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Not just bay's water needs protecting

By DAVID O'NEILL

The Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration executive order recently signed by President Barack Obama is the most assertive act a president has yet taken to protect and restore the bay. It is remarkable for another reason as well: It puts the conservation of landscapes and ecosystems on an equal footing with restoring water quality and recognizes the immense cultural and ecological value of the Chesapeake's landscapes.

President Obama and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar understand that we must conserve the watershed's intact ecosystems and restore others for the Chesapeake Bay to fully recover. They understand a bay without these landscapes would never provide the diverse habitats that lead to productive fisheries or the immense filtering capacities needed for healthy waters. They know that a bay watershed without intact forests and marshes, or long sweeps of undeveloped shorelines, or the watermen's communities that define the region, will be no Chesapeake at all.

Mr. Obama's order instructs Mr. Salazar's department to lead the effort to identify landscapes and ecosystems "that merit recognition for their historical, cultural, ecological or scientific values" and employ

strategies to conserve them. It notes this work should be coordinated with state and local governments and with the new Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the Star Spangled Banner Trail and other programs. The order also directs federal agencies to look at all their lands and find new opportunities for public access to the bay.

Both more access and a stronger effort to conserve ecosystems and landscapes will greatly benefit the public and the bay.

The Chesapeake's ecological, scenic, wild and historic landscapes are not sufficiently protected. More than 90,000 acres (nearly 150 square miles) of open land are consumed annually by growth in the bay states. Maryland alone could lose 700,000 acres (an area 10 times the size of Baltimore) of valuable agricultural and forest land in the next 25 years. At least 36 percent of the region's forestland is at risk over the next five to 10 years. From 1990 to 2000, impervious surfaces, including roads, parking lots and roof tops, increased by 41 percent across the bay region, affecting the health of our communities' streams and rivers. And although the bay and its rivers have thousands of miles of shoreline, only about 2 percent is open to the public.

The Department of Interior, working with other federal, state and local agencies and nonprofit organizations, has the expertise to take the lead in restoring and protecting Chesapeake Bay ecosystems and landscapes. The National Park Service, one of Interior's agencies, has broad experience in landscape level protection, ecosystem partnerships, recreation, interpretation, education and heritage tourism that, if brought to bear, can help save the bay's natural and cultural heritage and provide increased recreational and stewardship opportunities for all citizens.

Given the authority granted by the president's new order, the participation of state, local and private entities, and adequate resources, the public may gain greater access to the bay and the conservation of the significant and treasured landscapes that define the region's identity and create its rich ecosystems.

But times are tough and resources limited. No extra money accompanied the executive order.

So we, the citizens of the bay's watershed, must be vigilant and pursue opportunities to work hand-in-hand with our congressional leaders, state officials and local partners to make this work a priority and a reality.

A healthy bay is built on intact ecosystems. Healthy ecosystems spring from the conservation of landscapes. We benefit from productive fisheries, clean air and water, and increased economic opportunity from sustainable resource-based economies and tourism.

Ultimately, protecting and restoring the Chesapeake's treasured landscapes protects and restores the health of our whole, mid-Atlantic region and leads to a richer life for all of us.

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