

PUBLIC ACCESS AND THE FUTURE OF BAY RESTORATION

By Mike Lofton



The mission of the Chesapeake Environmental Protection Association (CEPA) is plainly stated in our name. We aspire to be a leader in the work to restore the health of the Chesapeake Bay through a combination of public information; governmental influence; direct personal involvement; and advocacy for the Bay, its tributaries, and the source water resources of the Bay watershed.

In pursuit of this mission, CEPA produces an Annual Plan to guide the work of the Board of Trustees. In 2020 the Board has added a focus on limited public access to the Bay as an issue of concern. In choosing to add public access concerns to the Plan, the Board has acknowledged the issue as one of significance and worthy of

CEPA's scarce resources.

What is the Problem?

A Presidential Executive Order in 2009 established the Chesapeake Bay program. Among its principle tasks was the creation of 300 new Bay access points by 2025. A modest goal at best and not one that is likely to produce safe convenient Bay access for millions of people that live in the watershed. According to the National Park Service, "The number of access sites is very low in comparison to the amount of shoreline in the Chesapeake watershed. There are just 770 existing access sites along the shorelines of the Bay and tidal portions of its tributaries, a combined length of 11,684 miles." Estimates put the portion of Bay shoreline available for public use at about 2%.

Water access is central to the rich quality of life we enjoy in Anne Arundel County. But for generations, the public has been losing the ability to enjoy the waters of the Bay and its tributaries. By 2010, the county did not own a single public beach or boat ramp, and major rivers didn't have an access point that could be considered safe. A small group of people recognized the problem and met with Recreation & Parks Director Rick Anthony and Councilman Chris Trumbauer. That meeting led to the formation of the Anne Arundel Public Water Access Committee (WAC), now a powerful advocacy group of several hundred "wet feet" activists, many representing groups with hundreds and thousands of members. The WAC is the effective voice for those that want but haven't had safe, convenient public water access.

Among the initial tasks of the Committee was an inventory of waterfront land already in public ownership. The results were shocking. The public owns thousands of acres of waterfront land that should be conveniently accessible to all-- but has instead been closed to the public that owns it.

Substantial progress has been made over the last decade. More than a dozen new water access points exist, state law amendments support expanded access, and the county's first public boat ramp opened in the Spring 2016 and a second in 2018. The WAC is now the clearinghouse for public water access action, helping anglers, windsurfers, kiteboarders, kayakers, paddle boarders, birdwatchers, trailer boaters and swimmers work with local nonprofits and government on water access projects. A map of the new public water access points has been created by a group of kayaktivists, resulting in the 100-mile Anne Arundel County Water Trail, online at <http://www.aacwt.org>. Yet, a substantial problem still exists. The recreation plan for Anne Arundel County, <https://www.aacounty.org/departments/recreation-parks/forms-and-publications/lpprp-20180904.pdf>, documents public water access as a "primary deficit"

Why Does it Matter?

Certainly, the economic impact of Bay related activity is critical. Anne Arundel's maritime and water-oriented visitor industries are pillars of the local economy. Thousands of jobs, hundreds of businesses and millions of dollars of tax revenue are dependent on safe convenient access to our waterways.

More importantly, the sense of place that evolves from outdoor experiences along the waters of the Bay region often leads to a feeling of shared responsibility for the resources. People who enjoy the outdoors are more likely to become active citizen stewards, engaged in the many conservation and stewardship efforts taking place throughout the region.

Despite this, physical access to the Bay and its tributaries—the very resources that form the basis for the Chesapeake’s unique identity—is inadequate. This has real consequences for quality of life, for the economy, and for long-term conservation.

There are many reasons to dramatically improve public access to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Public recreation, quality of life, and economic impact top most lists. In addition, many believe that our failure to move aggressively to reverse the decline in water quality stems from the fact that so few citizens have developed a personal relationship with the Chesapeake. They don’t care because they don’t have the kind of personal experience with the Bay that creates a passion for action. For a majority of Anne Arundel County residents, access to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries is not safe and convenient. Initiatives to advance Bay restoration face continuous threats of reduced funding and reduced regulatory enforcement.

As long ago as 2006, Bill Burton, well known Bay advocate, asked “How can vital citizen support come about to save the Chesapeake without access to it? People must have a taste of the Bay before they are willing to fight and sacrifice for its well-being.” (Bay Weekly, 4-12-2006).

In 2020 and beyond CEPA will seek to engage in activities to both improve the quality of life for all and build the base of inspired Bay advocates essential to sustaining the multi-generational effort required for successful Bay restoration. Your ideas are encouraged.

Resources:

<https://www.nps.gov/chba/learn/news/public-access.htm>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trump-wants-to-slash-chesapeake-bay-funding-environmentalists-hope-congress-steps-in-again/2020/02/12/ac9c409c-4c60-11ea-9b5c-eac5b16dafa_story.html

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/us-groups-working-to-open-more-public-access-to-chesapeake/2013/07/28/40010d60-f60d-11e2-9434-60440856fadf_story.html