

MARYLAND COASTAL BAYS PROGRAM

2025 A YEAR IN REVIEW

STEWARDSHIP
COLLABORATION
IMPACT



Friends of the Coastal Bays,

What a year it has been. Quite the rollercoaster really. There were ups and there were downs and a couple of loop-de-loops thrown in for good measure. But here we are, at the end of 2025, intact and moving forward. And with a more focused sense of purpose than ever.

The year started off with a level of uncertainty not experienced in the nearly 30 years of this organization's existence. As a National Estuary Program, we rely on federal dollars to keep our doors open. Fortunately, due to steady leadership, a solid financial position, and a staff that was willing to do whatever it took to keep this program moving, we got through those dark days by looking forward. And now, at the end of 2025, we are able to reflect upon the year and how we turned a dark cloud of negativity into a positive and uplifting force. A few of this year's highlights are worth mentioning:

Completion of the new Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan (CCMP): This new 10-year plan will carry us through 2035, with heightened focus on community engagement, education, clean water, resiliency and habitat protection and restoration.

Enhanced Environmental Education for Worcester County Schools: Our education team has been working diligently with Worcester County Public Schools to develop the new Environmental Literacy Plan for the school system to ensure the intergrate of environmental education for all students.

Newport Bay Partnership: By securing a 10 million dollar grant from the state of Maryland, we, along with our partners, are embarking on a 5-year effort to improve habitat and water quality in the Town of Berlin and the Newport Bay watershed.

Coastal Bays Boardwalk Exhibit: Our friends at the Ocean City Lifesaving Museum generously offered us space within their outdoor displays at the southern end of the boardwalk in Ocean City. The team of partners came together to develop plans, secured funding and a planner, and installed an incredibly beautiful display highlighting the ecosystems and culture of the Coastal Bays.

Royal Terns Successfully Nest in Chincoteague Bay: Royal Terns, who have not successfully bred in the Coastal Bays for over 5 years, nested and fledged chicks at our floating tern island in Chincoteague Bay. In addition, Common Terns, born on the floating island, started a new nesting colony at a restored beach in Assateague Bay.

Partners Sign a New Management Agreement: In June, we were able to bring all of our long-time partners together in Ocean City to sign a new Coastal Bays Program Management Agreement. This Agreement reaffirms the commitment by ourselves and our partners to work together to protect the Coastal Bays and implement the actions in the CCMP.

A New Financial Plan With a Greater Emphasis on Fundraising: This year has taught us is that we need to diversify our revenue streams. Fundraising can play a larger role in an organization's financial portfolio, and, with the help of our friends at the Community Foundation for the Eastern Shore, we have developed a strategy to do just that.

2025 got off to a shaky start, but with the help of our partners, our incredible supporters and volunteers, and our remarkable staff, we turned it into a year filled with positivity, hope, and accomplishment. There will be lots of exciting opportunities for all of us to continue to get our hands dirty and work towards our shared goals. And 2026 promises to be just as exciting as we will have special programming for our 30th year anniversary.

2025 Coastal Bays Staff

In picture from left to right, back row then front row:

Sandi Smith
Outreach & Marketing Coordinator

Brooke Eckert
Program & Communications Coordinator

Rene Schoellkopf
Finance and Operations Manager

Kevin Smith
Executive Director

Dr. Roman Jesien
Science Coordinator

Billy Weiland
Environmental Scientist

Steve Farr
Watershed Coordinator

Liz Wist
Education Coordinator

Kelsey Poisal
Environmental Program Specialist

Carly Toulan
Environmental Scientist

Kim Abplanalp/Zoe (office pup)
Bird Habitat Coordinator

Andrea García
Environmental Literacy Specialist

Ellen Turnbaugh
Education Program Manager

Staff from 2025, not pictured:

Jessica McIntosh, Newport Bay Partnership Coordinator

Nicole Masenior, Tern Raft Technician

Paige Cohen, Environmental Educator

Eva Arnold, MobileGreen Intern

Luna, Efie, Rufus, Sophie, Red, Max, Kramer: Office Pups

2025 Board of Directors

Steve Taylor
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Katherine Munson
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Worcester County

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Professor
University of Maryland Eastern Shore

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Habitat Restoration & Conservation Project Manager
Maryland Department of Natural Resources

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Citizen Advisory Committee Representative

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Ocean Pines Association

Bill Huslander
Chief of Resource Management
Assateague Island National Seashore

Larry Yates
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Town of Ocean City

Environmental Protection Agency

Hannah Sanders/Patrick McGettigan
US EPA Region 3 Project Officer

Noemi Mercado
US EPA Oceans, Wetlands and Communities Division, Partnership Programs Branch

Amy Van Blarcom-Lackey
EPA Mid-Atlantic Regional Administrator

Wishing You Peace, Love, and
Understanding in 2026,

-The MCBP Staff



The Maryland Coastal Bays

are a treasured natural resource, offering a wide range of ecological, recreational, and economic benefits to the community. The health and long-term sustainability of the Coastal Bays is, however, threatened by a variety of human activities in the Bays system and adjacent watershed. As a National Estuary Program, Maryland Coastal Bays Program is a non-profit partnership among the towns of Ocean City and Berlin, the National Park Service, Worcester County, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Maryland Departments of Natural Resources, Agriculture, Environment, and Planning.

The Maryland Coastal Bays Program works to enhance the ecological values and resiliency of the Coastal Bays, the watershed, and its communities through conservation and public engagement. The 175-square mile watershed is home to the resources of the St. Martin River, Newport Bay, Assawoman Bay, Isle of Wight Bay, Sinepuxent Bay, and Chincoteague Bay. The watershed includes more than 189,000 acres of land, 71,000 acres of water, 248 miles of shoreline, and nearly 35,000 acres of wetlands. Guided by the Management Conference and its collective membership, MCBP staff engages the local community and beyond, to implement creative solutions for resource protection and conservation in the Coastal Bays.

To take a dive into the health of these essential waterways, please check out our report cards at www.ecoreportcard.org/report-cards/maryland-coastal-bays/



Charting the Next Course: The New Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan for Maryland's Coastal Bays for 2025-2035

In June of 2025, the 2025-2035 Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan (CCMP) for Maryland's Coastal Bays was officially released to guide the next 10 years of work within the watershed. The agreement renews commitments among agencies, municipalities, and organizations to protect and restore the ecological health of one of the nation's most treasured estuaries.

What is the Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan?

Each National Estuary Program works within its community to develop a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) designed to protect water quality, habitat, and living resources within its watershed. The CCMP is uniquely tailored to the local environmental conditions and is based on input by local, city, state, federal, private, non-profit stakeholders, and community members, thereby supporting local priorities.

The CCMP provides a long-term framework for action. Actions within the CCMP that inform the annual MCBP workplan specify partners responsible for successful implementation. The 2025-2035 CCMP is presented in a format that highlights 4 Themes, 20 Goals, and 121 Actions. The Themes (seen right) are the umbrellas under which important Goals and Actions are placed for implementation of the plan. The plan also names periods for completion, range of potential costs, milestones for completion and performance measures to provide intended results.

Scan me for access to a fun Story
Map that explains the CCMP!



THEME 1 PROVIDE HEALTHY WATERS



In this theme, we look at ways to:

1. Reduce Nutrient and Pollutant Loading
2. Protect and Conserve Groundwater
3. Develop and Implement Comprehensive Watershed Programs and Strategies to achieve TMDL goals

THEME 2 PROTECT FISH, WILDLIFE, & THEIR HABITAT



In this theme, we look at ways to:

1. Management of recreational and commercial fisheries
2. Protect marine resources: seagrass, wetlands, island, and shoreline restoration
3. Conserve forests
4. Monitor and protect wildlife

THEME 3 CREATE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES & ECOSYSTEMS



In this theme, we look at ways to:

1. Enhance resiliency of ecosystems
2. Enhance resiliency of community assets and infrastructure
3. Coordinate with partners to develop/implement a Coastal Bays Sediment Management Plan
4. Promote conservation of land, natural resources, and energy

THEME 4 DEVELOP PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & PARTNERSHIPS



In this theme, we look at ways to:

1. Promote environmental literacy within the community
2. Coordinate with partners to develop and deliver academic programming
3. Cultivate volunteer participation
4. Conduct outreach to the public and policymakers to gain support

Into the Marsh

Whether you are an avid birdwatcher trying to get a glimpse of the elusive Saltmarsh Sparrow, an eager crabber trying to get a bushel of #1's to steam up for dinner, or a passionate artist trying to capture the intrinsic beauty of our watershed, you share a common interest in protecting our salt marshes. Salt marshes are incredibly important to both humans and our environment as they provide numerous ecosystem services. They help mitigate flooding events caused by storms and high tide events, they act as a buffer to our bays by helping to filter runoff carrying excess nutrients and pollutants, they store carbon, and provide habitat to many species in our watershed. Unfortunately, there are several threats that are causing us to lose salt marsh habitat throughout our watershed. Sea level rise, erosion caused by wave energy, development and hardening of shorelines are just a few of the reasons our salt marshes are disappearing at an alarming rate.

For many years now, MCBP has collaborated with numerous local, state, and federal partners to discuss ways we can address this issue through prioritizing salt marsh habitats in our watershed, scientific monitoring, research, and restoration. This year we were excited to see some of that hard work and planning come to fruition with several new projects in the works! MCBP has been partnering with the US Fish & Wildlife Service, Assateague Island National Seashore, and other partners to design, monitor, and implement several salt marsh restoration projects throughout the Coastal Bays watershed. The goal of these projects is to address the impacts of mosquito ditching, restore the natural hydrology (movement of water across the marsh), and promote the revegetation of areas that experienced vegetation dieback. Over the next couple of years, MCBP will continue to implement several marsh restoration projects in Newport Bay, Sinepuxent Bay, and throughout the Assateague Island National Seashore.

Another goal for these projects is to restore critical nesting habitat for target species like the Saltmarsh Sparrow. Maryland's lower eastern shore has historically had some of the best habitat for Saltmarsh Sparrows and hosts about 25% of the species global breeding population. The Saltmarsh Sparrow is an endangered species that solely depends on high marsh habitat for nesting. As a result of decades of marsh degradation and loss, this species' population has declined drastically. Although our partner organizations are focusing on the Saltmarsh Sparrow as a target species, this restoration will benefit dozens of other species and create a resilient ecosystem.

MCBP would like to thank the numerous partners who are helping us restore this critical habitat in our watershed, the landowners who are granting us the permission to access their property to implement restoration projects and conduct important scientific monitoring, and the state and federal agencies that have granted us the funding for these projects!



Wading birds in Chincoteague Bay
Photo by Drew Murray



Post-monitoring at a restoration site with
MCBP and USFWS
Photo by Carly Toulon

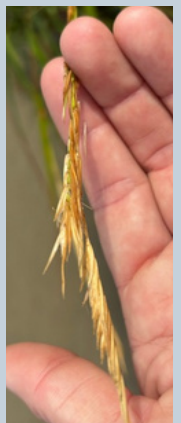


An example of an unhealthy, drowning marsh.
Photo by Rolling Wave Media



MCBP Staff Member Ellen Turnbaugh
harvesting *Spartina alterniflora* seeds.
Photo by Liz Wist

Marsh Grasses in the Classes is an environmental education and community engagement initiative between Maryland Coastal Bays Program, Delmarva RC&D, Inc, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MD Department of Natural Resources, and Worcester County Public Schools. This initiative supports events in Worcester County focused on the importance of salt marshes, supporting organisms that live in the salt marsh, and the need for restoration solutions. Community engagement and education are a crucial component of any restoration project to build trust, create awareness, and establish a common understanding of the importance of salt marshes and the need for restoration. Over the next two years, 12 Worcester County teachers and their classrooms will- from seed- plant, nurture, and transplant thousands of *Spartina alterniflora* (Salt Marsh Cordgrass) plugs to marsh restoration sites within the Coastal Bays watershed. Students and teachers will also be equipped with lessons and activities that enhance existing environmental curriculum. This project will also provide free and accessible community-focused events to engage landowners, community members, and hobbyists such as birders and artists.



Spartina alterniflora seeds.
Photo by Liz Wist

VOLUNTEERISM ACROSS THE WATERSHED



Volunteers at our Bay Day event in Ocean Pines. Photo by Laurie Smoker



Volunteers working hard to rescue stranded horseshoe crabs. Photo by Emily Osborne

Community Science: On the grounds stewardship

We are so fortunate to have a community filled with environmental stewards who share the same passions of protecting our watershed as we do. Whether it's bracing the heat and humidity to make sure their oyster cage is kept clean, scrambling across slippery rocks to rescue a stranded horseshoe crab, or collecting water quality samples in the dead of winter – nothing stops our volunteers! Volunteers are a critical piece to the success of our organization as we would not be able to accomplish nearly as much as we do without their help. This year, we are proud to say that MCBP volunteers spent around 253 hours of their time participating in our horseshoe crab, oyster gardening, and water quality monitoring programs! The value of an hour of volunteer work is currently \$34.79, which means that in these programs alone, our volunteers have contributed about \$8,800 worth of their time to our organization.

Taking it to the streets...and forests & waterways!

Volunteerism is at the heart of our efforts to keep our coastal communities healthy and thriving. Through programs like Marine Debris Plunder, Adopt Your Street/Adopt Your Beach, the Ocean City Beach Cleanups, and Discover Your Watershed events, volunteers play a vital role in reducing litter, protecting wildlife, and preserving the natural beauty of our watershed and beaches. Whether scouring the shoreline for trash, taking responsibility for a neighborhood street, removing invasives at a restoration site, or joining large community cleanups, every effort makes a visible difference. These hands-on opportunities not only improve our environment, but also build a strong sense of stewardship and connection to the place we all call home. This past year, through clean ups and invasive removal programs, volunteers dedicated over 515 hours of service to the improvement of our watershed.



Volunteers at 2025 Marine Debris Plunder. Photo by Andrea García



Volunteers and staff assisting with the Springfest table in April. Photo by: Beth Riley

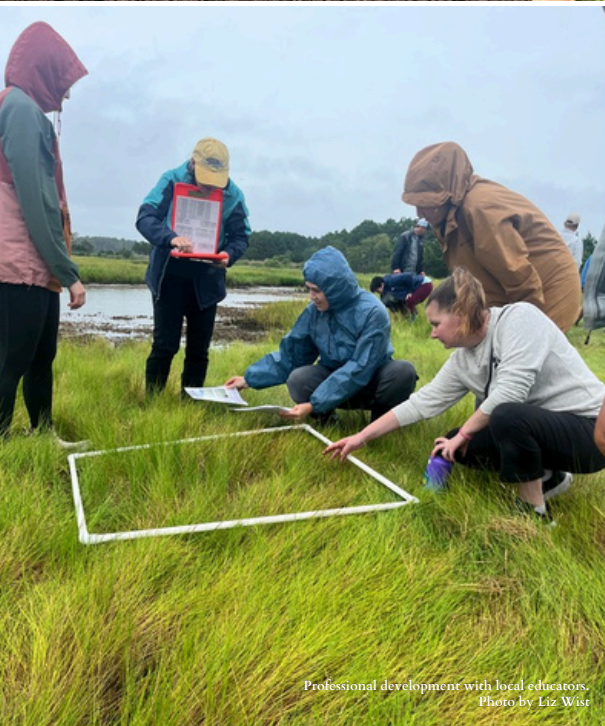
Out and about in the watershed

At MCBP, we make it a priority to provide a diverse range of volunteer opportunities to our community members and supporters to suit preference, ability, and availability. Throughout the year, Coastal Bays attends over a dozen community outreach events. These events allow us to meet our residents and visitors, make connections, and share our story. Community exposure at these events also helps to broaden public knowledge of our mission and the work being done. And this knowledge helps ensure commitment to the longevity of our current projects and support for future ones. Events like Bay Day, Harbor Day, Healthy Parks, Healthy People, National Nights Out, and the Germantown End of Summer Bash all expand our reach and let us meet our community where they are. A huge thank you to our outreach event volunteers who logged 247 hours of time representing MCBP in the local community!

Check out the "Coastal Bays by the Numbers" page in this review to see just how big of an impact these volunteers had in our community!



Pocomoke High School community garden opening.
Photo by: Caitlin Daw



Professional development with local educators.
Photo by Liz Wise



WETLANDS retreat.
Photo by Ellen Turnbaugh

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY: AN INVITATION TO INTERDISCIPLINARY STEWARDSHIP

Since time immemorial, environmental education has been central to the establishment and continued survival of communities around the world. Before contemporary systems of food production, transportation, and other resource exchange, the passing down of ecological knowledge has been integral to meeting fundamental human needs: food, water, air, and shelter. One's sense of place was not only a question of belonging, but of survival.

The formal adoption of environmental education in the K-12 classroom is a relatively new endeavor compared to its counterpart content areas, such as math and language arts. It was only 14 years ago that Maryland became the first state in the nation to enact an environmental literacy high school graduation requirement, and only five years ago that environmental literacy standards were formally adopted by the Maryland State Board of Education.

Since its manifestation in the formal classroom, environmental education has been traditionally designated to the sciences, encharging scientists and science educators with the task of facilitating connection, stewardship, and knowledge of the place students call home. This responsibility is monumental, and frankly impracticable for a sole group of professionals to accomplish. Environmental literacy instead invites us to share that responsibility. We are asked to consider the role each of us has to play in the story of stewardship – as writers, historians, artists, and teachers of all areas of study.

The Maryland State Department of Education states that:

Environmentally literate students understand environmental and physical processes and systems, including human systems. They are able to analyze global, social, cultural, political, physical, economic and environmental relationships, and weigh various sides of environmental issues to make responsible decisions as individuals and as members of their community and citizens of the world.

Environmental literacy is an explicitly interdisciplinary area of study. Students and educators alike are invited to consider nature not only as a site of scientific study, but also as a place of living history, artistic creation, economic promise, and health.

What does this look like in a K-12 classroom?

Consider the Ash Wednesday Storm of 1962. This is one storm in the history of many that has shaped the ways of life in Worcester County. This historical event is rich with opportunity to investigate the meteorological and coastal scientific explanations for how such powerful storms take place. In addition to working with the Worcester County Public Schools (WCPS) Coordinator of Science Instruction on this lesson, MCBP also worked with the Coordinator of Social Studies Instruction for an interdisciplinary exploration of storm events.

In social studies, students consider the social impacts of natural disaster events: how do natural disaster events create opportunities for change? How do communities remain resilient amidst infrastructural chaos, and how does the process of rebuilding redefine a community's identity?

Considering that change is one of the few constants of the Coastal Bays, these questions are pertinent to understanding the reciprocal relationship between people and their place.

The collective efforts of people from all walks of life is necessary to the mission of stewardship. By broadening the scope of disciplines engaged in environmental education, students of all interests and talents are provided pathways into environmental stewardship and connection to the place in which they learn and live.

Environmental literacy, in some ways, is an invitation to reconnect to our roots that revered the environment as fundamental to all else. It proposes an innovative way of connecting distinct areas of study by an interdisciplinary thread.

This year, MCBP has worked closely with WCPS to develop outdoor and classroom lessons, Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs), and an Environmental Literacy Plan (ELP) that provides a framework to build environmental education into school programs and curriculum. MCBP has also facilitated Maryland Environmental Literacy Advisory Network meetings for the Lower Shore area that bring formal and informal educators together to better coordinate resources and environmental literacy efforts around the region.

By centering a sense of place in our educational programs, MCBP continues to draw inspiration from the Shore's rich environmental heritage that has — and will continue to shape life in the past, present, and incoming future.

– Andrea García, MCBP Environmental Literacy Specialist



Professional development of local educators.
Photo by Liz Wist

We often overlook how connected and dependent we are on the land and its ecosystems, and the extent to which weather exerts its influence. Climate plays such a significant role in the complex and varying spatial character that defines the geographies of our world that we can metaphorically look to weather as the painter of the landscape. MCBP's Andrea García draws from the impact of a major coastal storm to address the subject of environmental literacy and its importance to fostering connection, knowledge of place, and stewardship. It is natural phenomena, such as major weather events, that remind us just how necessary it is to look past the narrow focus of specialization to succeed and flourish together as communities. Let's take this idea of weather as the painter of the landscape a step further into the realm of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and appreciating our place in the world. Like the meteorologist studies the variables that come together to create weather, we can look to other fields of study (geology, biology, forestry, pedology) to tell us about the intricately complex world of Nature which our planet's climate has permitted.

Central to this concept of environmental literacy is stewardship, and what may be thought of as the benchmark of a healthy, meaningful human existence with this planet. There is a path that leads to stewardship. Fostering a connection to Nature is perhaps first in the process, and so, in a sense, our children truly do hold the keys to the future. Next in this journey toward stewardship is passing along existing knowledge while creating opportunity for new knowledge. Be it from academia in the form of science, history, philosophy, music and art, or from skills passed down through the centuries, each is rooted in Nature, and each improves upon the other. Andrea states that environmental literacy connects "distinct areas of study by an interdisciplinary thread." Stewardship requires time and cooperation. It is the marker of our species' odyssey to live in harmony with the planet and with each other. There is a planetary – humanitarian hope that exists in the concept of environmental literacy.

–W.R.Weiland, Reflection on literacy across the watershed

Reedy Island

Reedy Beach, behind Macky's on 54th St., was installed two years ago on a historic breeding location that had partially eroded away by placing crushed clam shell and raising the elevation that wouldn't be affected by high spring tides. We added habitat elements like decoys, chick houses, grasses and a sound lure with calls of Royal and Common Terns intermittently (called social attraction,) to entice the birds to nest. Paid for by a grant from the Chesapeake and Coastal Service of the Department of Natural Resources, it targeted two State-listed Endangered species, Royal and Common Terns. This year we're happy to report that a new, small, Common Tern colony began in June with 39 nests that produced approximately 31 chicks!

This winter, a larger beach of crushed shell just west of this location will be added to further increase habitat. Funded by the Wildlife and Heritage Service of the MD Department of Natural Resources, we look forward to this colony possibly expanding or a second species breeding there too. Common Terns, Royal Terns, and Black Skimmers have all historically nested near one another, so stay tuned for updates in 2026!



Reedy Beach with social attraction elements: a sound lure with calls of terns, decoys, and chick houses.
Photo by Kim Abplanalp



As our environmental issues grow more complex, our solutions to protect, preserve and restore our coastal bays must also adapt. To meet this need, Maryland is promoting an innovative whole watershed approach to holistically address social, economic, and ecological concerns in a geographic target area. The whole watershed approach uses community collaboration and science-based solutions to restore healthy land and water. This year, the Newport Bay watershed was selected by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources as one of the five target areas across the state to pilot the whole watershed approach through a \$10 million dollar investment over the next five years.

The Maryland Coastal Bays Program is leading the newly funded initiative called the Newport Bay Partnership (NBP) in collaboration with the Assateague Coastal Trust, Lower Shore Land Trust, Town of Berlin, and Worcester County. In the first year, \$2 million dollars is dedicated to implementing restoration projects as well as new engagement activities to understand and address community needs. Restoration projects include stormwater management, addressing flooding issues, and improving habitat in streams and marshes. Community events, workforce development, establishment of new citizen coalitions, and educational programs will inform and assist future restoration projects to improve habitat and water quality. If you would like to get involved, please contact the NBP coordinator, Jessica McIntosh, at jmcintosh@mdcoastalbays.org

Ocean City Boardwalk Exhibit

After a two year development process, the Coastal Bays Program, in partnership with the Ocean City Life-Saving Station Museum, opened a Coastal Bays exhibit space at the south end of the boardwalk. This pivotal opportunity has created the chance for MCBP to provide interpretation to an astronomical number of residents and visitors at a public location. Complete with a 16 foot mural, signage, and 3D animals and plants, this exhibit works to embrace the theme of the space into every single element; the Maryland's Coastal Bays are home to a dynamic and diverse web of life that forms the foundation of our communities, connecting us to each other, the nature that surrounds us, and a deep sense of place. Every one of us is tied to this magnificent watershed in one way or another and we hope the stories told through the exhibit increase awareness of the rich heritage of this land and provide knowledge of the robust ecosystems of the Bays. We want people to leave the exhibit understanding that they are part of the Bays story - and the Bays are now part of theirs.

Deep thanks to the Ocean City Life-Saving Station Museum and the Society for this opportunity, to our local sponsors Harrison Group Sales (Gold Sponsor), and The Windrow Group and Old Pro Golf (Silver Sponsors), to granters Chesapeake Bay Trust and Beach to Bay Heritage Area, to artist Leslie Belloso, interpretive planner Melanie Mae, and to all those who had a hand in the development of the exhibit.



Coastal Bays Boardwalk exhibit lit at night.
Photo by Liz Wist

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

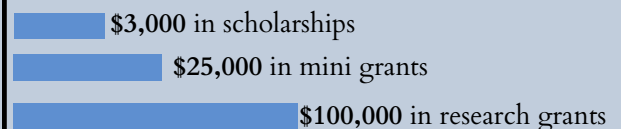
Highlights from 2025


- Our incredible team of dedicated volunteers donated over **1,650** hours
- **5,557** people were reached through the **132** education and outreach events
- **2,040** students were educated through field trips and classroom lessons
- **400** Common Tern chicks and **8** Royal Tern chicks fledged on the tern raft
- **5,409** Horseshoe Crabs were recused and **15,659** Horseshoe Crabs were surveyed
- **60** acres of marshes were restored in partnership with US Fish and Wildlife Service
- **339** water quality and phytoplankton samples were taken in the Coastal Bays

2025 FINANCIAL REVIEW

\$ MCBP received over **\$3 million** in various grants and **\$30,000** in private donations

Maryland Coastal Bays Program was able to offer:



 The volunteer hours donated in 2025 are valued as an in kind donation of **\$57,403**

Marsh on Assateague Island National Seashore.
Photo by Carly Toulan

1996-2026 Celebrating 30 Years of Conservation

A message from Foundation Board Chair, Steve Taylor



The magnificent barrier island system in Maryland has captured the hearts of many. Behind Ocean City's and Assateague's beautiful beaches are shallow bays and winding creeks that host abundant wildlife and unforgettable beauty. Vacationers, and residents alike, have enjoyed the excitement of this resort wonderland and the peaceful tranquility of the shared federal-state seaside park for generations. But by the mid 20th century, this coastal jewel was quietly under siege.

The boom of development, the rise of tourism, and the resulting environmental threats were starting to overwhelm this delicate ecosystem. The waters, once teeming with life, began to show the tell-tale signs of stress: excessive algae from nutrient pollution, declining natural wildlife habitats, and struggling aquatic populations. Local residents, watermen, and conservationists began to worry that their way of life—and the ecosystems that sustained it—might be slipping away. But, out of that concern grew a community focused on solutions.

A small band of determined citizens understood that saving the bays would require more than scientific reports or government mandates—it would take the hands and hearts of the people who lived there. So, they contacted the Maryland Department of Natural Resources for help and in time a team of dedicated scientists joined with local governments and passionate citizens to identify efforts that might help this threatened resource.

The team knew significant financial resources would be needed, and even though it was a long-shot, they applied to the Environmental Protection Agency to be included in the prestigious National Estuary Program – and they succeeded! In 1996, the Maryland Coastal Bays Program (MCBP) was formed to become one of 28 estuary programs around the nation.

Armed mainly with a bold vision and a belief in the power of consensus, they faced a monumental task: knitting together a patchwork of competing interests—tourist industries, farmers, fishermen, and residents—to agree on a single, shared path forward. A grassroots partnership was formed with the support of federal, state and local resource agencies and tasked with demonstrating that only environmental protection can bring long-term economic prosperity – a daunting challenge for such a rapidly developing area.

In spite of many challenges, the partnership persevered. Over nearly three decades, the MCBP transformed from a hopeful concept into a powerful,

collaborative force. They deployed meticulous, long-term scientific monitoring, gathering data that proved invaluable in charting a course for recovery. They didn't mandate change; they inspired it. They worked shoulder-to-shoulder with farmers to implement best management practices designed to reduce nutrient runoff. They worked with homeowners and municipal officials to ensure wastewater reduced nutrient releases. They protected acres of vital wetlands, the bays' own natural filters, allowing the ecosystem to begin healing itself. They worked with watermen and legislators to ensure the protection of seagrass beds. They championed projects like the establishment of nesting sites for species like the Common Tern, providing a safe haven for life to flourish again. Citizens volunteered to monitor water quality, plant marsh grasses, and restore shorelines. Businesses began to adopt greener practices. Teachers incorporated bay ecology into their lesson plans, and schoolchildren learned to test water samples and release terrapins back into the marshes. Slowly but surely, the tide began to turn.

Today, the fruits of this unwavering dedication are unmistakable. While challenges like climate change and continued growth persist, the bay system is fighting back. Finfish and shellfish populations have made remarkable recoveries, an encouraging sign of improved water quality. Nutrient trends show a definitive improvement in many parts of the system, a clear testament to the hard work of partners across the watershed. The MCBP has become a model of successful watershed management, proving that when people choose collaboration over conflict, and when passion guides policy, even the most fragile of natural treasures can be safeguarded for future generations. The Maryland Coastal Bays are not just surviving; they are embarking on a path toward thriving because of the powerful commitment made by this small community.

What began as a small effort by a few passionate individuals has grown into a thriving partnership of citizens, scientists, and policymakers working toward a shared vision: a healthy, sustainable coastal ecosystem that supports both people and wildlife. The story of the Maryland Coastal Bays is a story of renewal. It shows that when communities come together—when fishermen and farmers, students and scientists, government and grassroots groups share a common purpose—the tide can turn. The bays that once faced decline now shimmer again with life, a living reminder that restoration is not only possible, but powerful.



Reflecting on our past and the achievements the Maryland Coastal Bays Program has accomplished is something we hope to continue to celebrate as we enter 2026, marking 30 years of our organization! That means 30 years of monitoring the health of our waterways, connecting and engaging with our community, providing free education programs to people of all ages, and restoring the bays habitats. We are grateful to everyone who has helped us get to this milestone. Whether you have supported us by attending our events, been gracious enough to lend your time as a volunteer, or been generous enough to donate to the Maryland Coastal Bays Program- we thank you. Your support helps meet critical needs that keep our bays healthy, our wildlife thriving, and our community connected to the water we love.

Please consider donating towards our organization as we head into our 30th Anniversary!



SCAN HERE

SAVE THE DATE

Get ready for the Maryland Coastal Bays
Program 30th Anniversary Gala!
You are invited to a celebratory evening in
honor of this amazing milestone.

Where: Assateague State Park Living Shoreline

Thursday, September 17th, 2026
5 – 9 PM

Stay tuned for more details on the event
and ticket purchasing!

2026 CALENDAR

Stay Up-to-Date on our opportunities
by checking our online events page!



www.mdcoastalbays.org