Native Lands (York County) Park near Wrightsville, PA, is the site of a former Susquehannock Village. It is located behind the Zimmerman Center for Heritage, the first official visitor contact station on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.

**Smith Trail has come a long way in 10 years**

Visitors, new sites continue to rack up miles on first national water-based trail.

**By Lara Lutz**

Along the James River, an outfitter in the Richmond area now weaves tales of the 17th-century Chesapeake Bay into paddling tours and fishing trips.

Farther north, in Virginia’s Caledon State Park on the Potomac River, kayakers can stay overnight at paddle-in campsites where none existed three years ago.

Still farther north, a new kayak launch on the lower Susquehanna River offers free access to the Bay’s largest tributary. A large sign identifies the stone building there as a visitor contact station on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.

These are some of the many developments along the 3,000-mile water route throughout the Bay and its rivers that was created 10 years ago next month to mark the historic exploration of the region by English settlers four centuries ago.

The trail, established by an act of Congress on December 19, 2006, is arguably the most ambitious network for environmental and cultural tourism.

**TRAIL CONTINUES ON PAGE 25**

PA municipalities begin uphill paddle to reach runoff goals, one stroke at a time

Methods to curtail stormwater runoff varies by location as officials-realize they have the responsibility for projects and their funding.

**By Rona Koberl**

Pennsylvania is beginning to tackle its mammoth and long-neglected stormwater runoff problems, beginning the work in some unlikely places.

Blair County, a good 180 miles from the Chesapeake Bay, has begun to corral the various municipalities within its 340,000 mostly forested acres to work on cleaning the runoff from their developed areas.

Lancaster, a city so firmly rooted in the past that Amish buggies still ply its streets, has become a model nationwide for green streets and green roofs.

And Harrisburg, which declared bankruptcy and couldn’t even air-condition its own city hall five years ago, has managed to restructure itself and begin to unlog its drains. Those efforts are starting to intercept at least a little of the polluted runoff bound for the Susquehanna; instead, the rain soaks into the ground, gets reused or is otherwise kept out of the degraded river.

Still, it’s just a drop in the proverbial bucket. Pennsylvania has achieved only 3 percent of its total urban and suburban stormwater infiltration goal. While the state’s biggest Bay impact comes from its agricultural sector, it also produces more nitrogen-laden urban runoff than any other, with 171 million pounds in 2015 according to federal-state Bay Program estimates. That’s almost half of the total nitrogen load from stormwater for all six states and the District of Columbia, and far short of its goals of 13.1 million pounds by 2017 and 10.5 million pounds by 2025.

Complicating matters is that the Keystone State is home to more than
launched in the Bay watershed. Based on the travels of Englishman John Smith, who explored and mapped the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers 1607 to 1609, it was the first national water-based trail in the United States. The National Park Service launched a National Water Trails System six years later.

Managed by the Park Service, pieces of the Smith trail have been slowly coming together, forming the start of a regional network of places that invite people to experience the Bay’s waterways and become more interested in protecting them. In a number of ways, sites on the trail tell Smith’s story, highlight American Indian cultures past and present, and provide a window on environmental change.

The trail traverses the length of the Bay and branches up its rivers in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia. In 2012, approximately 840 miles of trails were added on sections of rivers, including the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, where Smith did not travel but were part of the Indian landscape in the Bay region in the early 1600s.

Along the waterways, the trail encompasses approximately 180 land-based sites with interpretation and resources, such as public programs, exhibits, launch sites or settings in which the landscape is still similar to the early 1600s. Almost all of these sites are owned and managed by partner organizations such as state parks, nonprofits and Virginia Indian tribes—rather than by the Park Service itself.

“At its best, the trail has an authenticity to its landscape, an appearance associated with the early 17th century,” said Jonathan Doherty, assistant superintendent for the National Park Service Chesapeake. “It’s about offering sites with a sense of history that’s real, not manufactured.”

But the Smith trail is far from complete. During its first 10 years, the Park Service has focused mostly on planning and developing trail resources along just two rivers, the James and Potomac. The James plan was completed in 2011 and the Potomac in 2015. Plans for the Susquehanna are under way.

The river plans deliver an outline of possible projects—an encyclopedia of good ideas,” said Matt Jagunick, an outdoor recreation planner for the Park Service.

But achieving the goals outlined in those plans can take years, depending on local partnerships and available funds. On the lower James, the trail’s partner groups say they have achieved more than 70 percent of the goals set for the lower James in the 2011 work plan. Efforts to flesh out the Potomac

independent sites, there’s no single entry gate—sometimes no gate at all—where visitors can be counted.

The Smith trail is not alone in this conundrum. Other trails, like the Washington-Rochambeau National Historic Trail and the state-based Virginia Oyster Trail, link a variety of independent sites that make a collective accounting of visitors—and expenditures—quite difficult.

Getting the message out
To date, one of the best indicators of trail usage is the number of visits to Smith trail geocaches, a family-friendly “treasure hunt” using GPS coordinates. Since 2012, nearly 12,000 visits to 54 Smith trail geocaches have been logged in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware, and each logged visit usually represents more than one person.

But this captures only a subset of people who may have traveled the Smith trail, either deliberately or by accident. Many people visit trail sites without realizing it. It is hoped that they learn about the trail while there. But they might also just soak in the scenery or appreciate a free, convenient place to launch a kayak or canoe.

The geographic scope of the trail, and its many independently managed sites, creates both obstacles and potential. The widespread effort has encouraged groups to combine resources in an era of limited

still be found floating in the Bay and its rivers: 10 bright yellow “smart” buoys, set out by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration at places where Smith’s shallow passed.

By phone or the Internet, the buoys transmit navigational and scientific information, as well as Smith-related tales.

A recording from the buoy near Annapolis, for instance, narrates Smith’s comments from 1608: “The

The Zimmerman Center for Heritage, near Wrightsville, PA, has a floating canoe/kayak launch that provides access to the Susquehanna River. Photo / Dave Harp

The western shore by which we sailed we found all along well watered, but very mountainous and barren, the valleys very fertile, but extreme thick of small wood so well as trees and much frequented with wolves, bears, deer, and other wild beasts.”

But the trail development focus soon shifted to the shore. “Some people will never be in a boat, so we needed land-based nodes where people could still have a trail experience,” Doherty said.

Work began first on the James River. The Park Service looked for partners—nontours, government agencies, Indian tribes and private businesses—that could give the trail on-the-ground meaning. They identified locations of Indian communities where Smith stopped, places that evoke a sense of the early-1600s landscape, and organizations that

TRAIL CONTINUES ON PAGE 26
could help communicate trail themes or get people on the water.

A plan was released in 2011 that identified four focus areas: the James River Oxbows, Chickahominy River and River Front Park, Jamestown and Powhatan Creek, and the Pagan River and Town of Smithfield.

As a result of these efforts, 16 public access sites, mostly for paddle craft, have been added or improved. Several outfitters and parks have added trail interpretation to their public programs. Kiosks and wayside signage mark more than a dozen trail locations on the tidal James and its tributaries.

Planning for the tidal Potomac trail spur began in 2013. It posed special challenges because of the densely developed landscape along some stretches of the river and the overlapping presence of three other national trails.

“We have many layers of history here and there’s no place where you are ever telling just one story,” Doherty said. “That’s the beauty and the complication of the Chesapeake.”

Mervin Savoy, a member of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe of Maryland, said that she hopes the trail will help tell the Piscataway story along the Potomac.

“Smith would not have survived without native help. There would be no Smith trail without us,” said Savoy, who sits on the trail’s advisory board.

The trail’s mission dovetails with the tribe’s existing tourism effort, called Through Piscataway Eyes. “When you are on the Smith trail, you are of course going to come across our village sites,” Savoy said. “It’s all one thing.”

The grounds of Chapel Point State Park are an important part of the Piscataway landscape. Above the park, a village once stood on a hill, now owned by the Catholic Church, which overlooks the Port Tobacco and Potomac rivers.

Smith stopped there in 1608. Savoy would like to realize long-discussed plans for an interpretive site and community center at the park. Even though she wishes that Piscataway interests alone were enough to spur progress, Savoy said the Smith trail might provide the impetus.

“It just won’t pass muster without it,” she said.

John Wilson, associate director of stewardship for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, said the state doesn’t have the resources now to fund such a project.

“If NPS could bring some of those resources to the table, that would be great. We’re certainly supportive,” Wilson said.

Help from all sectors

In the meantime, the department may be adding paddle-in camp sites at state parks on the lower Potomac.

“We see the development of these sites as a great asset and something that will make the trail more real,” Wilson said. “But we want to make sure we have the capacity to manage these things. We want to set it up for success.”

The Park Service has some funds available to help trail partners improve shoreline access, enhance Smith trail themes and conduct related youth programs, like the Baltimore-based Kids in Kayaks.

From 2012 through 2015, Smith trail projects received approximately $2.1 million, but partner organizations have also raised funds and committed staff and financial resources for long-term operations and maintenance.

The Zimmerman Center for Heritage, on the Susquehanna River near Wrightsville, PA, became the first official visitor contact station on the entire Smith trail in August. It not only offers programming, but serves as a trailhead where visitors can receive detailed information about other trail locations and ways to experience the river. It has a large National Park Service sign out front, despite the fact that it is not Park Service property.

Jonathan Pinkerton, vice president of the nonprofit Susquehanna Heritage, which operates the center, said that serving as a contact station has already improved programming and visitor amenities. They’ve added a kayak launch and waterfront pavilion, improved the visitor reception area, added signage and developed trail programs. The Park Service provided approximately $160,000 of a $1.5 million budget for these improvements, which were also supported by funds from other sources.

The center also received one year of staffing help from the Chesapeake Conservancy Corp.

“That happened because of our partnership with NPS,” Pinkerton said.

Involvement with the Smith trail has led to greater emphasis on the environment, alongside the center’s focus on history and heritage.

“It has solidified the notion of environmental stewardship in our programming,” Pinkerton said. “It’s not just about Smith and his voyages, or native American sites. It’s also about the landscape and how we protect this resource for future generations.”

The Park Service sign at the front of the building is attracting local attention and drawing visitors seeking a national park passport stamp. Pinkerton said.

The center is also able to offer the popular Park Service Junior Ranger program, which brought in more than 300 students during its first year.

At the Sultana Education Foundation, in Chestertown, MD, staff has
been highlighting Smith trail themes since their recreated shallow took to the water in 2007.

"It's a baseline for what the Bay was, before we messed it up," McMul-

len said. "You can't teach environmental-

science without teaching history.

It's a fundamental part of our method-

ology to combine the two."

In the spring of 2017, the foundation's

new headquarters — where a large map

of the Bay is built into the floor and

animated with lights to show Smith's

route — will become the second visitor

contact station on the trail.

The Park Service did not provide

financial assistance for the building or

floor map, but has helped with program

development and teacher training. In

2008, it provided the Sultana Founda-

tion with approximately $85,000 to

support Smith trail expeditions for the

public and to develop the Chester and

Sassafras rivers water trails as compo-

nents of the Smith trail.

Preserving Werowocomoco
A major site in Virginia is slated

for attention in the coming year: a

264-acre tract of rural, riverside land.

It was once the location of Werowo-

comoco, a spiritually and politically

important Indian community on what

is now the York River. John Smith was

brought to Werowocomoco as a captive

to meet the Indian leader Powhatan.

It is also where Smith later claimed to

have met Pocahontas.

The Park Service recently

purchased Werowocomoco for $7.1

million, but it is not yet open to the

public. A planning process, including

public input, is expected to begin in

early 2017 to determine how to protect

the site while hosting a potentially

large number of future visitors.

Werowocomoco is the only property

that has been acquired specifically for

the Smith trail. Joel Dunn, president of

the Chesapeake Conservancy, said that

the trail has put landscape conserva-

tion efforts in a larger context.

"The trail has given us a framework

for the interpretation of the Chesape-

akee, its rivers and history that we
didn't have before," Dunn said. "It's

engineering a collective impact."

A conservation strategy for the

Smith trail released by the Park

Service in 2013 analyzes the landscape

for places that are especially important

for maintaining or enhancing visitor

experiences. Relatively large, natural

landscapes are critical and are often

not fully protected by conservation

agreements.

The initial list of conservation focus

areas includes places like the upper

Rappahannock River in Virginia and

the upper Nanticoke River on Mary-

land's Eastern Shore.

Coordinating conservation efforts

in large areas, where many organiza-

tions are at work, can be challenging,

much like the development of the trail

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funding, but can an undertaking with

so many owners and locations ever

achieve a solid regional identity with

broad public recognition?

Dunn suggested that one way to

overcome that hurdle would be to

boost the trail's status.

"I want to make the trail a national

park. There's no reason it shouldn't be," Dunn said. "When people think of

great landscapes in the United States,

the Chesapeake Bay should be among them."

Dunn said that national parks get

dedicated line items in the federal budget. National trails do not.

"Right now, the trail is nested in

among [the budget for] some 20 other

national trails, so it's difficult to get

more money," Dunn said.

Gaining national park status, he

added, could lead to greater, more

reliable funding, and step up the pace

of trail development.

Doherty counsels patience, saying

it takes time to develop such a spraw-

ling, complex project. The Appalachian Trail, he pointed out, took approxi-

mately 75 years to become the trail as

we know it today.

"For a whole host of reasons, things
take time, from the Smith trail to con-

servation efforts in the Chesapeake as

a whole," Doherty said. "It also takes

commitment and people with a vision. We still have a ways to go."