegate Rip Sullivan

Delegate Sullivan (D-Fairfax) is recognized as one of Virginia’s foremost energy leaders, working through both the Energy Commission of Virginia and the General Assembly. As chief patron of HB895, which passed, he secured a landmark expansion of Virginia’s energy storage targets—raising Dominion’s obligation from 2,700 to 16,000 megawatts and, for the first time, establishing

dedicated long-duration storage targets. He also championed HB897, which would have attached clean energy conditions to Virginia’s \$1.9 billion data center tax exemption; though it did not pass, its framework shaped budget negotiations. His steady guidance of bills through his Labor and Commerce Subcommittee advanced much of this session’s energy agenda.



Senator Scott Surovell

Senator Surovell (D-Fairfax) is recognized for his leadership as Chair of the Energy Commission of Virginia, where he shepherded through the most consequential suite of clean energy bills since the 2020 Virginia Clean Economy Act. He served as lead patron on measures strengthening integrated resource planning, adopting smart permitting, enhancing shared solar, and laying the foundation for

Virginia’s green bank. We especially recognize SB250, which opens small portable “plug-in” solar to Virginians long left out of the rooftop market—allowing any customer to install a device up to 1,200 watts without interconnection fees or net metering hurdles, and protecting renters’ right to install on balconies and patios.

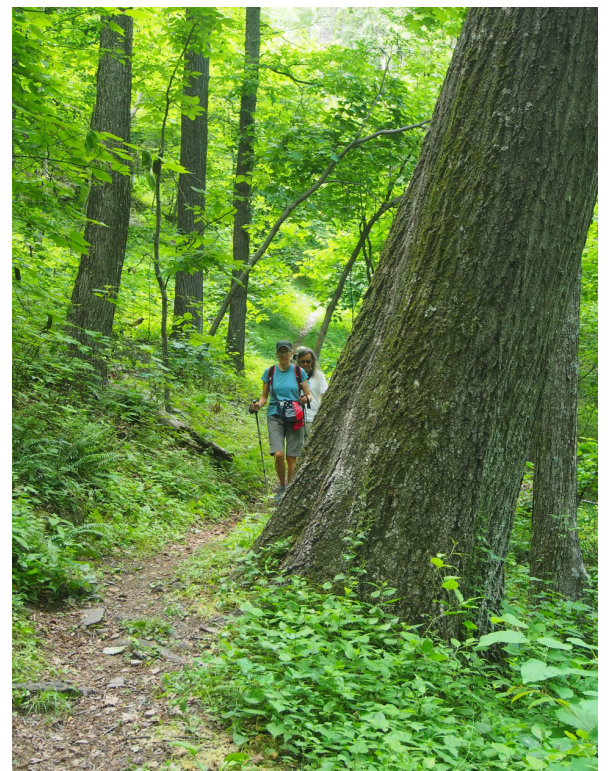
-Corrine Ball

Save Roadless Areas (continued from page 1)

Get Involved

- 🌲 Direct comments to sc.org/roadlessrule and we will submit them to the Forest Service when the Environmental Impact Statement is released. Please include specific comments on why your favorite roadless areas should be protected.
- 🌲 Ask your Senator and Representative to co-sponsor the Roadless Area Conservation Act and Shenandoah Mountain Act, and oppose Representative Hageman’s (WY) bill to rescind the Roadless Rule, if they have not already done so.
- 🌲 Join us in a future outing as part of the Sierra Club’s Summer of Action. The Shenandoah Group of Sierra Club will host several outings throughout the summer (and perhaps the fall) in Virginia’s Roadless Areas.

Roadless areas in America’s national forests support climate resilience, wildlife and plant biodiversity, as well as air and water quality.



The hike to save roadless areas began at Reddish Knob, the site that President Clinton selected to announce the roadless rule in 1999.

FALLS OF THE JAMES GROUP



SHAVON PEACOCK

He was only with our group briefly, but Ralph has a unique presence: calm, patient, knowledgeable, and willing to help. We are all sorry to see him leave Virginia.

-John Luker, Coastal Virginia Group Chair

I want to add that Ralph has led and co-lead many FOJG and Sierra Club Chapter hikes as the chapter outings leader. He set up our FOJG Meetup group two years ago, and we now have 853 Meetup members who get notifications of our upcoming hikes, clean ups, Big Yard Sale event, and FOJG programs. The Greater Louisville Sierra Club group will gain a valuable member! I will really miss hiking with Ralph and wish him happy new adventures and hikes in Kentucky!

-Shavon Peacock, FOJG Outings Leader

Fond Farewell to Ralph Grove

For the entirety of the twenty-first century, Ralph Grove has served the Virginia Chapter in numerous leadership and volunteer roles, contributing an extraordinary range of talents and expertise. The positions he has held offer a glimpse into the breadth of his service and the lasting impact of his contributions.

- 🌲 Chapter Outings Chair
- 🌲 Chapter Treasurer
- 🌲 Chapter Food and Agriculture Issue Chair
- 🌲 Local Group Chair of Shenandoah Group
- 🌲 Local Group Ex Com member of Chesapeake Bay Group
- 🌲 Chair of the Virginia Chapter (highest volunteer leadership position in the state)

Through it all, Ralph's steady leadership and commitment made these extraordinary contributions appear almost effortless.

If there was ever a person who exemplifies calm competence, it is Ralph. To attend a meeting that he runs is to know that the stated time of the meeting will be observed, that the topics will all be covered, that everyone will be heard, and sensible decisions will be made. We could not have asked for more. One could also encounter Ralph in unexpected places, such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, where he frequently volunteered.

Ralph, you will be missed at this year's Big Yard Sale, on hikes, and throughout the state of Virginia. With gratitude, we wish you well in your new life in Kentucky.

-Joe Brancoli, FOJG Chair



SHAVON PEACOCK

ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL

BIG YARD \$ALE

Post-Sale Picnic and Plant Swap

Three dozen Sierra Club members gathered for a fun potluck picnic and plant swap in June at the Carillon Shelter in Richmond's Byrd Park. We celebrated another successful Big Yard Sale at the University of Richmond with plenty of great food and company.

From left: Sierra Club members Bruce Tarr, Joe Brancoli, Steve Yarus, Anne Repp, Billy Davies, and Lydia Pittman.



JASON ASHLOCK

Our group with Becky Lakin, front row, fourth from left

Tomorrow Company Conservation Tour

In April, we enjoyed an amazing two-hour Sierra Club tour of the Tomorrow Company conservation land in Henrico, Virginia. Becky Lakin and Jason Ashlock shared their journey of transforming 40 acres of land, protected by a co-held conservation easement with the Capital Region Land Conservancy, into a place where people from nonprofits, global organizations, academic institutions, and other sectors can start conversations, explore leadership development, and engage in immersive learning experiences. The Tomorrow Company will have it all: Wild mustangs, chickens, and sheep; open woods with native grasses, a densely forested area, a treehouse, yoga platform, composting toilets, an herb garden, and 1500 ft. of swales and berms in a field with 596 trees.

Jason Ashlock said, “We’re The Tomorrow Company, a nature-based learning and retreat organization rooted in the belief that healthier futures are built by learning from living systems. On this land, we bring together ecology, formerly wild horses, leadership, community, and reflection through gatherings, workshops, and experiences that help people reconnect with what matters most.” Stay connected, learn about future events, and follow the ongoing story of the land and its work. Sign up here to receive our newsletter: <https://tomorrowco.org/orgdev>

Contact Becky and Jason about their Horse + Human Experiences for Nonprofits half day (4 hours/\$130 per person) or whole day (6 hours/\$195 per person) sessions. “Working from the ground with our herd of formerly wild mustangs, participants encounter something no workshop can simulate: a living system that responds not to title or intention, but to presence, clarity, and care. Horses are immediate, honest, and without agenda. They teach the conditions that build trust in any relationship, and reflect back, in real time, what we’re actually communicating versus what we think we are. There is no greater teacher of human potential than a horse. Their lessons are illuminating, challenging, and transformative. Every time.”

For more information, contact:

Becky Lakin | Becky@TomorrowCo.Org | 804.928.9421

Jason Allen Ashlock | The Tomorrow Company | The Giving Foundation
804.930.3389

-Shavon Peacock, FOJG Outings Leader

AI (continued from page 1)

AI chatbot, which have been linked to acts of violence against both the individual and others around them.

All of the code, data, text, images, etc., generated by AI are stored in data centers, and more content is created every day. A Pew survey found that about 50% of U.S. adults have used a chatbot, and about 24% of respondents use them daily.

There are many other concerns about AI I haven’t even mentioned, such as data protection, job search/hiring processes, national security risks, and so much more. So, to quote John Oliver, what can we do? We can avoid using generative AI as much as possible. In some cases, like a job requirement, it might be difficult to abstain entirely. However, for personal use, there is likely a better alternative.

A Pew survey found that about 50% of U.S. adults have used a chatbot, and about 24% of respondents use them daily.

We can also learn about generative AI’s effects and, where appropriate, explain our concerns to others in the community. This includes family, friends, and lawmakers, who should take steps to regulate AI and its impacts. Sharing the truth about data centers can help everyone understand the risks of using generative AI.

As products we already use begin incorporating generative AI, such as social media and popular search engines, we can use settings or alternative platforms to protect ourselves and our data. Some platforms often default users to “opt-in” to updates that include generative AI. Sometimes, it isn’t possible to opt out at all, such as when Meta uses posts shared on its platforms to train its AI. However, we should opt out of generative AI’s influence on these platforms whenever possible. One example is Pinterest, which has a setting to remove AI-generated content from your feed.

Generative AI is likely not going anywhere. But until its use is sustainable, properly regulated, and more accurate, I would rather ask the group chat than an AI chat.

-Mai Kubin

PIEDMONT GROUP

Environmental Justice Presentation

Our May program on Environmental Justice drew our most diverse audience ever. The presentations started with a 5,000-foot view from the Southern Environmental Law Center and an introduction by attorney Mark Sabath, who handles a range of water, air, energy, and environmental justice matters in the Commonwealth.



Environmental justice anthropologist consultant and former University of Virginia Visiting Scholar
Dr. Lakshmi Fjord

Dr. Lakshmi Fjord discussed what’s happening at the state level, including a proposed gas plant in Cumberland County. An environmental justice anthropologist, Dr. Fjord’s numerous accomplishments include defining the disproportionate impacts on the historic Black community of Union Hill by the Atlantic Coast Pipeline’s compressor station.



Don Gathers is a Deacon at First Baptist Church, former Chair of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials and Public Spaces, and Chair of the Charlottesville Clergy Collective.

First Baptist Church Deacon and community organizer Don Gathers discussed some recent decisions about housing projects impacting traditionally Black neighborhoods in Charlottesville. Gathers shared the recent decision by City Council to allow a seven-story apartment building at the edge of Fifeville. New proposals include decisions to approve two more housing projects on the edges of Black neighborhoods, neither of which are affordable housing and all are designed for students.

Discussions continued outside until well after the program, reflecting the seriousness of these issues in the Piedmont region.

Sneakers4Good

Charlottesville’s local running shoe store Ragged Mountain is accepting used sneakers, running shoes and hiking boots. Ragged Mountain Running & Walking Shop contributes them to sneakers4good and the proceeds benefit our group. Last year’s “shoe drive” raised \$800 for the Piedmont Group. Here’s some cool info about the program and statistics about how recycling shoes and sneakers benefit the environment. <https://sneakers4good.com>



Save the Date Virginia Sierra Club Gathering

April 16-18, 2027 | Pocahontas State Park
 Socialize, share ideas, learn about important issues, enjoy music, and explore the great outdoors. For more information, contact John Cruickshank at jcruickshank4@gmail.com.

Virginia Sierran WFA Classes

Most courses offer CPR/AED/choking add-on the Friday evening immediately beforehand; see below.

September 5-7	Mountaintop Retreat On-site trails; lake with sandy beach, swimming, and free boat use; optional sunset view hike; evening campfires. Free camping nearby, and \$15/bed/night cabins on-site at Mountain Lake Biological Station near Blacksburg, VA
October 17-18	Wilderness First Aid certification course (Washington, DC area, Camping Option)
November 7-8	Wilderness First Aid certification course, with CPR option (Charlottesville area)

Visit www.sierraclub.org/virginia/events-calendar, select the course you are interested in, and follow the link to RSVP.

PIEDMONT GROUP



Mourning Kirk Bowers

The entire environmental community is mourning Kirk Bowers, who passed away on May 21st. Kirk was a dedicated advocate for conservation whose work had a lasting impact on environmental efforts throughout central Virginia. Shortly before his passing, he was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his many years of service and advocacy.

A valuable member of the Virginia Chapter staff, Kirk served as Conservation Chair of

the Piedmont Group for eleven years. His background in civil engineering brought tremendous technical expertise, research skills and thoughtful analysis to our work.

Kirk was particularly well known for his opposition to the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and Mountain Valley Pipeline. He used his technical knowledge, passion for organizing and advocacy to educate the public, support environmental protections, and mobilize opposition to those projects.

Kirk also worked on a wide range of other environmental and development issues, including climate resiliency planning, coal ash concerns, river and floodplain protection, land use issues, solar development, cell tower ordinances and organizing around data center construction issues.

In addition to his technical and advocacy work, Kirk cared deeply about community organizing and public outreach. He helped spread awareness at tabling events, recruited volunteers, attended rallies and encouraged people of all ages become environmentalists.

Kirk's contributions to environmental advocacy and conservation will have a lasting impact on the Virginia environmental community. Our deepest condolences go out to his family, friends and all those whose lives he touched through his commitment, hard work, and dedication.

Kirk will be remembered for many years of service, supporting the protection of the natural world, ecosystems, and sustainable policies, and his commitment to protecting Virginia's natural resources.

Piedmont Sierrans are tracking many more environmental issues:

- 🌲 Sewage sludge applications in Orange and Albemarle Counties
- 🌲 Opposition to a second gas plant in Fluvanna and high voltage lines impacting five of our counties
- 🌲 A variety of proposed new regulations in Albemarle County
- 🌲 Collaboration with a great nonprofit: dontspreadonme.org

Celebrating Everything Science at Kid*Vention

The Virginia Discovery Museum hosted the popular Kid*Vention in April, an annual family science festival in Charlottesville. For many years, the Piedmont Group has had a presence at the event, encouraging children to protect, explore, and enjoy the natural world. This year we focused on teaching young naturalists about the parts of a tree and gave them pine seedlings to plant.

Members volunteering at this annual event were encouraged by the enthusiasm of the children and their parents, a positive sign that future generations may take better care of our planet.



Above: John Cruickshank helping a budding environmentalist identify the parts of a tree.

Below: Beth Hodsdon and Scott Ziemer encouraging two young naturalists to explore a hollow tree.





This Can Happen Anywhere

by Joe Brancoli

Before I dazzle you with the facts and figures on the 27th almost-annual Big Yard Sale, let me again pitch the concept, “This Can Happen Anywhere.”

Do not think that The Sale at the University of Richmond began with as many volunteers, customers or dollars raised, as it does now. It there’s an opportunity to partner with a college or university, your group can start something, too, which may grow in scale and popularity. Time and again, volunteers report how much they enjoy The Sale because it’s a hands-on activity and their contribution fuels a large and rewarding effort.

The Numbers

The 2026 Sale was in a new location— the basketball courts at the climate-controlled Weinstein Fitness Center. Nearly **100 volunteers** set up the two-day sale, which saw a record **1,300 customers**. The Sale raised more than **\$20,000**, shared by Falls of the James Group and the University’s Rethink Waste department.

Before the Sale, items were donated to the SPCA of Richmond and local non-profits helping people in poverty or experiencing homelessness. Foam mattress pads were donated to a Richmond company for reuse. Unsold items went to long-time partner, Goodwill, who parked a tractor trailer on campus for storage one month prior to the sale.

Falls of the James Group uses its proceeds to provide stipends to speakers at monthly programs, and for Annual Green Giant Award recipients. Last fall, we gave one thousand dollars each to ten different local non-profits running food programs, planting trees, doing non-corporate media, and other worthy endeavors.

Many thanks to the intrepid team who worked tirelessly for several months orchestrating The Big Yard Sale:

Lisa Thompson
Margie Langston
Aileen Rivera

Joe Brancoli
Linda Redmond
Daryl Downing

Shavon Peacock
Lydia Pittman

Thank you all for making the Big Yard Sale a success!

-Joe Brancoli, Chair, Falls of the James Group

I got 40 red white & blue shoe strings and a thousand telephones that don't ring. Do you know where I can get rid of these things? -Bob Dylan



Springtime in the Garden

by Alyse Cruickshank Rzodkiewicz

As we shift from winter into early spring, the ground is beginning to thaw and wake up. Things are not yet fully blooming, but everything is slowly returning. Soft greens are appearing throughout the garden, and my daughters are becoming increasingly curious about what is happening outside as new plants emerge and insects and pollinators return to the yard.

As we walk through the garden, we notice many emerging greens. Black-eyed Susans, wild strawberries, false indigo, and Joe Pye weed that we planted last fall are now growing larger and greener for the first time. One of our earliest bloomers this season has been golden ragwort, which has brought bright yellow flowers into several areas of the yard. The girls have especially enjoyed the textures of new leaves, the many shades of green, and the fact that all plants bloom on different timelines. As one flower begins blooming, we wonder which will bloom next.

Some of our favorite gardening activities this season allowed my daughters to experience nature while also forming a better understanding of gardening, planting, and the care that plants need. At the same time, many of these activities have helped create a stronger sense of belonging and connection to our yard. We encourage the girls to talk to the plants, buds, insects, and animals that visit the garden and think about ways to make the space feel welcoming for both pollinators and people.

This spring, we have been painting stepping stones with handprints and footprints, making beaded wind chimes, visiting plants to check for new buds, observing butterflies and insects, washing gardening tools, cleaning and refilling bird feeders, and creating small fairy habitats throughout the garden. We created "Cinderella's Springtime Collections," where the girls gathered fallen petals, moss, tiny leaves, sticks, and other small treasures from around the yard. Through these activities, they observed new growth, what remained from the winter months, and how the garden slowly changes from week to week.

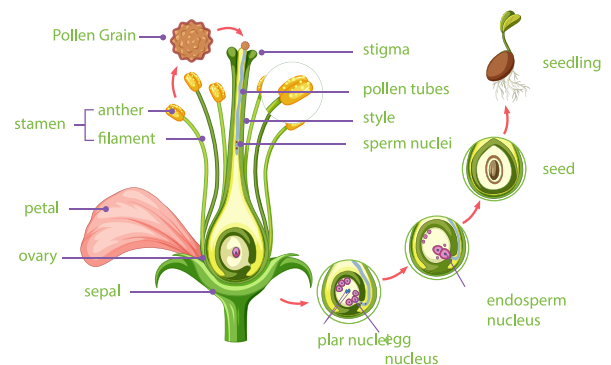
The girls and I continue to visit Snow's Garden Center and Hummingbird Hill Native Plant Nursery to learn more about native plants and adding to our garden. Many of the plants we choose are native Virginia plants, which are beneficial for local pollinators, birds, and insects because they naturally belong within our ecosystem. Once established, native plants also tend to require less maintenance and often develop deep root systems that help stabilize soil, absorb rainwater, and reduce erosion.

One area we are focused on this season is a sloped section of the yard where we continue to expand a rain garden pathway with stepping stones winding down the hill. Rain gardens help slow down and absorb excess stormwater, allowing water to soak more gradually into the soil instead of quickly running downhill.

This helps reduce erosion while creating healthier soil conditions and habitat opportunities for pollinators and wildlife.

As the garden continues to grow, we are excited to continue planting throughout the spring and fall and to continue creating a space that feels welcoming for pollinators, birds, wildlife, and imaginative play.

-Alyse Cruickshank Rzodkiewicz



Pollination of Flowering Plants



The Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club is over 20,000 members strong. We are your friends and neighbors working to build healthy, livable communities and to conserve and protect our climate and environment. The Virginia Chapter is part of the national Sierra Club, the nation's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization.

Information about our staff, executive committee and environmental action chairs can be found on the Virginia Chapter website under "About."

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RAPPAHANNOCK GROUP

Our Spring program in March centered around the topic of nuclear power, featuring guest speaker Dr. Edwin Lyman, Director of Nuclear Power Safety at the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS.) "Unsafe at any Size: The dangerous push to deploy experimental nuclear reactors around the U.S." attracted a crowd of several dozen at Central Rappahannock Regional Library.

UCS has been a nuclear safety and security watchdog since its inception more than 50 years ago. UCS is neither pro- nor anti-nuclear power, pushing for stringent nuclear safety and security standards and strong, independent, science-based regulatory oversight.

Dr. Lyman spoke to the nuclear exuberance, cautions and climate change. The biggest problem is affordability and the reality is that ratepayers and taxpayers end up bearing the financial burden.

There are many types of Small Modular Nuclear Reactors (SMRs) and many claims of what they are and can do are misleading. Advanced reactors are even less affordable. Again, cost savings will not be realized by the public. Few projects today have sufficient funding to proceed. The concern about cutting corners is justified.

Dr. Lyman discussed many of the circulating myths about SMRS, including:

- 🌲 The competition among nuclear reactor vendors for media attention and public and private financing is creating a bubble of inflated claims and unrealistic goals, with serious safety implications
- 🌲 The independence and competence of federal nuclear regulators have been fatally compromised
- 🌲 The state of Virginia should not actively encourage new reactor projects because it does not have its own authority to regulate nuclear safety and security.

Visit Rappahannock Group Sierra Club's Facebook page or website for Dr. Lyman's full Powerpoint presentation.



Guest speaker Dr. Edwin Lyman is an internationally recognized expert on nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism as well as nuclear power safety and security.