

Highland resident named Conservator of the Year

STAUNTON — Highland County resident John Sweet has been named Valley Conservation Council's Conservator of the Year.

The award, presented at Valley Conservation Council's annual conservation celebration, recognized Sweet's lifetime of environmental stewardship, culminating most recently with a donation of his 386-acre farm to the organization.

"When it came time for VCC's board and staff to select the recipient of our Conservator of the Year award, support for John Sweet's nomination was unanimous," said Natasha Skelton, VCC's executive director. "John has dedicated his life to environmental stewardship, and his extraordinarily generous gift to the region ensures that his legacy will continue for generations to come."

A lifelong outdoor enthusiast, Sweet was a member of the U.S. National Canoe Team, and first gained widespread attention when in 1968 he and a group of fellow paddlers became the first to descend all of the rapids in West Virginia's Gauley River. He then went on to develop and manage a successful business, which specialized in the fiber-

glass and other materials used to build the boats that made his sport possible.

In discussions with VCC staff, Sweet shared that he wanted to do something to help future generations feel the same passion for nature he has enjoyed throughout his life.

John and Charolette Sweet, who lived and worked on their Mustoe farm since 1988, originally placed it under easement with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to ensure the property retained its rural character in perpetuity.

In planning his estate after Charolette's death in 2014, Sweet searched for a way to ensure his property would continue to serve the regional community and be used to develop a conservation ethic for generations to come. Working with VCC, which is a regional nonprofit based in Staunton, Sweet developed a plan to turn this dream into a reality.

Sweet's farm, which has been deeded to the organization, will continue to support sustainable agriculture, but will also become a hub for environmental and agricultural education. Youth from the Allegheny Highlands and central Shenandoah Valley will have the op-

portunity to visit the property for educational programming and outdoor adventure for years to come.

Eric Fitzgerald, VCC board member and director of career and technical education for Rockingham County Public Schools, has been working with Sweet and VCC staff to develop a curriculum based around the farm's resources, and hopes to begin providing programming on the farm in 2019.

The property is home to a number of unique ecosystems and has the potential

to allow students the opportunity to study and research these in a hands-on, real-life manner.

"Our next generation needs opportunities to see natural areas in their pure form. John Sweet's gift to Valley Conservation Council will provide those opportunities," Fitzgerald said. "John Sweet has provided an outstanding resource for local educators to teach the importance of land protection and conservation."