

NATIONAL PARKS In The Chesapeake

More than four centuries ago, Captain John Smith set forth in a small boat to explore the vast, uncharted waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Over two years, he and his crew explored 3,000 miles of marshes, coves, rivers, and coastline. They found sprawling old-growth forests inhabited by wolves, bears, and deer; marshes rife with birds; oyster beds rising out of the sea; and a wealth of sturgeon and rockfish.

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Today, little of the 17th-century Chesapeake Bay remains. Since Smith first glimpsed it, wars have been waged and won in its meadows, a nation rose up from its swamps, and private landowners have claimed more than 90 percent of its shores. Thankfully, along the way, conservationists preserved historic and ecologically significant parts of the watershed in 54 National Park Service sites, five national trails, and seven national heritage areas. They range from Shenandoah National Park—a refuge of forests, mountains, waterfalls and headwaters—to the Civil War battlefields that defined a nation, like Gettysburg National Military Park. They also include sites that offer havens for generations of city dwellers, like Greenbelt Park in the Maryland suburbs of the nation’s capital, and sites that continue to mark great moments in history, like the National Mall. »



Osprey © iStockphoto

An Imperiled Landscape

Despite urbanization, the Chesapeake region still supports an important fishery, harbors critical habitat for wildlife, and provides drinking water—and homes—to nearly 17 million people. It is the largest estuary in North America, encompassing 64,000 square miles and nearly 12,000 miles of shoreline in six states and the District of Columbia. One of the most biologically productive estuaries in the world, the Chesapeake nurtures more than 3,600 species of flora and fauna and produces 500 million pounds of seafood every year.

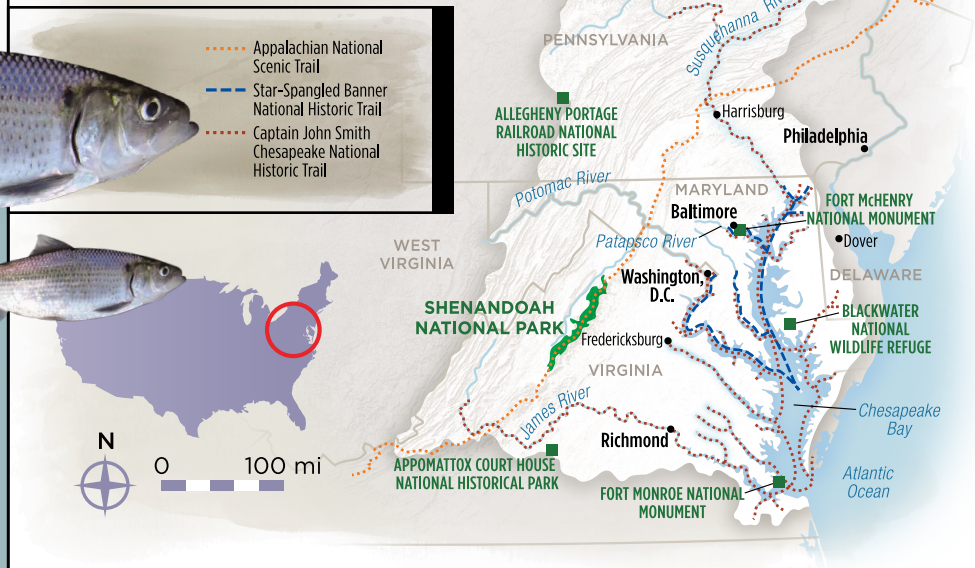
Even small changes in one part of the Chesapeake watershed can endanger the rest of the estuary, because it is tightly interconnected by water. Coastal development has shrunk wildlife habitat and sloughed sediments into shallows. Agricultural and residential fertilizers and livestock manure wash down streams, causing algae to bloom and dead zones to expand, killing marine life like blue crabs and shellfish.



One Fish, Two Fish: Shad Raise and Release Program



- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail
- Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail



Loss of habitat, water pollution, and blocked waterways have led to an almost complete disappearance of the North American Shad in the Chesapeake and the loss of associated fisheries. NPCA and its partners will teach local schoolchildren how to ‘raise and release’ shad at a new outdoor education site on shores of the Anacostia River, a key Bay tributary. The students will learn how to record data, observe and make predictions as they raise the fish, which will be released into the river. Restoration programs such as this will span the Chesapeake, improving its health and uniting the landscape, and teaching youth about migratory fish, the problems they face, and how we can help them.

Overharvesting has depleted fish stocks and decimated oyster beds. And air pollution from power plants, factories, and vehicle emissions has contaminated the water and acidified the bay.

Since John Smith first sailed by its shores, the Chesapeake has lost half of its shoreline forests, more than half of its wetlands, nearly 90 percent of its underwater grasses, and almost all of its oysters, which once filtered the entire bay into gorgeous clear aquamarine waters.

Now, a new, potentially catastrophic threat looms: Energy companies have begun gas drilling in the watershed’s Marcellus Shale. Documented impacts of this destructive drilling practice include surface and groundwater contamination, degradation to the landscape through road building, and dramatic increases in runoff into the region’s rivers and streams. Unchecked, these impacts could harm the health of the Chesapeake’s residents—and its national parks—for generations to come.

Big-Thinking Solutions



Kayaking the Captain John Smith Chesapeake NHT © NPS

National park sites may seem like pristine islands, but their borders aren't impervious to the ills that surround them. In the Chesapeake, this is particularly true, because water is the lifeblood of the land—and carries pollutants far and wide. The good news: the Chesapeake's 54 national park sites, whether established for their natural or cultural values, can also act as models of restoration, helping to tip the entire ecosystem to stable health.

NPCA's National Parks in the Chesapeake program, founded in 2010, has made progress toward restoring the watershed. Our ecosystem-wide plan focuses on building the foundations of a long-term healthy landscape in three ways:

Protecting Land

With NPCA's advocacy leadership, Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia became a national monument in November 2011, protecting three miles of rare, relatively undeveloped Chesapeake coastline and adding 324 acres to the park. Now, we are lobbying for legislation—already introduced—to establish the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park. The park would protect Tubman's childhood home and more than 350 acres of pristine wildlife habitat, including marshes, freshwater ponds, and deciduous forests, next to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on Maryland's Eastern Shore. We are also advocating for new conservation easements and federal purchase of private land in national parks like Richmond National Battlefield in Virginia. This growing string of protected lands offers critical refuges for wildlife, sensitive plants, and humans alike.

Protecting Air and Water

Pollution is a big, unwieldy issue threatening the bay. NPCA currently is contesting a proposed coal-fired power plant in Surry County, Virginia that could blacken the region's air and water—and threaten the health of the national parks. Working with local citizens, we are persuading towns and counties to adopt resolutions against the plant. (Already five communities have passed resolutions, and more are prepared to vote on them.) To achieve clean water in the watershed, NPCA helped found the Choose Clean Water Coalition in 2009, which now numbers more than 200 local, regional, and national organizations. Together, we are leading numerous action campaigns and lobbying for important legislation, such as the Farm Bill, which could allocate additional funds to farmers who implement good farming practices like fencing cattle out of streams or planting green streamside buffers. These and other best practices reduce polluted runoff and protect fragile wetlands, contributing to a cleaner Bay.

Restoring Landscape, Connections

Working with partners across the Bay region, NPCA will lead the way in on-the-ground restoration projects that will improve the health of the Chesapeake and strengthen the connections among the national parks. Replanting wetlands along the shipping channel at Fort McHenry, marshes at the site of the future Harriet Tubman Park, and wildlife habitat at Fort Monroe are among the projects. A new outdoor education site for inner-city youth will be built on the shores of the Anacostia River, a key Bay tributary with sites on both the Captain John Smith Chesapeake and Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trails. NPCA and our partners will work with local schoolchildren there to raise and release shad, a fish species that relies on the connection between the river and the sea to survive. These restoration projects will span the Chesapeake, improving its health and uniting the landscape.



Harriet Tubman © Library of Congress

Why Act Now?

After decades of work to reduce pollution emptying into the Chesapeake, the Environmental Protection Agency and the watershed states—DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV & DC—unveiled a new cleanup plan in December 2010. This blueprint calls for specific cuts by 2025 in nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment flowing into the bay.

States in the Bay region know that because the landscape is connected, cleanup efforts must be united to confront the pollution challenges facing the land and water. Now is a critical time for NPCA to act as a voice for the national parks and ensure that the waters that surround and flow through them are cleaned up—and stay clean. It's not just national parks at stake, but the millions of dollars they generate from visitors and the thousands of jobs they create. 🐾



Sailing at Sunset © RJ DiLoreto

Protecting National Parks Improves Our Quality of Life

Overwhelming evidence demonstrates the benefits of healthy parks. They improve our physical health and psychological wellbeing, strengthen our communities, and make the Chesapeake region a more attractive place to live.

Reducing air pollution from coal-fired power plants and motor vehicle emissions, for example, reduces the risk of a wide range of disorders including asthma and chronic bronchitis, especially in infants and children, the frail elderly, and anyone working or exercising outdoors. Making

Bay waters healthier improves the drinking water for millions of residents in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Spending time enjoying the parks helps reduce stress, improve physical fitness, and enhance self-esteem as well as create family bonds that last a lifetime.

Protecting our national park sites in the Chesapeake not only helps the natural world thrive, but improves the quality of life for the 17 million Americans who call the Chesapeake landscape home.

How Your Gift Will Make a Difference

Donor gifts are critical to funding the challenging work of conservation and advocacy. Already, our donors have helped NPCA achieve huge successes for national parks in the Chesapeake, like the 2011 establishment of Fort Monroe National Monument. But meaningful conservation in a landscape as vast and complex as the Chesapeake requires constant vigilance and a steady flow of new projects. These are just a few examples of what generous donor gifts are helping us accomplish right now:

- Restore wetlands across the estuary, starting with Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine and Fort Monroe National Monument. NPCA and our partners are organizing hundreds of volunteers and staffers to remove debris, eradicate invasive species, and plant native vegetation.
- Constantly monitor plans for new coal-fired power plants and contest proposals, such as the Surry County, Virginia power plant, to safeguard the health of our air and water.
- Lobby for nationwide legislation to prevent destructive Marcellus Shale gas development in sensitive areas.
- Establish a federal rule that would help cities establish greener building codes to curb polluted storm water runoff.
- Sponsor a Center for Park Research scientific study on the potential impacts of hydraulic fracturing on national parks, which we'll use to inform policy makers and the public and inspire them to action.
- Advocate for protection of lands within and adjacent to park boundaries through fee purchase, conservation easements, and state programs.
- Help secure funds so the Park Service can purchase land for two new national historical trails: John Smith Chesapeake and the Star-Spangled Banner.