



## The Birmingham News

### Community rallies to save imperiled fish

#### Park in works to protect darter

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The watercress darter, an endangered fish found only in the Birmingham area, has brought together an alliance in Powderly among people of science and faith.

Well-wishers gathered Friday outside Faith Apostolic Church to herald future construction of the Seven Springs Ecoscape, a park designed to protect the fish and educate the public about the rare inhabitant.

The reddish fish is about 2 inches long and lives in only a few areas in the world, all of them close by: Powderly, Roebuck Springs, Pinson and two sites in Bessemer.

Samford University professors Mike Howell and Larry Davenport discovered seven years ago that a spring flowing in front of Faith Apostolic Church contained the little fish.

The spring runs through church property not far from Arrington Middle School.

The Southern Environmental Center, based at Birmingham-Southern College, will oversee the park's design and construction, which is expected to be done in April. Phase One will cost \$45,000.

Privet, mimosa and other invasive plant species would be removed and replaced with native plants such as bald cypress, wax myrtle and river birch. A vacant house, near the headwaters, also would be demolished and removed.

The Freshwater Land Trust raised \$25,000 in private donations, and has \$20,000 coming from an EPA grant, said Wendy Jackson of the Freshwater Land Trust.

The next phase, Jackson said, would be a \$1 million project with an education center.

Since the discovery, Bishop Heron Johnson gets calls from across the country on the famous fish. "They call my home more than they do the church."

After the speeches and ceremonial dirt-turning, some felt drawn to the spring to check out the guests of honor.

"Can you see anything? You see the fish?" Barbara Jones called from the bank to her husband, Nelson Jones, who was deeper in the marsh.

Both are church ministers, and both were dressed in Sunday finery.

Nelson Jones grew up in the area and remembers tramping through the spring when there were houses on both sides and the Belcher lumber company bustling nearby. He also saw what now is known as the watercress darter.

"We called them minnows," Jones said.

Howell has a long history with the darter. He found one 43 years ago in Glenn Springs in Bessemer.

The joint effort of church members and conservationists, Howell said, echoes Alabama native E.O. Wilson, who called for people in the scientific and religious realms to seek common ground and help preserve the world, especially its biodiversity.

"We all want to have a clean environment for our grandkids," Howell said.

Jackson brought up the story of Noah's ark preserving animals as providing a modern-day lesson to follow.

"If they're important enough for God to save," Jackson said, "aren't they important enough for us to save?"

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