

## **2023 Legends Award Nomination**

**Scott D. Sunderland, Supervisory Natural Resource Manager  
Blue Marsh Lake, Philadelphia District, North Atlantic Division**

Mr. Sunderland started his career with USACE in 1982 as a seasonal park aide. This was a great introduction to the world of natural resource management and recreation for a student who just graduated from Penn State University with a degree in Forest Technology and was continuing his studies at Slippery Rock University in Recreation Resource Management. The first summer he patrolled the park lands and waters, assisting visitors, responding to emergencies and spent some time working with a crew of disadvantaged youth on a trail along Blue Marsh Lake. The first summer led to two more summers as a seasonal park aide which led to a full-time position with the U S Army Corps of Engineers in the fall of 1984. The summers at Blue Marsh exposed him to all types of land and water-based recreation, fishing, water skiing, paddling, mountain biking, and hunting.

### **Quantifiable Recreation Improvements**

#### **New Opportunities and Increased Participation by Marginalized Communities**

Blue Marsh Lake is located just outside of Reading, Pennsylvania, the fourth largest city in the state, with 68% of the population identifying as Hispanic. It has been listed as one of the poorest cities in the US with 26% of the population living below the poverty line. A large portion of the visitors to Blue Marsh Lake come from the Reading area. While attending the Partners 2000 Conference Mr. Sunderland heard a speaker talk about recreation trends and one of the trends moving forward was going to be large family group picnicking. He recognized this trend taking place at Blue Marsh Lake and led the construction of large picnic pads near the water to allow family groups to gather two to three tables for their use. With the knowledge that many of the visitors did not know how to swim, he recognized a need and developed a partnership with Cabela's Outfitters to provide life jackets and to construct life jacket loaner stations at Blue Marsh Lake. The life jacket loaner stations have proven very popular and are still in use at the lake. They have instructional signs in both English and Spanish to make sure that the USACE water safety message is getting out to the public.

Speaking of water safety, Mr. Sunderland has been a big proponent of water safety throughout his career, doing many formal and informal programs from local schools to national conferences, participating in media interviews, and even dressing up as Bobber the Water Safety Dog!

During the Covid Pandemic when it seemed like everything was shut down except for recreation areas, Blue Marsh Lake saw a 20% increase in visitation. The USACE policy was to keep the gates open for passive use, but to not open other facilities. With the increase in visitation there was a definite sanitation issue by not having facilities open for the public to use. Mr. Sunderland worked with other managers in the North Atlantic Division to successfully convince North Atlantic Division management to open restrooms and other facilities for the public.

After spending several years as a ranger in the Philadelphia District and a stint as a maintenance worker for the park and dam at Blue Marsh Lake, Mr. Sunderland returned to the ranger staff at Blue Marsh in 1994. The Blue Marsh Lake multi-use trail, previously only 5 miles, which he worked on building his first year as a summer ranger was now 16 miles long! Mr. Sunderland and other staff members planned out and blazed a route to have this trail entirely encircle Blue Marsh Lake. In the following years Mr. Sunderland oversaw and participated in the brushing, clearing and construction of the trail, completing the loop in 1998 with a total of 30 miles of trail now open to previously underserved recreational groups including mountain bikers, hikers, and horseback riders. One of the highlights of the trail completion was the construction of a 60' bridge over a section of the lake. Mr. Sunderland designed and oversaw the construction of this bridge using surplus materials doing the measurements with handheld instruments. This was in the early days of mountain biking and once the word got out, folks would travel from surrounding states to ride this trail. In 1995 the editors of "Bicycling Magazine" listed the Blue Marsh multi-use trail as one of the best single-track mountain biking trails in the United States. The popularity of the trail grew and in 2011 was named as a National Recreation Trail by the Department of the Interior, one of the first trails to be designated as such on USACE lands.

While all this work was taking place on the multi-use trail an Eagle Scout approached the staff about doing an Eagle Scout Project at Blue Marsh. He proposed construction of a trail to be Handicapped Accessible within the day use area. Mr. Sunderland worked with the scout on the layout of the trail to ensure that it was compliant with the ADA regulations. He assisted in construction of the Eagle Scout project which became the "Eye of the Eagle Accessible Trail". The trail is wheelchair accessible and has a guide rope and interpretive signs in Brail to allow for use by the visually impaired. With Mr. Sunderland's oversight, the staff at Blue Marsh Lake transformed this area to be used for environmental education and worked to create stops along the trail with environmental lessons. The trail has evolved into an entire experience with additional Eagle Scout projects providing an observation overlook and a sensory garden in the center of the trail using all native plants which evoke all the senses to experience. This garden has led to a great partnership between the Boy Scouts of America, Penn State Master Gardeners and USACE.

As manager, Mr. Sunderland recognized that in addition to hiking and biking, paddle sports were becoming more popular and were a marginalized recreation community that has been underserved at Blue Marsh Lake. This interest in the paddle sports led to the creation of three kayak launches on the lake to allow easier and safer access to the water. Kayaks were purchased for use by the ranger staff to patrol the upper reaches of the lake to interact with paddlers whether they were on kayaks, canoes, or stand-up paddle boards and teach them about water safety and the potential dangers of paddle sports. The rangers use the kayaks to patrol other Philadelphia District lakes that do not have a ranger staff on site.

### **Partnerships with organizations in the public and nonprofit sectors.**

When it comes to partnerships, Mr. Sunderland recognizes the value of partnerships and has always been open to hearing proposals. As a member of the USACE HQ Partnership Advisory Committee he has worked on developing new national Memorandum of Understanding with the Ruffed Grouse Society and the Back Country Hunters and Anglers and is in communication the Boy Scouts of America national office to update the existing MOU.

In his tenure as manager of Blue Marsh Lake, Mr. Sunderland increased involvement of the staff on community boards, which led to recognition of USACE as a recreation provider and a natural resource agency to the local population. In 2023 Blue Marsh Lake was named Conservation Organization of the Year by the Berks County Conservation District.

One of the things that Mr. Sunderland observed over the years was several different agencies competing for the same audience for programs and events. Instead of doing similar programs as other locations and not getting very much public involvement, Mr. Sunderland thought outside the box. What he suggested was to have Blue Marsh Lake serve as a destination and host site for programs and events with partners. Blue Marsh Lake offers over 30 miles of trails, 1100 acres of water, and over 6000 acres of undeveloped land. His thoughtful approach has led to numerous successful partnerships over the years with the local township, county recreation departments and outdoor based organizations. These partnerships resulted in Pedal and Paddle events with the neighboring Berks County Parks and Spring Township Recreation Departments, Hosting the Don Hartman Conservation Leadership School with the Berks County Conservation District, Hosting the Tulpehocken Watershed Association meetings in conjunction with Berks Nature, Hosting events for the Pennsylvania Trails and Greenway summit with the Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks Association, to name just a few. These partnerships have also developed into the Blue Marsh Staff being invited to present programs offsite to groups such as the urban youth in Reading at the Berks Nature Place, water safety programming in the Reading School District and Cold-Water Safety at the Pennsylvania Game Commission's Middle Creek Wildlife Center. These partnerships with the other agencies have exposed thousands of visitors to Blue Marsh Lake and USACE.

Leveraging resources through partnerships to increase opportunities on public lands is an area where Mr. Sunderland has excelled. The \$134,000 grant he coordinated with the BassPro corporation for shoreline restoration, habitat improvement and increased boating and fishing access and the partnership with the Berks Area Mountain Biking Association (BAMBA) which in short time raised over \$400,000 through grants and donations to improve 3 miles of existing trails and the construction of 10 miles of new mountain bike trails are just two recent examples. The partnerships he has fostered and the benefits they provide for the recreating public over his 40+ year career are too many to list!

### **Use of creative solutions and programs.**

Throughout his career, Mr. Sunderland has been very eager to volunteer for additional assignments which have led to his involvement on regional and national teams. He has served on the USACE HQ Partnership Advisory Committee (PAC) and the Stewardship Advisory Team (SAT), serving as chairman of both these teams. He was also the North Atlantic Division representative on the Recreation Leadership Advisory Team (RLAT) and both the Recreation and Environmental Stewardship Budget Coaching and Training teams. Serving on these teams has allowed Mr. Sunderland to share what is going on at Blue Marsh Lake with representatives from across the country and to bring back that national knowledge where he would share with his counterparts across the North Atlantic Division.

He has instructed fellow USACE employees in the Partnerships in Natural Resource Management course. He was one of the first Pepper Spray Instructors in the North Atlantic Division and was also a Basic Boating Instructor for the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. Mr. Sunderland is constantly mentoring younger employees and really enjoys dealing with the summer park rangers, several of them have gone on to careers with USACE, The National Park Service, The US Forest Service, Pennsylvania State Parks, as well as other Federal, State and Local agencies.

In 2013, Blue Marsh Lake was selected as the Chief of Engineers Project award winner for Excellence in Natural Resource Management, Mr. Sunderland was a large part of many of the contributing factors for Blue Marsh Lake winning that award.

### **Community support**

Mr. Sunderland's commitment to the outdoors runs deep. Not only in his career, but in his personal life as well. He is a conservationist, the leader of a local ski club, a motorcycle safety instructor, and a lifelong Scouter. He serves on the board of directors of a local scout camp, he is an active member of the Hawk Mountain Council Boy Scouts of American Executive Board, serving as chairman of the nomination committee and a member of the Eagle Scout recognition committee. Mr. Sunderland earned his Eagle Scout award in 1979 and in 2020 was named Outstanding Adult Eagle Scout by the Hawk Mountain Council. Following the Scout Oath and Law, Mr. Sunderland is an active member of Trinity Lutheran church serving on the property board, a communion lay assistant, and as a chaperone for safe activities for the local high school.

Aware of the decline in interest and participation in hunting by youth, Mr. Sunderland recently became a certified Hunter-Trapper Education instructor for the PA Game Commission. Assisting the Game Commission with encouraging youth involvement in the sport and educating them on the positive aspects of nature-based recreation.

As a 30-year active member of the Ruffed Grouse society, he has served as Chapter vice chairman and treasurer. Looking to get youth involved in the conservation of wildlife, he has also served as an instructor/mentor for the Ruffed Grouse Society Youth Grouse Camp.

## CITATION:

Mr. Scott D. Sunderland is a true professional and outstanding ambassador for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Natural Resource Management Program. He serves as a national leader and innovative thinker. Through creative partnerships, stakeholder collaboration and thoughtful leadership, he leads his organization in offering the best possible Corps of Engineers recreational opportunities to the visiting public. Mr. Sunderland's guidance and recommendations are highly respected and sought out by the Corps at all levels. His selfless service, tenacious spirit and passion for the Corps' Recreation Program distinguish him as a national leader on Recreation and Land Management. These qualities and his many accomplishments reflect great credit upon Mr. Sunderland, the Philadelphia District, the North Atlantic Division, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

