

"We are all the Chesapeake"
Second Annual Champions of the Chesapeake Awards and Dinner
December 8, 2015
Remarks By Joel Dunn, President & CEO, Chesapeake Conservancy

I'm happy to join you tonight at the second annual Champions of the Chesapeake dinner, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service and the 10th anniversary of the Captain John Smith Trail. It is hard to believe, but this is my 12th year working on conservation in the Chesapeake.

The way I see it, the Universe has conspired to bring us together for this very moment. Just as it conspired to produce the double rainbow in the video we just watched. It was simply meant to be.

During filming, the crew sent me a picture of that double rainbow. They were shocked because it hadn't rained and never did rain that afternoon. But I wasn't surprised at all...It was meant to be... it was meant to spark a fire in you and me.

Last year, I gave a speech in this same spot about how I believe in the Chesapeake conservation movement – that with the power of technology and the power of community we can protect and restore our great rivers and special places.

This year, we are here to celebrate your passion for the Chesapeake, reinforce your belief in our ability to save our wildlife, culture and history, and remind you that you are the key to achieving this worthwhile and just cause.

I am here to propose that “you are the Chesapeake” and that together “we are the Chesapeake.” Just as each of the Chesapeake’s many rivers and streams contribute fresh water to the estuary, each of you contributes physically and spiritually to this special place.

The geography of the Chesapeake naturally weaves together the land and rivers in ways that make the ecosystem and our history inseparable from our daily lives. This landscape shapes our culture and traditions and defines our communities.

What I think the rainbow video conveys so well, thanks to Scott McDaniel who produced it, is that everyone that lives here and works here is a part of the Chesapeake. We literally have the river’s water running through our veins.

Whether you are male or female, African American or Caucasian, young or old, urban or rural, you are connected to the rivers and streams near your homes, schools and churches. To save this place, we must all recognize that we are a part of this ecosystem... we must recognize that “we are the Chesapeake.”

Along with that awesome connection and enlightenment, comes tremendous responsibility. By that I mean personal responsibility to achieve environmental sustainability for current and future generations. We must find ways to meet the needs of the present without compromising the opportunity of future generations.

This takes on added meaning for me this year, as Heidi and I are now the proud parents of a 7-month-old baby girl. She is healthy. She is happy. She is beautiful.

My daughter, your daughter, niece or granddaughter deserves to have the same opportunities to enjoy the Chesapeake as we’ve had in life.

She deserves clear water and wild creatures... the orange of a monarch butterfly, the flight of an osprey, the sight of a leaping rockfish.

- She deserves to see the poetry of a Bald Eagle dive from Fones Cliffs on the Rappahannock River to catch a white perch.

- She deserves to experience the wildness of the James River near Jamestown, the epicenter of America's modern history.
- She deserves to enjoy the beautiful chaos of thousands of snow geese in flight along the Nanticoke River and at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.
- She deserves the adventure of shad fishing on the mighty Susquehanna River, the longest river on the east coast of North America.
- She deserves to take an awe-inspiring walk in the Green Cathedral on the Severn River or kayak around the shipwrecks at Mallows Bay - Potomac River.

Four Hundred and seven years ago, when Captain John Smith first explored our great rivers and Bay, he declared that "Heaven and earth never framed a more perfect place for man's habitation."

Of course, if John Smith were to retrace his 1608 Chesapeake Bay voyages today, he would see a dramatically changed landscape.

Tragically, as a result of industrial, residential and agricultural pollution, many of our prime rivers and streams are no longer fishable or swimmable. Here in Annapolis I can't let my dog swim in Spa creek because he gets sores on his belly.

These are symptoms of a profound watershed wide ecosystem collapse evidenced by deforestation, rapid conversion of open space, loss of fish and wildlife populations, dangerously poor water quality and sea level rise.

And despite one of America's longest and most intensely coordinated efforts to protect and restore the estuary, ecosystem health and productivity continue to face significant challenges.

- From the \$330 million dollar mega-development approved on top of Fones Cliffs on the Rappahannock River;
- to the 500 thousand volt powerline on the James River within view of Jamestown;
- to the hundreds of acres of vital wetlands we are losing each year on the Nanticoke River from sea level rise;
- to the various dams undergoing relicensing on the Susquehanna River that completely block fish passage;
- and to the threat of residential development in the heart of the Green Cathedral on the Severn River.

Even more frustrating is that so few people know what is truly at stake, because access to the great rivers and the Bay is so limited.

Of nearly 12,000 miles of shoreline, only 2% is publicly accessible. This is significant because people cannot love what they have not seen and what they do not know. We cannot ignite their passion for this place if they are blind to it.

So if you accept that we are the Chesapeake, and future generations will either praise our foresight or curse our ignorance, and you ask what should we do?

- I can say that we must recognize the urgency of now and stand up for our beliefs and values with all the strength that God can give us.

- We must challenge each other on what we can do for the Chesapeake and therefore what we can do for each other.
- We must act, vote, donate, volunteer and commit to achieving a state of harmony between people and the Chesapeake.
- We must learn from our Native American forefathers and friends and consider how decisions today will affect people seven generations from now.

I wish the planners in my hometown of Sudbury, Massachusetts had the foresight to think seven generations ahead.

When I was a child, I watched the forests and wetland disappear from around my house, the frogs and salamanders fade out, the luna moths stop coming, and the fireflies stop blinking. Back then I thought that science was the answer, so I studied ecology.

In my twenties, after doing scientific research in the rainforests of Panama, my study sites were cut down. Replaced with oil wells -- no joke. Back then, I thought the combination of science and policy was the answer, so I studied public policy.

And then I met Pat Noonan. Pat is my hero, my mentor, and my friend. Pat has helped create numerous National Parks and National Wildlife Refuges in the Chesapeake and around the country. His conservation leadership is on par with the great Teddy Roosevelt.

Pat taught me a lot of things over the past decade. He taught me that to accomplish conservation goals, partnerships are essential, knowledge is power and that money matters.

Perhaps more importantly though, Pat taught me that conservation depends upon the people living in the Chesapeake. Pat taught me that "we are the Chesapeake."

Coming out of graduate school, Pat presented me with the opportunity to help him, Charlie Stek, Ann Swanson, John Griffin, Dan Sakura, Nancy Merrill and many others in this room to establish the John Smith Trail. My job was essentially to convince others around the Bay that the Trail was a great idea.

I never thought that I would be working on a National Historic Trail as a vehicle for conservation. But the trail traverses the entire Chesapeake landscape and touches everyone here in some way.

And what a wonderful way to engage the National Park Service more fully in the effort to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2005, I put 80,000 miles on my car -- and went to every historical society, garden club, mayor, county commissioner I could reach and talked about the beauty and magic of the Chesapeake's history and wildlife.

I described Smith's amazing adventure and how the National Trail could help us protect special places, enhance public access and teach people about our fascinating Native American history.

I met many people along each of the Rivers of the Chesapeake and grew to profoundly appreciate their diversity...

And I am proud to say that some Congressional offices told us that we generated more letters of support for the Trail than against the Iraq war.

Having met the people of the Chesapeake, I realized that this place is made special by the people who call it home.

Like a rainbow, the people of the Chesapeake are a variety of related and colorful things -- geographically, ethnically, culturally and economically diverse.

Jon Jarvis and Dan Ashe – You are the Chesapeake

Keith Campbell and the Campbell Foundation staff – You are the Chesapeake

Mark Belton – You are the Chesapeake

Nick DiPasquale – You are the Chesapeake

Theresa Pierno and Will Shafroth – You are the Chesapeake

John and Sue Neely – You are the Chesapeake

On the eve of the 100th Anniversary of the National Park Service, I argue that the Chesapeake is as beautiful and precious to our nation as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, or Yosemite... and that the future of the Chesapeake depends on you.

Now I haven't spent a lot of time talking about the Chesapeake Conservancy, but I want you to know that I believe that we are a game changer. We are a nimble, efficient, and effective organization and everything we do is in partnership with businesses, other nonprofits, and state and federal agencies.

- We've helped create a National Trail, National Monument, National Park, expand National Wildlife Refuges and are working on establishing the first National Marine Sanctuary in 20 years.
- We fight for Program Open Space and the Land and Water Conservation Fund to protect these special places along the trail.
- We've had a hand in conserving thousands of acres throughout the watershed and creating or enhancing dozens of public access sites, particularly in partnership with the National Park Service's Chesapeake Gateways Program.
- Through our Conservation Innovation Center, we're applying new technology to advance the entire conservation movement. Like Bob Dylan did in 1966 for folk music, we are bringing our movement from acoustic to electric.

We're only about 5 years old, but I think its significant that we have 2 Directors of federal agencies, Maryland's Secretary of Natural Resources, and an international, multi-billion dollar corporation attending our second annual awards dinner. Imagine where we'll be in another 5 years.

So I will conclude by saying that together, with you and all of our partners, we are the Chesapeake. And therefore we must rise to the challenges at hand -- we must act, vote, donate, volunteer and commit to saving our great rivers and special places before they disappear forever.