

Celebrating 25 Years of Conservation

This is the third in a series of articles celebrating our “Coastal Bay Heroes” – those who have contributed to the establishment and ongoing work of the Maryland Coastal Bays Program.

Cathy Wazniak – Unparalleled Professionalism

If you spend any time talking with Cathy Wazniak, your next move would be to open a dictionary or your Google search engine. Why? Because you would learn all kinds of new words and phrases like “cyanobacteria” or “phytoplankton biomass”. This is the world of Cathy Wazniak and she’s spent the better part of the last 30 years floating around Maryland’s Eastern Shore grabbing water samples, identifying different algal species and studying water quality throughout the Coastal and Chesapeake Bays. She clearly knows what she is doing.

We’ve been particularly lucky to have Cathy as a part of our world here in the Coastal Bays. As a biologist for Maryland’s Department of Natural Resources, Cathy has been studying the water quality here for a long time. She helped write a number of the cornerstone documents for the Program, including an early assessment of the coastal bays in 1993, the Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) in 1996 and the Eutrophication Monitoring Plan in 1999. In 2019, her team identified an unprecedented algal bloom of *Prorocentrum* (a bloom forming dinoflagellate) in the Coastal Bays which resulted in the highest chlorophyll values ever recorded in Maryland. Not good for the Coastal Bays, but good to know you have a crack team of biologists you can count on to identify these occurrences.

Cathy and her crew from the Department of Natural Resources have been instrumental in monitoring the health of the Coastal Bay waters since this program started in 1996. She is responsible for maintaining monitoring stations and gathering and analyzing the data. Cathy was instrumental in getting the first continuous monitors placed in the Coastal Bays. If you are not familiar with these gadgets, go to www.eyesonthebay.dnr.maryland.gov. What you’ll find there is real time data, dating back to 2002, on water temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen and other water quality indices.

Got a question about an algal bloom - call Cathy. A question about nitrogen fluxes in the waterway – call Cathy. A fish kill – call Cathy. She is our real time, real world expert on all things water quality related. Her knowledge is deep and her generosity in sharing this knowledge is always apparent. Ask her a question, but plan on 30 minutes of intent listening as she takes a deep dive into the world of phytoplankton and one-celled organisms.

Her leadership on the Scientific Advisory Committee (STAC) has been invaluable. Her vast knowledge of the Coastal Bays, monitoring techniques and overall water quality helps guide our scientists as they work to unravel confounding issues of nutrient enrichment, water circulation and future trends in the Coastal Bays. This program is very fortunate to work with such a dedicated professional.

They say that everyone is replaceable. Well, I’m not so sure that is true in this case. Her encyclopedic knowledge gained over many years would be hard to duplicate. Thanks, Cathy, for your dedication and working so hard for the health and well-being of our waterways and thanks for being a true Coastal Bay Hero.