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The cover image is of Pike Island at Fort Snelling State Park in Minnesota, looking west, showing the Mississippi River. Photographer Brett Whaley. (CC BY-NC 2.0)

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FEATURE

WHERE THE WATER TAKES YOU: UNLOCKING PLACE-BASED MEANINGS THROUGH INQUIRY AT THE TIDAL BASIN IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

By Barbara J. Little and Katie Crawford-Lackey

Do you recognize the well-known body of water shown in Figure 1? Perhaps not, without its most recognizable markers. Figure 2 should make this water immediately familiar.

We recognize the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., mainly through its associated landscape, whether of gloriously blooming cherry trees or the famous monuments surrounding it. It is a famous place largely because of the annual

Figure 1: A widely recognized body of water, without its most recognizable markers. Image by B.J. Little, March 2017.

Cherry Blossom Festival, which draws a large number of visitors to the capital. In recent years, approximately one-and-a-half million visitors come to D.C. during the three weeks of the National Cherry Blossom Festival (National Cherry Blossom Festival, n.d.).

But the Tidal Basin is more than a backdrop; it is a sizable body of water in the monumental core of the capital city. It's approximately 107 acres, 10 feet deep.

Using the Tidal Basin as our case study, we are interested in exploring a current and promising trend in heritage interpretation that focuses on inquiry-based and audience-centered interpretation. Using a set of guided questions to discover and re-discover the Tidal Basin, we explore for ourselves how people may unlock meaning for themselves. Such a process is, as Nina Simon (2016) argues, the very heart of relevance. And there is nothing more relevant than relevance right now in the context of public presentation at museums and historic sites (e.g., The Empathetic Museum, n.d.; Museum Hack, n.d.; Simon, 2010, 2016; National Park Service, 2014).

Audience-centered interpretation (e.g., Simon, 2010; National Park Service, 2014) seeks to be relevant by providing opportunities for visitors to connect, contribute, collaborate, and co-create. That is, members of an audience become participants in interpretation through opportunities to connect emotionally and intellectually with natural and cultural heritage, to contribute to the process of making meaning out of a place and its history and social context, and to collaborate with each other and with interpreters in dialogue or other interactions. Overall, the purpose is for interpreters and visitors to co-create the visitor experience.

Such interpretation at historic sites and parks is usually focused on place, but it is not restricted to

Figure 2: The Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., with the cherry trees in blossom. Image in public domain.

Figure 3: National Park Service public map showing Tidal Basin in relationship to nearby Washington, D.C. monuments.

any particular place. Instead, it strengthens the meanings of a place by exploring connections—among places, across time, among disciplines, and across other boundaries. We chose to explore the Tidal Basin because we wanted a convenient place in Washington, D.C., that we thought would have some of those connections. Otherwise, it didn't have any specific significance to either of us, nor—as it turned out—did we know very much about it. We acted as a team of two to collaborate and co-create meaning as we sought new insights into the history of this body of water.

Exploring the Tidal Basin

We began our exploration of the Tidal Basin simply by taking the time to experience it with our senses. We pretty much had the place to ourselves (Figure 4). The buds on the trees were barely visible and it was very windy and a little bit cold. Walking the approximately two-mile loop around the whole basin took longer than we expected. For much of the way the sound of wind drowned out any traffic noises. As we walked, we noticed that the water seemed to take on different characteristics—different textures and colors—depending on how much it was exposed or sheltered and how hard the wind was blowing. We would not have noticed the character of the water itself had we stayed in one location or focused on the monuments. As we walked, it seemed to us that, without the trees in bloom, the heart of the place was the water itself.

Figure 4: The Tidal Basin as it appeared during the authors' exploration in March 2017. Image by B.J. Little.

As we experienced the place, we slid back and forth between thinking of ourselves as visitors and researchers, that is, researchers in the sense of inquirers, as members of an audience might see themselves if they were participating in an audience-centered inquiry-based exploration. We were guided by the National Park Service's "Curiosity Kick-Start," an online set of core questions meant to spark curiosity when visiting a place (National Park Service, n.d.[a]):

- What is this place?
- What happens or happened here?
- Who and what lives here?
- Who and what lived here before?
- How is this place changing through time?
- How did it come to be this way?
- What will be here in the future?
- How is this place connected to other places?
- What does this place mean to me and to others?
- How do we know the answers to any of these questions?
- What don't we know and why?

As we walked, we thought about those questions so that we could make notes about research that we wanted to do to satisfy our curiosity and see what connections we could find between this place and other places.

We want to acknowledge that there is a lot about traditional interpretation to build on. The wayside exhibit signs that are placed in a few places around the Tidal Basin serve to answer common questions and to spark curiosity. In many cases, they inspired us to learn more. So, for example, in addition to learning about the cherry trees (see also National Park Service, n.d.[b]), we learned that there was an African American builder responsible for the 1940s bridge and current seawall (Figure 5) and that a prominent woman writer (Figure 6) originally proposed the planting of cherry trees around the Tidal Basin (for more on Scidmore, see Parsell, n.d.). Those brief historical tidbits got us thinking about how the historic accomplishments of women and people of color are often hidden in plain sight in our public landscapes and we were glad to have the stories told. We were also tickled to learn that there was a beach here in the 1920s (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Archie A. Alexander, senior partner in the firm of Alexander and Repass of Des Moines, Iowa, contractors for the "million-dollar bridge" being built across the Tidal Basin in 1943. Roger Smith, photographer. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

Figure 6: After an 1885 visit to Japan, Eliza Scidmore initially proposed the planting of cherry trees along the Potomac River. Image courtesy of the National Park Service.

Figure 7: A game of push ball at the whites-only Tidal Basin beach, July 1924. National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress.

Core Questions

The Tidal Basin has an amazing setting and is surrounded by famous trees and quite a few national monuments. There are lots of fun facts and some interesting seeds of ideas that might take us beyond those trees and monuments.

How do we begin to think about where this extraordinary body of water might take us? It's time to explicitly address the kick-start questions listed above. Like most visitors, we came to this place with certain kinds of knowledge and the capacity to be surprised. All of these core questions sparked more questions and often a desire to learn more.

What is this place?

We call this place the Tidal Basin, a modern name for a modern construction. We haven't drawn specific boundaries around it, but consider it to include the water, the seawall, and the surrounding landscape, including the monuments.

What happens or happened here?

This question prompted us to think of the Tidal Basin as an intentionally created landscape formed for a specific purpose. The features of the Tidal Basin—the monuments, the vegetation, and even the basin itself—are continually being maintained, in both the past and the present. While bearing what we can appreciate as a natural beauty, this place is ultimately a human creation managed by National Park Service staff.

Observing our surroundings, we felt that this was a space for exploration—visitors could discover the natural (trees, plants, flowers, water) and cultural (monuments, interpretive signs). The place begs to be explored both on land (the walking path) and on the water (rental boats), and those are the activities that happen here currently. It is both a destination spot for tourists and a place that locals visit.

We learned from the on-site interpretive signs that some of the things that happened here in the past were the building of the bridges and the basin itself; planning, planting and gifting with Japan; swimming; lots of different kinds of memory-making through memorials; and, in general, the development of the place over time to become what we experience today.

Who and what lives here? Who and what lived here before?

We speculated about who or what may have lived in this place before the creation of the Tidal Basin. Using our basic knowledge of the history of the area, we surmised that before it was artificially construed, the basin area may have been tidal flats, a wetland full of life—home to plants and animals—and it certainly would have been a place used by Indigenous peoples. Even after the city of Washington, D.C. was established in 1790, the area that is now the Tidal Basin was still largely undeveloped and would likely have served as a place to gather food or water cattle, pigs, and other livestock.

The Tidal Basin today still teems with both plant and animal life. The area is practically bursting with new life every spring with the budding of the cherry trees.

How is this place changing through time? How did it come to be this way?

Once a natural landscape, the Tidal Basin was created to suit the growing human habitation of the capital city. The current landscape, while having a natural feel, was artificially created.

Acknowledging that much of what we observed in our surroundings was intentionally designed, we began to ask ourselves additional questions: "Who created the Tidal Basin and why?" We

realized once again that our knowledge of the history of this place was limited and that we needed more information to adequately answer this question.

What will be here in the future?

The previous questions got us thinking about the past and present in relation to our place. Now we began to think about how the past and present have the power to shape the future of the Tidal Basin. This question sparked a new line of thinking; instead of focusing on the cherry trees or the monuments, we began thinking about our place in terms of its natural resources, specifically the water. We concluded that if the climate continues to change at the present rate, the basin may very well become flooded in the foreseeable future. This is where we began to see the power of nature, specifically the global water crisis, as directly having an impact on the sites near us.

How is this place connected to other places?

This question prompts us to consider all kinds of connections. From the clearly observable—like the Tidal Basin is connected to both the Potomac River and the Washington Channel (see Figure 3)—to abstractions like beauty, gift-giving, fairness and justice.

We started our walk near the new Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial (visible in the distance in Figure 1) and walked toward the memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We were struck immediately by the juxtaposition of this expansive memorial and the Japanese gift of the cherry trees. As we sat on a bench, looking through the trees to the water, we discussed the challenge of interpretation and wondered if there would be some way to collaborate with an audience to delve into the complexity of international relations, domestic policies, World War II, and the internment of Japanese Americans. Based on this train of thought, we made connections to associated sites, including Japanese internment camps such as Manzanar National Historic Site in California. The monuments also inspired thoughts about universal concepts such as civil rights (Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial) and public works (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial) and places affiliated with those themes.

Perhaps the most tangible connections were water related. We wondered about fishing. In considering the previous question, we concluded that the reservoir may flood in the future due to rising water levels around the world. This revealed potential connections between the Tidal Basin and other sites across the country that are also imperiled due to effects of global warming.

Talking about the Tidal Basin led us to think about current events and national issues, including climate change and more generally the effect of humans on the natural world and how people engineer and transform the landscape constantly.

What does this place mean to me and to others?

The Tidal Basin means something different to each person who visits, and this meaning is likely to change based on the visitor's prior knowledge and direct experience of the place. Our understanding of the basin (and thus its meaning) changed for both of us through the observation and research process.

As we contemplated this question, our thoughts went immediately to what we witnessed during our visit to the Tidal Basin—the national monuments, the cherry trees, and the meticulously maintenanced landscape. This place is a popular tourist destination, a place of national commemoration, and a tangible symbol of friendship and reconciliation with Japan. While attempting to answer this question, we identified several compelling stories within the Tidal Basin, yet we realized we were not addressing the untold stories of this place. In fact, we were touching on some of the most well-known and visible aspects—the monuments and the cherry trees.

After we chose the water as the central focus of our place, we reconsidered this question. Upon further reflection and a bit of research, a different story began to emerge, as we explain below.

How do we know the answers to any of these questions?

Before conducting our research, we knew very little about the history of the Tidal Basin. Most of what we knew about this place came from our experience living and working in the city. We were also able to address several of these questions by using our general knowledge and observations of this place, including information from a few well-placed interpretive signs. Perhaps most revealing was our inability to adequately address many of these questions. We had both visited the Tidal Basin on previous occasions and were relatively familiar with the place, yet it dawned on us that we knew so little about its past and present.

What don't we know and why?

A lot! By contemplating these questions, we realized how little we knew about the history of this place or about its meanings today. We wanted to know more about what was here before the Tidal Basin, specifically how and why the reservoir was eventually formed. We also wanted to know who was responsible for creating the current design and how this space was used after it was created. We realized we also didn't know much about the water itself. Were there fish (we couldn't see any)? Was it clean enough for swimming (we doubted it)? Is it freshwater or saltwater? We also didn't really know how visitors experienced the Tidal Basin or if they thought about the water or any of the questions that came up for us.

Exploring Further

We were inspired to do a little light research into the history of the Tidal Basin itself, the kind of online investigation that any visitor would easily do with a mobile phone on site. We found a helpful local history blog entry (Goff 2015), some information on the National Park Service website, and an extraordinary collection of historic photos on the Library of Congress site.

The Tidal Basin had been completed in 1896, mainly as a tool for using the tidal power of the Potomac River to flush the Washington Channel, and it was more or less a lagoon, polluted with wastewater and sewage.

Currently, as explained by the National Park Service (n.d.[c]), "Twice a day at high tide, 250 million U.S. gallons of water from the Potomac River enter the Tidal Basin through the inlet

gates. As the tide turns, water trying to flow out of the inlet gates causes the gates to close, and the outlet gates on the Washington Channel side of the Basin open. The rush of water out of the Tidal Basin sweeps away any silt or sediment build up inside the Washington Channel, keeping it navigable." See Figure 3 for the relationship among these bodies of water.

The Tidal Basin itself did not solve the problem of pollution in the waters, but it created a seemingly safer place to swim than the dangerous Potomac River. In 1914 a senator from Nebraska started pushing for Congress to construct a public beach and after a lot of back and forth, construction started in 1917 on the southeastern edge of the basin near the current location of the Jefferson Memorial. Construction included not only dumping tons of sand and gravel but also installing liquid chlorine dispensers to attempt to sanitize the water (Goff 2015).

During the few years it was open, from 1918 to 1924, the beach was immensely popular. A newspaper account in the Washington Post reported more than 20,000 people visiting the beach

Figure 8: U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries Henry O'Malley stocking fish in the Tidal Basin, April, 1925. National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress.

Figure 9: An unidentified African American woman fishing in the Tidal Basin, 1957. Toni Frissell, photographer. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

during one day in 1920. As popular as it was, it was for whites only. African Americans were swimming nearby in the dangerous Potomac River. The Senate eliminated funding for a proposed beach on the opposite side of the Tidal Basin for African Americans and Congress feared that they would be forced to integrate the beach. Instead, they decided to close the beach and as of 1925, there was no more swimming allowed in the Tidal Basin. (Goff 2015)

Fishing, however, continued and was apparently encouraged, given that the water was stocked (Figure 8). Fishing in the Tidal Basin has been continuous (Figure 9; Cohen et al., 2016).

The National Park Service has been studying non-recreational fishing in Washington, D.C.'s, waters for several years (e.g., Cohen et al., 2016). This study is about people who fish and either consume or share their catch (as opposed to those who catch and release). There are wide-spread public health campaigns to discourage eating fish caught in the waters of the Potomac, Anacostia, and related waters, including the Tidal Basin (see Washington, D.C., Department of Energy and Environment, n.d.[a]). The study is still underway, but Cohen et al. report that people continue to fish for personal and cultural reasons and they eat the fish or share the fish with others who eat the fish.

PCBs and other chemical contaminants make the fish dangerous to eat. One of the region's most popular fish, striped bass, is on the city's list of fish that should not be eaten. We suspect that it's eaten regardless, as it's a delicious fish.

Expanding the stories

We started thinking more about the water itself, especially because we had learned more about the fishing. The water quality around D.C. is impaired, which makes the fish unsafe to eat frequently. Yet, people do eat the fish frequently, even though they are aware of the health risks.

That leads us to other quality of water issues and ideas about environmental justice. The Potomac and Anacostia Rivers are the major rivers that run through Washington, D.C. Anacostia Riverkeeper is an advocacy organization that works to restore the Anacostia River, to make it both swimmable and fishable. The organization also works to connect the community to the river. It is a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance global network of clean water advocates.

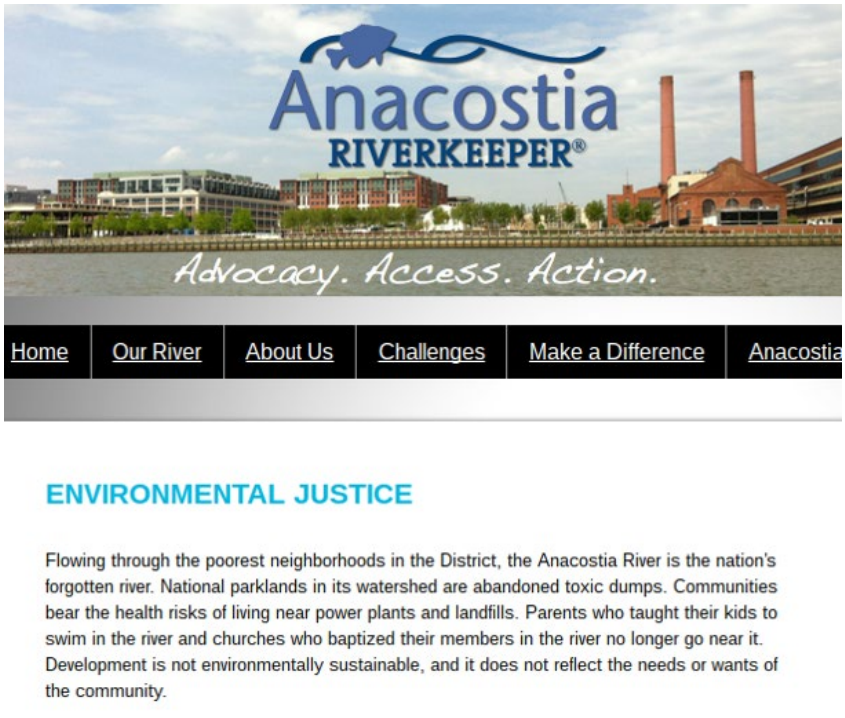

Figure 10: Anacostia Riverkeeper website.

On February 24, 2017 the Mayor of Washington, D.C., Muriel Bowser, signed the Fisheries and Wildlife Omnibus Amendment Act of 2016 (Washington, D.C., Department of Energy and Environment, 2017). Among other things, the legislation increases environmental protections for aquatic life, wetlands, and shorelines in Washington, D.C. At the same time, the mayor announced that the city now has a "state" fish, the shad (a popular east coast fish that runs in the spring) and a state amphipod, or small crustacean. The Hay's Spring amphipod is endangered because of the degradation of the urban groundwater. It is heartening to learn that there is more attention being paid by the city to the quality of the water.

So, where has the water of the Tidal Basin taken us in our exploration of inquiry-based and audience-centered interpretation?

We used the core questions and a little bit of further research to discover the Tidal Basin as a relevant place to each of us, connected to environmental justice.

Would others come up with the same meanings for themselves?

We are both involved professionally in public history. After this exercise, we first jumped to thinking about how we might come up with ways to encourage visitors to discover the water and the ways in which it connects to other waters, especially waters that are not drinkable, swimmable, or fishable. We reasoned that wherever visitors are from, every one of them has a connection to water. We jumped too fast, but our reaction was instructive to us because it made us think about our roles and audience roles. Certainly, we want to acknowledge that there is value in using interpretive tools to engage visitors

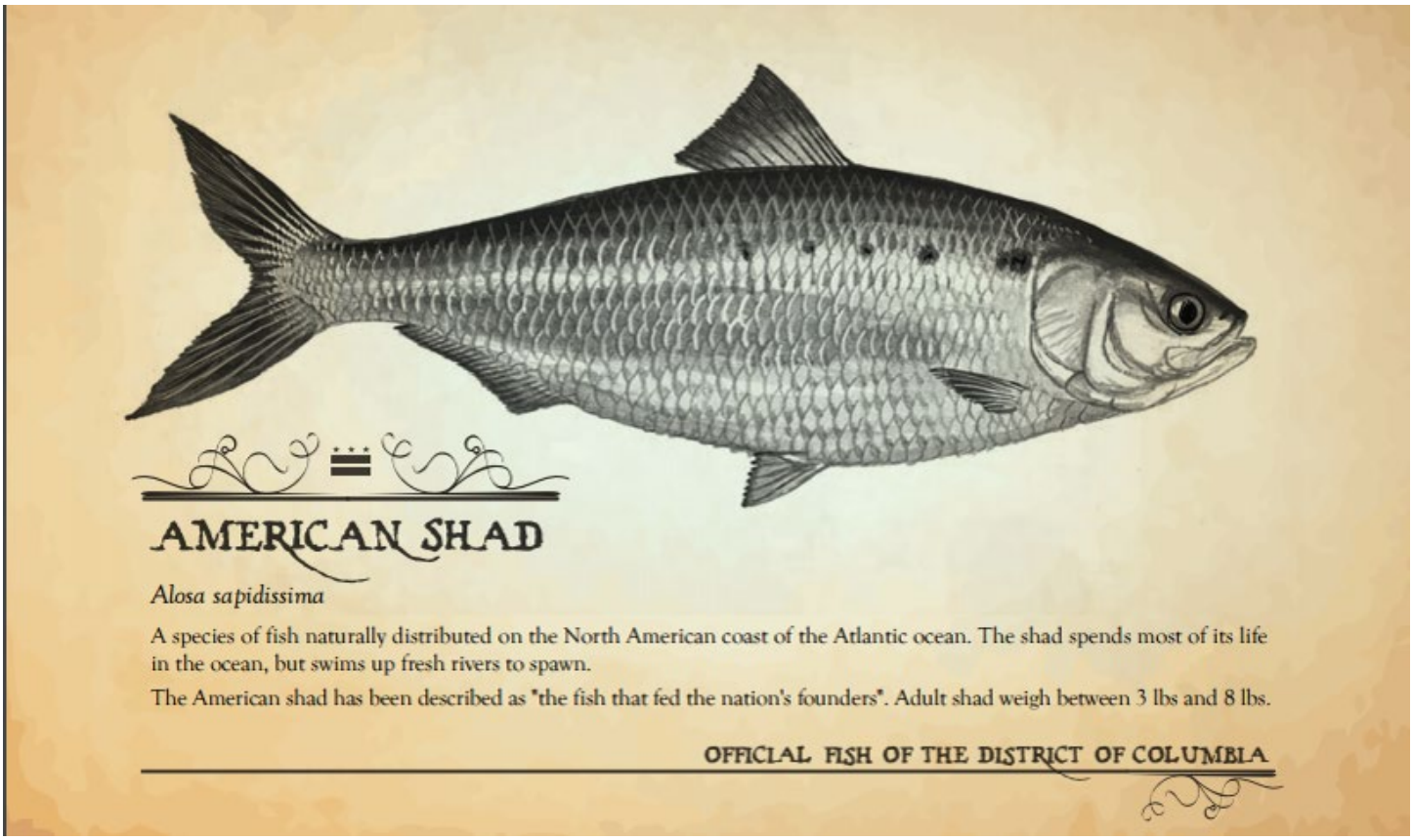

Figure 11: American Shad, D.C. State Fish. Official Fish Poster from Department of Energy & Environment website (doee.dc.gov).

to raise their awareness. However, that is not what this set of core questions is about. Audience-centered means that the audience members are full participants and it is their meanings that they are unlocking for themselves. It is not up to us to tell them what a place means to them.

There are many factors that influence what someone finds relevant in the core questions: prior knowledge, language skills, curiosity, companions, availability of materials or technology to research questions, and so much more. The very definition of the place, at the beginning, would influence the experience of inquiry-based exploration of a place.

At the Tidal Basin, for example, the boundaries of the place being experienced are fluid. The "place" could be the Tidal Basin as we defined it; or it could be a grove of cherry trees, the paddle boats, the Thomas Jefferson or Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, Jr. memorials, the monumental core of the city, or something else. The meaning depends on the participants, what they bring to the place, and what they discover about the place.

In the inquiry that we carried out, the water of the Tidal Basin took us where our own curiosity and interests led us. Our experience taught us both about the Tidal Basin and about the realities and possibilities of inquiry-based, audience-centered interpretation. And it taught us to be patient!

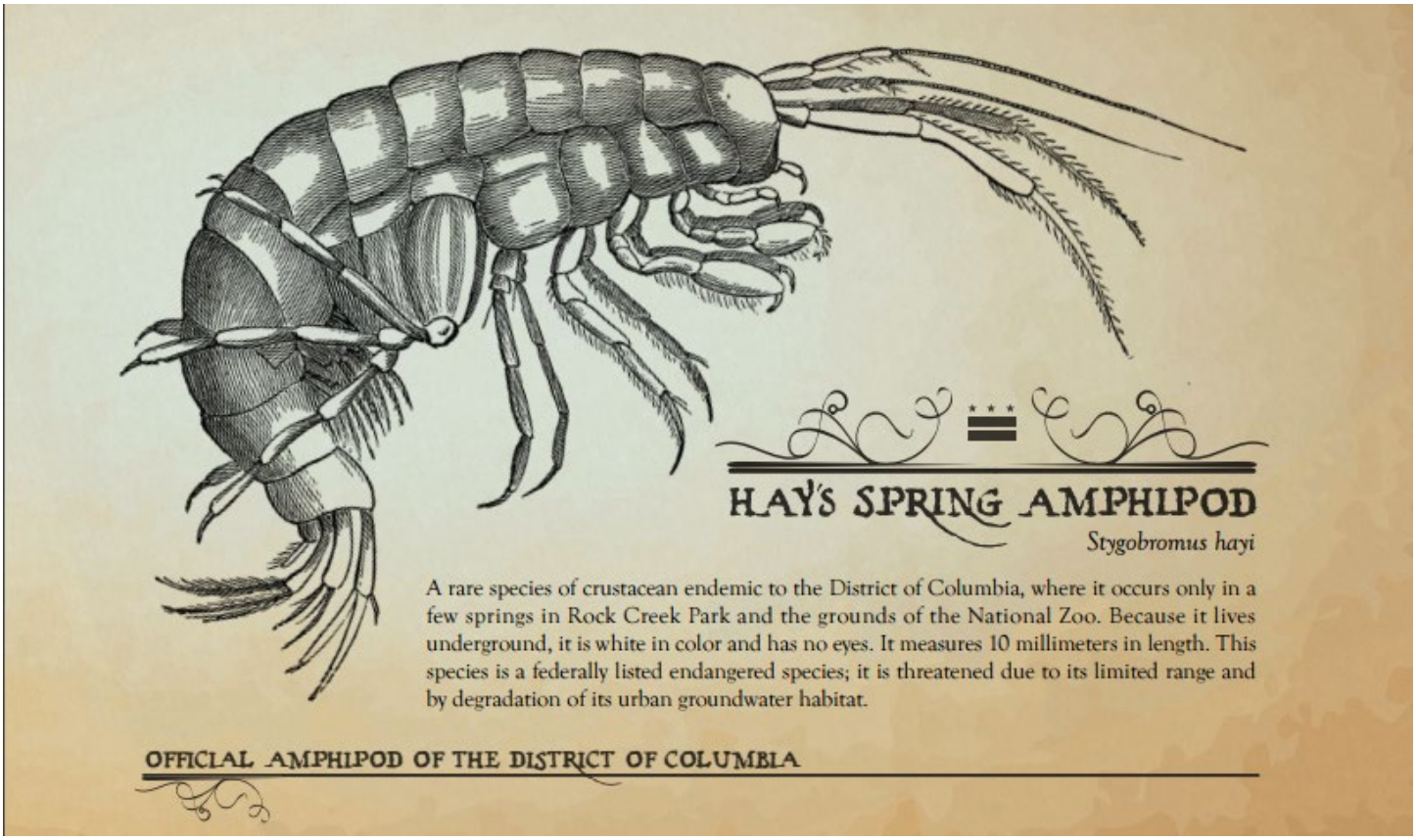

Figure 12: Hay's Spring Amphipod, D.C. State Amphipod. Official Amphipod Poster from Department of Energy & Environment website (doee.dc.gov).

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