

# Maryland Coastal Bays program director resigns

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The Maryland Coastal Bays Program executive director announced Friday he is stepping down from the post after working for the program for almost 18 years.

The former director will now shift his focus to environmental and public relations consulting using his knowledge, skills and abilities to assist other organizations with conservation and policy needs.

“It’s time to hand the reins to some fresh blood,” he said. “I think we accomplished a lot and I am proud of that, but it’s time to pass the baton.”

Wilson started with the program in November 1997 as the public outreach coordinator. The former Ocean City Today reporter recalls sitting on the beach one afternoon reading The (Baltimore) Sun and seeing the job posting.

“I had finished graduate school at Boston College and was bent on going back to school for my PhD after earning a few bucks,” he said. “I saw this posting and thought, ‘I love this program. I’m versed in these issues. I want to do this.’ ”

For a decade Wilson would help sway public opinion about conservation in the coastal bays before being tapped for the executive director in 2008.

“I had two great predecessors in Steve Taylor and Dave Blazer,” he said, “they made things easy for me.”

Indeed Wilson credits staff and the people of Worcester County for making the program so successful.

“The staff we have here are some of the most dedicated people I have ever worked with,” he said. “They, along with our local residents, are responsible for our great work.”

He said two decades ago he could never have imagined the sheer outpouring of support through volunteerism and donations that the program now enjoys annually.

“It’s astounding,” he said.

Wilson strengths were in policy and wildlife issues and he steered the program toward this arena, protecting more than 10,000 acres of forests and farms, restoring wildlife habitat and working on planning and zoning to keep sprawl from consuming land, he said. Under his watch, the program instituted colonial nesting bird, terrapin, seal and amphibian monitoring.

Known for bringing together diverse factions, Wilson was proud to run an environmental program that farmers and developers could support.

“When you bring folks together, you see attitudes change,” he said. “You realize you can institute a program that has teeth but respects the needs and beliefs of all sides.”

During his tenure, the program became adept at competing for and securing state and federal dollars, including more than \$1 million from the EPA to run its outreach program, more than \$1 million state and federal money for the Bishopville Dam restoration and millions for other conservation and restoration projects.

“These pots of money are earmarked for conservation purposes. I like to think we made the taxpayers of Worcester County proud by bringing money back here rather than sending it across the bridge,” he said. He added that the county, Ocean City, Berlin and the state of Maryland were critical partners in these projects.

In addition to the Bishopville Dam project, Wilson pointed to island restoration and the Lewis Road Kayak Launch as some of his favorite Coastal Bays projects.

“There is something very rewarding about taking an old dump and turning it into a kayak launch,” he said, referring to the program’s effort to turn Ocean City’s abandoned garbage dump on Lewis Road into a kayak and canoe launch.

Likewise, Wilson said, the new dredging and spoil island creation the program helped kick-start, could be the last chance black skimmers and royal terns have to survive in Maryland.

“Projects like this really make a difference,” he said. “To lose these shorebirds in this state would be a travesty, especially considering the island creation is actually saving tax dollars by allowing sand to be re-used in the bays rather than trucked miles inland.”

Wilson was again quick to point out that Coastal Bays staff, government partners and citizens should take the credit for the successes.

“We get very creative with ways to find and save money,” he said. “Still, every year our partners invest between \$10 million and \$30 million in the coastal bays watershed. Considering the value of tourism and farming the return on investment is worth every penny,” he said.

The program tripled its savings with Wilson at the helm and also now enjoys an additional \$720,000 endowment at the Community Foundation. The group co-leases the beach store and the canoe and bike rental on Assateague Island National Seashore.

Wilson said the buy-in, coordination, and commitment by the National Park Service, EPA, and local and state partners is a model that is difficult to replicate. “We ask a lot of our partners’ time and resources, and they have never failed to come through,” he said.

In 2014, the program completed a new 15-year Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for the bays behind Ocean City and Assateague. Berlin, Ocean City, the state and feds devised and committed to more than 200 activities to protect and restore the bays.

“The resolve our partners exhibit is really amazing,” Wilson said.

He added that even Delaware and Virginia have come to the table after years of limited involvement.

In 2009, the program collaborated with the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science to create the first ever history and issues book (“Shifting Sands”) on the back bays. The 400-page tome details the biological and cultural history of the bays and describes management options for restoration. Along with the book, the program began issuing an annual report card on the health of the bays in the same year.

“We have a long way to go,” Wilson said, “but I’m glad so many dedicated people already got us so far ahead of the curve.”