

Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access Plan

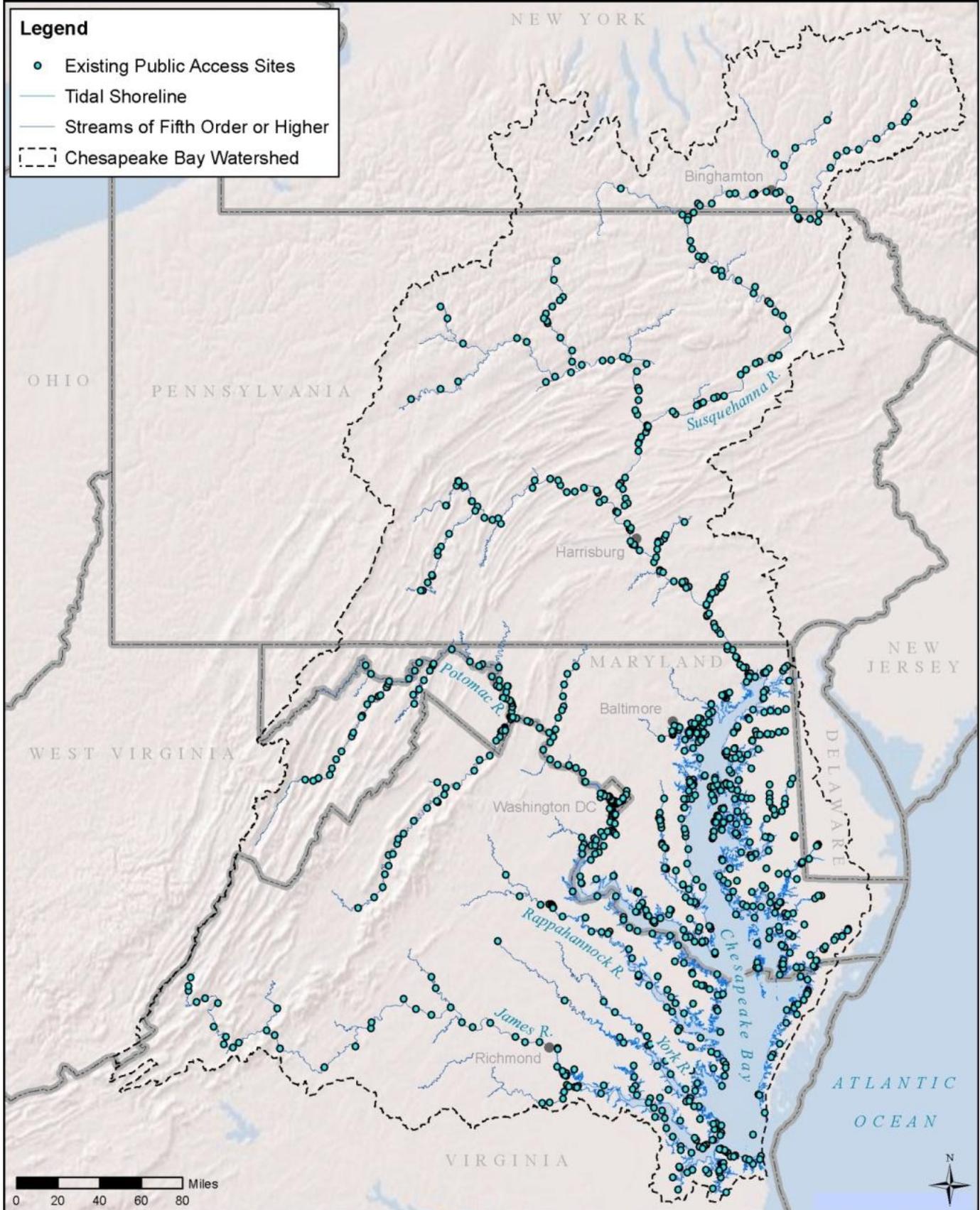
Executive Summary

January 2013

Prepared by the National Park Service in collaboration with the Commonwealths of Pennsylvania and Virginia, the States of Delaware, Maryland, New York, and West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.



Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access: Existing Public Access Sites





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Providing adequate public access to the Bay and its tributaries is important for quality of life, the economy, and for long-term conservation of the region's treasured natural and cultural resources.

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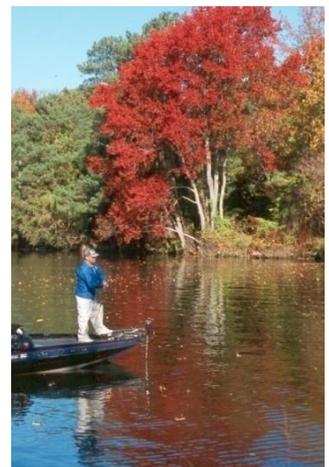
Executive Summary

The Chesapeake Bay region is rapidly urbanizing. More than eleven million people live in metropolitan areas close to the Bay, including significant diverse communities and new immigrants. Fewer people interact daily with the waters, forests, and open lands of the region. Despite this trend—or perhaps because of it—regional residents increasingly seek opportunities to reconnect with the outdoors.

State, federal, and local governments are guardians of these opportunities, providing public sites where everyone can enjoy the natural and cultural bounty of the Chesapeake Bay watershed—relaxing, learning, and reflecting in direct interaction with the region's treasured outdoors. Some sites provide direct access to the Bay and its rivers for boating and swimming. Others provide spots where visitors without watercraft can fish, observe wildlife, walk trails, and camp along the water's edge.

Open, green spaces and waterways with ample public access bolster public health and quality of life. People rely on these special places to exercise, relax, and recharge their spirits. Outdoor time strengthens family bonds and nurtures fit, creative children. At the same time, it builds personal connections with the very places that have shaped life in the region for centuries—especially its streams, rivers, and bays. This has a distinct economic value, too, as tourism, much of it associated with the area's waters, is a potent force in the region.

The sense of place that evolves from outdoor experiences along Chesapeake waters often leads to a feeling of shared responsibility for the resources. People who enjoy the outdoors are more likely to become active



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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 limited. This has real consequences for quality of life, for the economy, and for long-term conservation.

The *Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed* was released in May 2010, in response to Executive Order 13508 (Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration) issued by President Obama. It includes a key goal to increase public access to the Bay and its tributaries by adding 300 new public access sites by 2025. The basis for this goal lies in the long-standing public demand for greater access to the water in the Chesapeake region.



NPS/Ross

The strategy explicitly calls for the National Park Service, in conjunction with the watershed states and other federal agencies, to “develop a public access plan to inform and guide expansion of Chesapeake watershed public access.” Further, the strategy directs the plan to assess the demand for public access; describe (inventory) the existing public access facilities; assess barriers to public access; determine gaps in the public access system; identify opportunities for new access sites; and help direct federal, state, and local funding toward public access opportunities.

This *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access Plan* serves these purposes. The plan was produced in concert with a Public Access Action Team, which includes people involved in public access planning and implementation in each of the Chesapeake watershed states and the District of Columbia. They worked with National Park Service staff, helped guide the planning process, and participated in key decisions with respect to scope and definitions. Team members also served as the primary contacts and reviewers of data as it related to their specific jurisdictions.



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This plan reflects public access to significant streams, rivers, and bays in the entire Chesapeake watershed, including portions of Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and all of the District of Columbia. No prior plan for the region has addressed this broad geographic scope.

Specifically, the plan covers all tidal streams and bays with boating opportunities; streams classified as “fifth-order” and higher; and streams smaller than fifth-order when they are part of a water trail or contribute to its development.

Public access sites are locations owned and managed by a public entity (or a nonprofit organization in an agreement with a public entity) providing the following:

- Boat-related access: boat ramps, car-top boat launches, soft launches (supporting paddle craft, motor, and/or sail boats)
- Swimming access: designated areas appropriate for swimming
- Fishing access: piers, bank fishing facilities or easements, and parking adjacent to the water
- Viewing access for water, wildlife, and shoreline areas: nature trails, hiking or biking trails, waterfront trails, boardwalks, and observation decks located at or leading to the water's edge.



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Through an extensive process involving review of existing local, state, and federal data, public workshops and an online public mapping tool, this plan describes the status of existing public access as follows:

- There are 1,150 documented existing public access sites where people can launch boats, fish, swim, or look out over the Bay and its tributaries. About a third of these sites provide more than one types of access.
- 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—equivalent to the distance along the United States' west coast from Mexico to Canada.
- Multiple studies and plans, including all state outdoor recreation plans, continue to document high public demand for access to streams, rivers, and bays.
- Significant stretches of shoreline have little or no access. In some cases, the gap between sites is dozens of miles. For example, the southern bank of the tidal James River includes a 64-mile stretch with no regularly open access sites. And there are long stretches of the Rappahannock, Potomac, Susquehanna, Nanticoke and other rivers, as well as the shoreline of the Bay where the public has little or no access to the water. Long, inaccessible stretches make it difficult to plan trips along water trails and reduce the benefits of ecotourism. A lack of public access also leads to trespassing, as users have no other option for getting on or off the water.



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PA DCNR



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- Less than half of access sites provide launches or landings for boats or paddle craft.
- State agencies report significant overcrowding at trailerable boat launching facilities along the Bay and tidal tributaries.

To identify potential new public access sites, the planning team reviewed existing planning documents to identify and assess all previously proposed potential sites, and members of the public identified hundreds of additional desired sites at workshops and online. The team reviewed and refined the list of these sites for this plan. This revealed that:

- 320 specific potential new sites have been identified for providing public access to the water.
- Over half of these sites are already on publicly owned land.
- Only a small fraction of these sites (5 percent) are categorized as “construction-ready.” The remainder requires either additional design and permitting or more substantial evaluation.
- Boat launching capacity is the most frequently suggested access type for these sites (47 percent of the total sites).
- The highest demand for new public access sites is frequently but not exclusively concentrated in and around urban areas.
- A large number of potential sites are along existing water trails or national historic trails, which can often bring strong community and local support for developing needed sites.
- Members of the paddling public frequently expressed a desire for small primitive campsites, picnic areas, and restrooms at appropriate locations along water trails.

The plan recognizes and documents a series of planning and policy considerations that will influence a strategic approach to expanding public access. In addition, the plan sets out a series of actions for moving access development forward. These include:

1. Make funding for public access a priority.
2. Carry out and support more detailed assessments and project design for potential sites.
3. Fill strategic gaps in access along water trails.
4. Incorporate identified proposed public access sites and actions in key plans.
5. Further examine urban public access issues and needs.
6. Work with private sector funders to develop access.

7. Engage in hydropower re-licensing processes to expand public access.
8. Explore options for resolving railroad crossing liability.
9. Establish memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with transportation departments.
10. Explore potential for additional access on public lands.
11. Fully address accessibility at public access sites.
12. Build opportunities for citizen stewardship.

Implementing these actions and responding to the specific opportunities for adding access sites will expand the number of places for people to get to the water by more than 20 percent by 2025.

Ultimately, this undertaking is not just about adding more boat launches or fishing piers. It is about extending the scope and range of access to the water to greater and greater reaches. Citizens of the region want more places along the water where they can walk, sit, play, picnic, camp, swim, fish, watch wildlife, and put in their canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, sailboats, and powerboats. Public access to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries is important to their quality of life.

To view the complete Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access Plan, please visit: <http://www.baygateways.net/PublicAccess/>

For more information on this plan, please contact: Superintendent, National Park Service, Chesapeake Bay Office, 410 Severn Avenue, Suite 314, Annapolis MD 21403, (410) 260-2470.



NPS/Jett



James River Association



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Cover Photos

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Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access: Potential Public Access Sites

