

Great Rivers of the Chesapeake Bay

"In these moments when our national character is most tested, we rightly seek to protect that which fuels our spirit." Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior

HAVEN AND EARTH NEVER AGREED to frame a more perfect place for man's habitation," wrote Captain John Smith. He got it right. From its beginnings, our nation has been defined by its people and its places, and no place has had a more profound influence than the region anchored by the Chesapeake Bay. Rivers are its lifelines. They provide the freshwater that mixes with the ocean's salt to create one of the world's most productive aquatic systems, home to more than 3,600 species of plants, fish, and animals. The rivers are transportation corridors that help power the region's economy. And indeed the great rivers of the Chesapeake, some of which are highlighted here, are inextricably linked to great historical events and treasured landscapes. With a regional population approaching 17 million—and climbing fast—and with 90,000 acres of open space vanishing each year, protecting these landscapes while fostering ecosystem and cultural connectivity is vital to preserving the region's history and ensuring its future.



5 The Susquehanna: Mother of the Bay

Mightiest river on the Atlantic seaboard, the Susquehanna winds nearly 450 miles from its headwaters in New York State, through Pennsylvania farmland (above), to Havre de Grace, Maryland. Each day the Susquehanna pours some 20 billion gallons into the bay, about half the bay's freshwater inflow—and 40 percent of its pollutants. From earliest times the river provided native peoples a trade corridor. Now a nationally recognized conservation and recreation corridor is emerging along the lower Susquehanna, where private and public groups seek conservation of more than 16,000 acres of utility-owned lands. At its mouth, the river flows past Garrett Island, the bay's only rocky island and the northern end of the John Smith Trail. Miles of rearing native underwater grasses provide favored habitat for the Chesapeake's famed blue crabs.



6 The Sassafras: River in Bloom

Each summer the exquisite American lotus (above) engulfs the tidal backwaters of the Sassafras, a popular river with boaters. Yet summer also brings potentially toxic algal blooms. Turtling Turtles and Eastern Tiger Salamanders are among the threatened species that call the Sassafras watershed home.



7 The Nanticoke: Forest and Marsh

Nearly the entire watershed of the Nanticoke River is rural, including bucolic Chicone Creek (above), close to the site of one of the last Nanticoke Indian settlements and just north of the historic town of Vienna, Maryland. Though the thick forests the Indians knew have dwindled, the watershed retains a great diversity of plants and animals. Along with visiting tundra swans and other waterfowl, the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel finds a haven here. Above Phillips Landing in Delaware lies the nation's northernmost stand of bald cypress. Some of the region's remaining Atlantic white cedar swamps are located along the Nanticoke, as is seaside alder, a shrub found here and also, oddly, in Oklahoma.



8 The Pocomoke: Paddlers Paradise

The first designated Scenic River in Maryland, the Pocomoke is also the Chesapeake's southernmost tributary. Below its head of navigation at Snow Hill, the river is joined by tranquil Nagsawong Creek (above) before passing through Pocomoke River State Park. The park shelters a dazzling display of wildlife, from warblers and woodpeckers to otters and eagles. Over the river's course, tannins from the decaying bark and needles of cypress trees stain its clear water dark, creating a near-perfect mirror. As deep as 45 feet, the Pocomoke is reportedly the second deepest river in the world after the Nile.



9 Islands of the Chesapeake

West of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge near Cambridge, Maryland, a loose archipelago of low, marshy islands stretches southward. At its northern end is Upper Hooper Island, one of the oldest settlements in the state, purchased from the Yaocomaco Indians, legend tells, for five wooden blankets. At the southern end, on Smith and Tangier islands, one can still hear traces of the islands' lifting speech—and the crabs don't get any fresher (above). Most of the islands in between are uninhabited, their tricky shoals warning to greet unwary sailors.

The Challenge

Across the Bay's immense watershed (right) there remain intact landscapes and ecosystems that still evoke the time 400 years ago when Capt. John Smith first sailed up its rivers. Many areas, while altered by centuries of human activity, provide wildlife habitat, celebrate our heritage, offer unparalleled recreational opportunities, and fuel local and regional economies. Protecting these lands will require a bold new initiative that emphasizes public-private partnerships and coordinates efforts across jurisdictions to make the most effective use of resources. With renewed spirit and ingenuity, we can—we must—conserve the Bay's treasured landscapes and help restore its great rivers.



MAP KEY

- Featured Treasured Landscapes
- Federally protected area
- State protected area
- Protected area
- Captain John Smith's routes
 - June 2-July 21, 1608
 - July 24-September 7, 1608
 - Other routes
- Chesapeake Bay Gateway

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1 The Potomac: "Where one goes pleasantly"

Rising in the Appalachian piedmont, "the nation's river" flows east and south some 385 miles to the Chesapeake. Along the way it passes majestically through Washington, D.C., at the feet of the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. Just two dozen miles south of the capital Beltway it begins a wide sweep around Maryland's Rural Tayloe Neck. Algonquin Indians named the feeder creek on the neck's north side Mattawoman, "where one goes pleasantly." With its quiet marshes and remarkable biodiversity, Mattawoman still lives up to its name. Nanjemoy Creek emptying into the Potomac on the south side of Tayloe, shelters abundant wildlife, including a nesting ground for great blue heron (above).

2 The Patuxent: History Meets Nature

It's the longest river, at 115 miles, lying entirely within the state of Maryland. The last 50 miles are navigable, which allowed John Smith to map both it and the native villages that lined its banks. Some 200 years later, British forces sailed up the river en route to touching Washington in 1814. In recent times, battles on the Patuxent have been over pollution. The fight to clean up the river has been led by Bernie Fowler, a former state senator, now retired. For more than 20 years Fowler has conducted an annual "wade-in" (above) to gauge the river's clarity—and has seen dramatic improvement. The river draws wintering waterfowl and harbors large numbers of bass, perch, and catfish.

3 The Rappahannock: Home of Eagles

This deep, powerful river shelters the mid-Atlantic's largest population of bald eagles. Among their favorite roosts is Fones Cliffs (above), where they keep an eagle eye out for bountiful shad and herring. It was from these sandstone heights that Rappahannock Indians ambushed Smith and his men as they rowed their 28-foot, oak-timbered Discovery Barge upriver in August of 1608. Halls of arrows flew from both sides of the river but met stout shields the crew had erected atop Discovery's gunwales. The Indians did not pursue the vessel, which was soon safely out of range. Today the river's shoreline remains relatively undeveloped and unspoiled.

4 The James: First Colony's Lifeblood

Southernmost tributary of the Chesapeake, the James River was our unborn nation's first commercial waterway. Just upriver Jamestown, it is joined by the Chickahominy, which shares its name with the tribe that still thrives today. It was on this meandering watercourse that John Smith was taken prisoner by the Powhatans but was famously saved, he later wrote, by the chief's daughter Pocahontas. These days the Chickahominy and its broad tidal marshes are a peaceful refuge, where one can catch a 30-pound catfish on a view of cypress "knees" silhouetted by the sun (above). Charles Stek, Chairman of Friends of the John Smith Chesapeake Trail, has said, "Some see the sun setting on the bay, see it rising."

