



A great blue heron stretches its wings at Cat Point Creek, a tributary of the Rappahannock River.

## *Treasured perspectives spur drive to save landscapes on a large scale*

≈ Agencies, organizations collaborate to redouble effort to preserve significant natural, cultural and historical regions.

**BY KARL BLANKENSHIP**

Joe McCauley's white government truck rolled out of a pine forest, across a field and to the edge of a cliff overlooking the Rappahannock River.

A bald eagle flew overhead. "This," McCauley said, "is bald eagle central." Not long ago, 145 bald eagles were counted along Cat Point Creek, just a couple miles downstream.

The Rappahannock was smooth as glass. A mile away, its opposite bank was buffered by hundreds of acres of tidal marshes. Sweeping views to the east and west revealed only the slightest hint of development.

In many ways, the landscape is much as Capt. John Smith saw it more than 400 years ago when he mapped 14 Rappahannock Indian villages as he explored its shores.

Almost everything within sight from the cliff was within the loose boundary for

the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, which McCauley manages. But, he said, this place was more than just a refuge: It is a Treasured Landscape.

Treasured Landscapes are a concept championed by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who speaks frequently about the importance of protecting "nationally significant" tracts, including areas around the Chesapeake watershed, for future generations.

While "treasured landscape" is a term with no set definition, federal and state officials, along with land conservation advocates, agree on one thing: It's a license to think big. Instead of protecting individual tracts, they see the concept as a means to help ensure the conservation of huge swaths of land around the watershed—areas that may include hundreds of thousands of acres, encompassing entire counties.

The Treasured Landscape idea gained momentum in the watershed after President Barack Obama signed an executive order last May that called the Chesapeake Bay a "national treasure" and, among other things, called for federal agencies to help



*One of the refuge's osprey clutches a fish in its talons. Photo / Dave Harp*

conserve Bay landscapes and improve public access to the Chesapeake and its tributaries.

In response, a draft federal report released last November called for creating a Chesapeake Treasured Landscape Initiative that would coordinate federal funding and work with state and local governments to protect priority areas and improve public access to waterways.

In March, federal agencies proposed a draft goal of protecting, by 2025, 2.3 million additional acres in the Bay watershed that are identified as conservation priorities by federal, state or local agencies. That could require doubling the 125,000-acre-a-year land protection rate within the watershed over the last several years.

The draft goals also call for adding 300 public access sites in Maryland,

Pennsylvania, Virginia and the District of Columbia by 2025, a 40 percent increase from the current 757. A public access site is defined as a boat ramp, fishing pier, swimming area or adjacent boardwalk or trail along the Bay or its tributaries.

"It is a bold proposal," said Hedrick Belin, president of the Potomac Conservancy. "But we have got to be taking bold steps if we are going to be moving the needle—and if we are going to be having an impact."

Right now, 7.8 million of the watershed's 41 million acres have some type of protection, generally through outright public ownership or conservation easements that prevent development.

Nonetheless, many important areas remain threatened. The population of the Bay watershed has doubled since

1950, reaching 17 million, and that number is expected to surpass 20 million by 2030. As humans take up more space, natural resources are under more pressure.

The region loses an estimated 55 square miles of forest a year, along with 140 square miles of farmland. Civil War battlefields—commemorating fights that often took place in rural areas—are encroached upon by suburban development.

When these lands are lost, it often leads to an increase in Bay pollution. The projected forest loss in coming years could increase the amount of nitrogen pollution to the Chesapeake by 1,300 pounds a day, according to the Bay Program.

"If we get the right lands in the right places, then we can contribute to the efforts to protect the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers," said John Davy, of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. "With anything that is protected, that's less impact from the land that flows into those waters."

While its exact definition has yet to be established, there is general agreement that a Treasured Landscape is one that has ecological as well as cultural or historic significance. A treasured landscape would have to meet at least two of those criteria and provide public access.

For instance, in Maryland's Dorchester County, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and the adjoining Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park and adjoining Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway could all be considered part of a "treasured landscape" although they were established for different reasons.

"It's the same landscape, but with different constituencies," said John Maounis, who heads the National Park Service's Chesapeake Bay Office and has been working to develop the Treasured Landscapes Initiative for the Bay watershed. "Different people from different perspectives thinking that this place is important."

The Rappahannock Refuge, likewise,

*Clouds scud  
across the  
morning sky  
above the  
river at the  
Rappahannock  
River Valley  
National  
Wildlife  
Refuge Photo /  
Dave Harp*



provides important habitat for bald eagles and other birds; provides public access; has historic links to the John Smith expedition; and has cultural ties to Rappahannock Indians who once lived in the area.

When those diverse elements are melded into a “treasured landscape,” it can become the focal point for federal and state agencies, as well as nonprofit land trusts, to target their activity.

That’s what happened in the Rappahannock refuge, which has an approved boundary that includes 268,000 acres in portions of seven counties. But the refuge, which was established in 1996, was never intended to own all that land.

Instead, the plans call for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect only about 20,000 acres, either through outright easements or ownerships. To date, it’s protected about half that much. But the refuge boundary helps to guide the conservation efforts of others.

Other partners, such as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy,



*A photographer takes advantage of the view at an observation and paddlecraft launch area on Mount Landing Creek. Photo / Dave Harp*

The Trust for Public Land, and Fort A.P. Hill have protected thousands of additional acres, while county governments have sometimes used planning and zon-

ing to protect, or minimize impacts to habitats important to the refuge.

“The vision is large-scale,” said Mark Bryer, director of The Nature Conservancy’s Chesapeake Bay Initiative. “But if you can articulate a large-scale vision like that, you can really achieve some amazing things.”

In fact, he said, land trusts increasingly are looking to magnify their impact through such partnerships. “The fact that there are multiple partners playing a role in conservation actions in large places is almost a prerequisite for us getting engaged in a place,” Bryer said. “We would never expect that we would do it all ourselves.”

Another key element to “thinking big” is ensuring that local communities are involved. Enough money would never be available to preserve all of the land over a huge watershed. Communities need to support the proposal through their land use decisions.

“An important goal is to engage the public at the grassroots level to define what they feel are their treasured land-

scapes. What landscapes do they value and what is important to them to conserve?” said David O’Neill, president of the Friends of the John Smith Chesapeake Trail. “Treasured landscapes can serve as an organizing framework for a community to define the landscapes that are important to them and then to determine the array of tools that can be used to conserve them.”

In fact, many see the initiative as a way to bring tangible benefits—including ecotourism dollars—to upstream communities that are funding the pollution reduction efforts that have garnered most attention regarding the Bay.

“That is a piece that needs to be amplified,” said Brenda Barrett, director of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. “I see this as having the ‘big idea’ and trying to bring the resource, the conservation and the recreational user into the picture.”

The state already has a Conservation Landscape Initiative that targets large regions for tourism, conservation, community revitalization and recreational projects. Barrett said several of its priority areas, such as the Lower Susquehanna region, seem to mesh comfortably with a Bay Treasured Landscapes initiative. The lower Susquehanna contains river towns such as Columbia—once considered as a possible capital for the nation—as well as hills with spectacular river views, the largest known Susquehannock Indian village, a native wildflower preserve, old canal remnants and recreational opportunities.

“We know we have a treasure here on the Susquehanna,” she said. “But if we can get more help and more energy, that’s fabulous.”

Besides money, Barrett said, the federal government also brings another important element—legitimacy. “People want validation. They want a higher authority to say this is really important.”

A key element to making the initiative a reality is increased funding for the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. The fund was created in 1964 to



*Laurel Grove Pond at Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Photo / Dave Harp*

use royalties from offshore drilling to finance federal and state land protection efforts, including both purchases and easements. Although the fund is authorized to spend up to \$900 million a year, it was fully funded only twice.

Obama’s proposed 2011 budget would provide \$434 million for the fund next year, an increase of more than \$100 million from this year’s level. Obama has promised full funding by 2014.

Treasured landscapes proponents would like to ensure that promise is fulfilled. They hope the funding will help to push the initiative forward and would like the money from the fund that comes to this region—which amounts to several million dollars a year—targeted toward priority landscapes.

While federal agencies under the executive order are responsible for developing the Treasured Landscape initiative, the concept has broad backing, including state conservation agencies from Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Delaware, and more than a dozen national and regional conservation organizations, ranging from The National Geographic Society and The Conservation Fund to the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy and the Friends of the John Smith Chesapeake Trail, which has played a major organizing role.

## Treasured Landscapes

This is the National Park Service’s working definition of a Treasured Landscape:

Treasured landscapes are special places we revere as individuals, as communities and as a people for their ecological, historical or recreational values—for their role in maintaining and renewing our identity and spirit as a people.

Most of these landscapes are large; they are the settings or surroundings in which life in the Chesapeake region plays out. Some are protected or formally recognized as parks, wildlife refuges, historic sites or heritage areas, but others are not; they are sweeping segments of the countryside—for-ests, farming communities, and natural areas (many linked to the water)—that we recognize as creating the sense of place that is the Chesapeake region.

In addition, land conservation advocates and state agencies are lobbying Congress to add \$10 million in next year's budget to prime a new Chesapeake Bay Treasured Landscapes Fund, with an ongoing commitment in future years. That money would leverage additional funds from states, local governments or land conservation groups, as has happened in the Rappahannock refuge.

Using money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to purchase or protect properties is often time-consuming.

The special Chesapeake fund would be nimbler, allowing funds to be used quickly as opportunities to protect prime tracts emerge.

For instance, when he stood atop Fones Cliff, McCauley could gaze at a landscape that was largely protected—but which the refuge did not own. “You don't see much evidence of human habitation up here,” he said.

But that could change. The land McCauley was standing on fell into none of those categories. It—and the fields and pine forest he had driven through to reach the cliffs—were recently rezoned for 47 homes. To keep the landscape intact, the refuge is negotiating to pur-

chase the land.

Such targeted acquisitions have allowed the USF&WS to purchase or secure easements on large tracts along the river that protect tidal marshes, fields and forests, wetlands, nesting sites and other high-quality habitats.

“I've heard it referred to several times as a string of pearls concept—stepping stones along the river,” McCauley said. Many of those “stepping stones” also provide public access, such as trails through forests and fields, wildlife watching opportunities and canoe launches.

About 6 million people live within a two-hour drive of the refuge, so the refuge is designed to provide for their needs, as

well as protecting habitat for bald eagles, songbirds, waterfowl and other wildlife.

An essential element of protecting landscapes, McCauley and others say, is not to lock them up, but rather to open them to public use. People who enjoy a resource, studies suggest, are more likely to be willing to help protect it.

“I'm certain the people who are already here already know that this is a Treasured Landscape, because they are working hard to protect it,” McCauley said. “But I think the refuge adds a sense of importance on a national basis. And by having a refuge here, I think it creates a venue for all Americans to come here and appreciate this.”



*Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge Manager Joe McCauley looks out over the Fone Cliffs Overlook.*

*Photo / Dave Harp*

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