National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

A Partnership for Enhancing the National Trails along the Tidal Potomac River

Potomac River Segment Plan

2015

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Cover Photos:

Top left: Tent camping (photo credit: NPS archive)

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Bottom right: Waterman (photo credit: NPS archive)

Bottom right mid: National Harbor (photo credit: NPS archive)

Bottom left mid: Mason Neck State Park (photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

Bottom left: Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge ((photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

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Digital Copy of the Potomac Segment Plan

An online version of this plan is available for download at http://www.nps.gov/cajo/getinvolved/potomac-river-segment-plan.htm

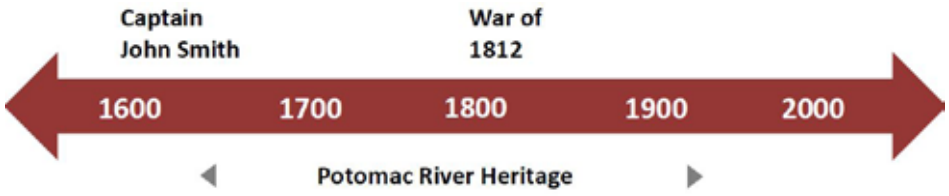
*Note that the document prints in the intended booklet layout if you select "print on both sides" and "flip on short edge".

Executive Summary

Potomac River and the National Trails

The Potomac River perhaps captures more of the American experience than any other river in the country. In many respects, the river, particularly its tidal portion from Great Falls down to the Chesapeake Bay, traces the evolution of the people, land and events of the United States. It is, therefore, not surprising that three congressionally designated national trails, which focus on important events and developments in the region, overlap along this 140 mile stretch of the tidal Potomac River.

They are the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, and the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail. While each trail was legislated with respect to specific themes and time periods, they all serve to direct attention to historic moments, cultures, and key resources that played a role in the country's development.



How to Interpret Trail Resources at Partner Sites

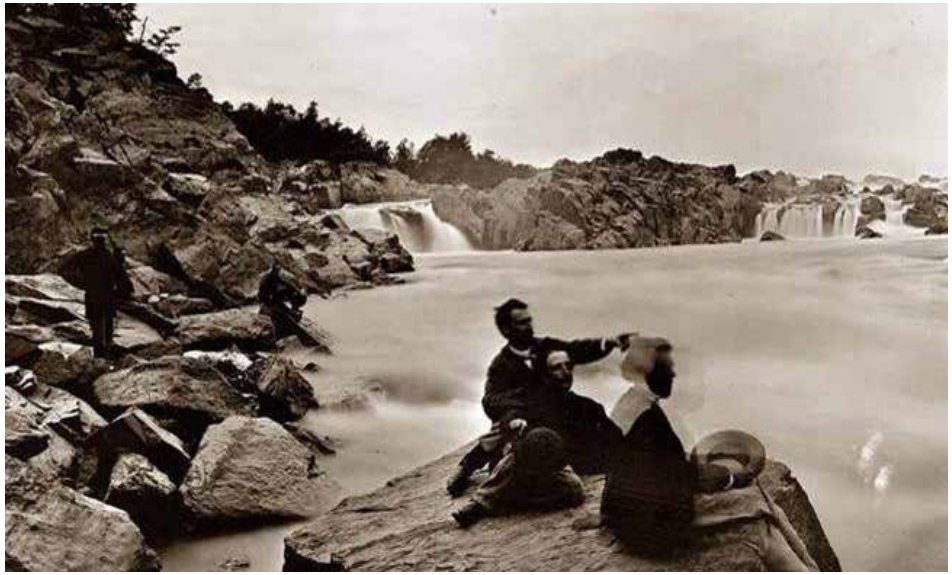
Within this stretch of river, more than 100 public sites provide people with access to the waterfront. These sites, which include wildlife management areas, parks, recreation areas, historic sites, museums, and waterfront entertainment districts are managed by a variety of agencies, states, counties and municipal jurisdictions. Not only do these places provide access to the Potomac River and its resources but many also offer high quality visitor experiences. While some of these sites recognize the three national trail routes that occur along or in close proximity to their shorelines, many do not. By virtue of the national trail designations, many of these sites are recognized as trail partners. But in some cases these trail partners may be unsure of how to effectively interpret the significance of national trail resources or best collaborate with other partner sites along the trails when common interpretive, recreational and conservation goals exist.

Common Foundation to Work Towards a Shared Goal

It is clear that these local, regional and nationally significant sites – as well as the river as a whole – could benefit from an alignment of individual site planning and management priorities to identify mutually beneficial opportunities to help advance partner missions in concert with the national trails. It is also clear that national trail managers can aid partner sites by providing better communication on how to best interpret the national significance of trail resources. A strategic plan focusing on the preservation, interpretation, enhancement and enjoyment of the resources along the Potomac River could provide a common foundation for trail managers and trail partners to work towards a shared goal.

Intent of the Plan

It is the intent of the Potomac Segment Plan to provide that foundation—aspiring to enhance the presence of three national trails at partner sites along the tidal Potomac. The Potomac Segment Plan is a collaborative planning effort led by members of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the Chesapeake Conservancy, the Potomac Conservancy and the National Park Service. This core group of planning team members believes that the three national trails can act as the connecting fiber between partner sites, aligning multiple site management goals within a single plan to ensure individual actions are maximized throughout the tidal Potomac River region to benefit as many partners as possible. By utilizing the water- and land-based national trail routes, the natural, historic and cultural resources of individual sites can be connected throughout the region.



This page: Undated historic photograph of visitors recreating at Great Falls Park. (photocredit: NPS archive)

Opposite page: Visitors continue to be drawn to marvel at Great Falls Park. (photocredit: NPS archive)

Planning Process

The planning process, initiated in early 2013, has engaged hundreds of stakeholders including trail partners, public land managers, private developers, conservation groups and many other affiliations interested in the history, health, prosperity and recreational enjoyment of the tidal Potomac River. Multiple focus group meetings, stakeholder workshops and individual interviews were held over the course of two years to learn what people are doing , what they would like to be doing and what could be done to enhance trail visitor experiences. Information was also gathered on any planned actions that would help address the identified needs and opportunities. This outreach resulted in:

- Buy-in and support from local site managers and Potomac-based organizations throughout the study area;
- Strengthened and new partnerships between multiple federal, state , local agencies and non-government organizations;
- Verification of the inventory of national trail resources that currently exist at partner sites along the Potomac; and
- Partner-driven suggestions on significant trail-related resources and how national trail recognition can best serve trail partners and Potomac region visitors..

Partner-driven Opportunities

This plan reflects the priorities and needs expressed by the site managers and stakeholders along the tidal Potomac. Stakeholders believe that the national trails can act as a tool to complement their existing programs and create new opportunities for potential site enhancements. All partners agreed that cross-site promotion and consistent storytelling of interpretive trail themes could help strengthen the connection between sites and enhance the existing network of trail partners. Using the information gained through this process, the plan offers strategies and recommendations to “make the trails more real” along the Potomac through:

- Identification of near-term opportunities, referred to as “action items”, including both cross-cutting (applicable at trail-related sites region-wide) and site-specific, that will promote the national trails at partner sites by protecting resources, enhancing interpretation or creating new public access;
- Creation of immersive trail experiences for visitors that connect individual sites to multiple partner sites along the routes of three national trails; and
- Leveraging partnerships to better serve visitor needs, discovery of new funding sources and engagement of the next generation of environmental stewards by helping to link individual site planning efforts.

Living Document

The Potomac Segment Plan is intended to be a “living document” that will be updated periodically to reflect new opportunities and actions for partnership collaboration and enhancement of the national trails. Progress on action items and updates on plan implementation will be reported to stakeholders on a regular basis.

There are hundreds of opportunities outlined in this plan. Some await funding, others a project sponsor, and many are “shovel-ready”. While implementation will require the work and support of all the partners and stakeholders, the results of these efforts could be truly amazing. The three national trails will become “real” and an attraction for visitors, natural and cultural resources important to trail integrity will be protected, local economies will be enhanced, and people will be better able to connect with the stories, places and events which have labeled the Potomac as the “Nations River”.

Purpose of the Potomac Segment Plan

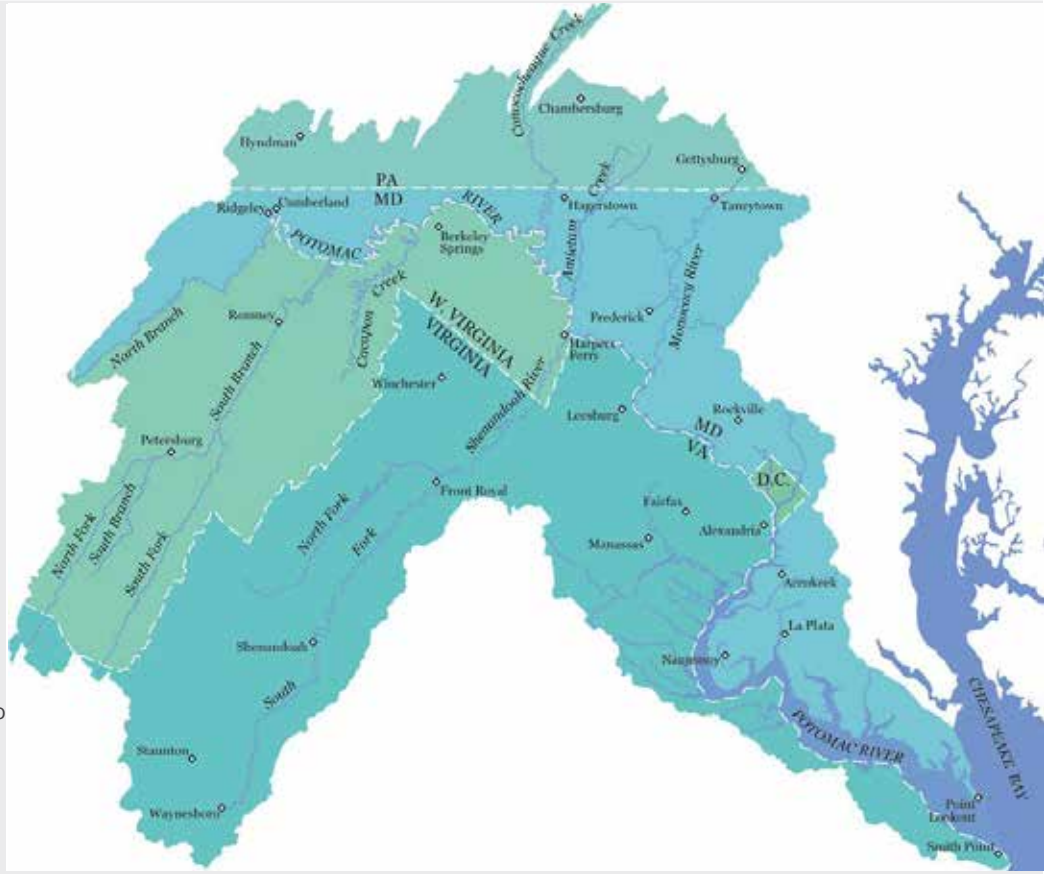
The Potomac Segment Plan outlines how three national trails could be enhanced along the Potomac River over the next several years. Based on feedback from site managers, community advocates and other stakeholders along the river, the plan identifies specific opportunities at partner sites along the tidal Potomac River that would make the trails more visible and meaningful for visitors, and would seamlessly interpret diverse trail-related stories and resources. New or enhanced public access, linking routes between partner sites and compelling hands-on experiences, referred to as "Action Items", are highlighted as opportunities to advance the trails as educational, recreational, preservation and tourism assets for the region.

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in North America and one of the most productive in the world. The Bay supports more than 3,600 species of plants and animals, including fish and shellfish, migratory waterfowl and an array of mammals.

Opposite page: Satellite view of the Chesapeake Bay centered on the tidal Potomac River

This page: Graphic indicating the Potomac River Watershed area

The Potomac is the only river in the U.S. with three national trails running nearly the entire length of its tidal corridor: the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail and the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. The national trails serve as tools to provide new and enhanced ways for residents and visitors to experience the tidal Potomac. Recreational, educational and conservation opportunities enable people to imagine lands and waters as they might have been long ago, embrace an important part of our collective heritage, embark on personal journeys of exploration and discovery, cultivate a stewardship ethic and provide a positive impact to local economies along the route.



While there are comprehensive management plans (CMP) for the individual national trails in this region, the strategies herein focus on the entire length of the trails (collectively over 4,000 miles) and do not get into great detail at the local level of planning. This document focuses on an approximately 140 mile stretch of the Potomac River, from Great Falls to the mouth of the river at the Chesapeake Bay, where the three national trails overlap to explore shared organizational priorities and resource-leveraging opportunities that will best serve the communities within the Potomac corridor and fulfill the intent of the National Trail System Act.

The plan describes this approach in depth, providing the following:

- A description of the various trails and a foundation for trails development (Chapter 1);
- A discussion of over arching strategies for supporting and linking the trails (Chapter 2);
- A description of seven trail sections and specific actions for enhancing the trail experiences and connecting sites within individual focus areas (Chapter 3); and
- A framework for coordination and implementation strategies to build partnerships, leverage funding and stimulate implementation (Chapter 4).

The Region and the River

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in North America and one of the most productive in the world. The Bay supports more than 3,600 species of plants and animals, including fish and shellfish, migratory waterfowl and an array of mammals. Habitats within the 64,000-square mile Chesapeake Bay watershed range from the Piedmont Plateau and upland forests to tidal marshes and swamps. The Chesapeake provides many important economic, recreational and educational resources for those who live, work and travel here.

The Potomac River, second largest tributary to the Chesapeake Bay, is steeped in history and scenic beauty. In 1608, Captain John Smith became the first European explorer known to navigate the river. He saw a waterway teeming with fish, crabs and oysters, and a forested shoreline thick with wildlife. For thousands of years prior to exploration, American Indians inhabited the region in temporal communities that became relatively permanent with the advent of agriculture.

The tidal Potomac River corridor—central to the Nation's political evolution—bears a rich cultural history and is endowed with numerous historic sites, natural areas and communities. The river has witnessed the growth and development of the United States; from European contact with American Indians in the early 17th century to the American Revolution; from the War of 1812 to the Civil War; from slave ships supporting tobacco plantations to steamboats supporting the Industrial Revolution. The lives and accomplishments of George Washington, Robert E. Lee and other famous Americans are woven into the Potomac's intricate history. Before railroads and roadways dominated the landscape, the river served as a major highway transporting trade goods and travelers to the Chesapeake and beyond. As the United States continues to evolve, the ability of the Potomac to meet the demands of a grateful Nation remains constant.

Today, travelers along the Potomac can enjoy stretches of undeveloped landscapes evocative of John Smith's time. Many of the most important historical sites in the nation are located along its shores. Havens of protected lands offer glimpses of bald eagles, osprey and other wildlife. The Potomac is a microcosm of the vividly scenic and culturally rich Chesapeake Bay region and continues to support a variety of industrial, civic, military and public recreational opportunities for millions of area residents and visitors.

Health of the Potomac River

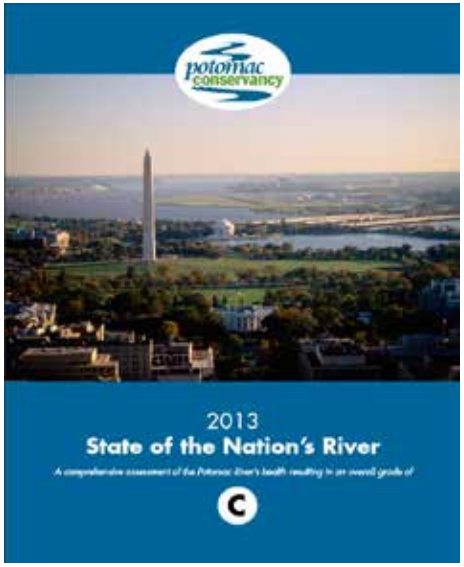
The current health of the Potomac River is questionable at best. American Rivers named the Potomac River the nation's most endangered river on its 2012 list of the top ten most threatened rivers in America. Although the Potomac is cleaner than it once was, the river is threatened by many factors, including population growth, storm-water runoff, combined sewer overflows, suburban sprawl, pharmaceutical pollutants, lawn fertilizers, loss of healthy forests, erosion, industrial waste and pollution.

The water quality of the Potomac received a "C" grade in the Potomac Conservancy's 2013 State of the Nation's River report (an improvement from 2011's D grade). Nearly seven million people live within the Potomac Watershed, and the Potomac River provides 486 million gallons of drinking water to over 4.5 million people in the Washington DC metro area every day. However, many communities warn against the consumption of fish caught from the river and restrict swimming access due to pollutants, contaminants and potential irritants in the water. The majority of recreational use on the Potomac is boating; personal paddle craft, sail and power boats.

There are many other planning documents which outline strategies for evaluating and improving the health of the river, including scientific analysis, zoning and development restrictions and construction best management practices. This document aims to improve the health of the river by building stewardship among the residents and visitors to the area through enhanced opportunities for recreational, historic, natural and cultural resources experiences along the tidal Potomac.

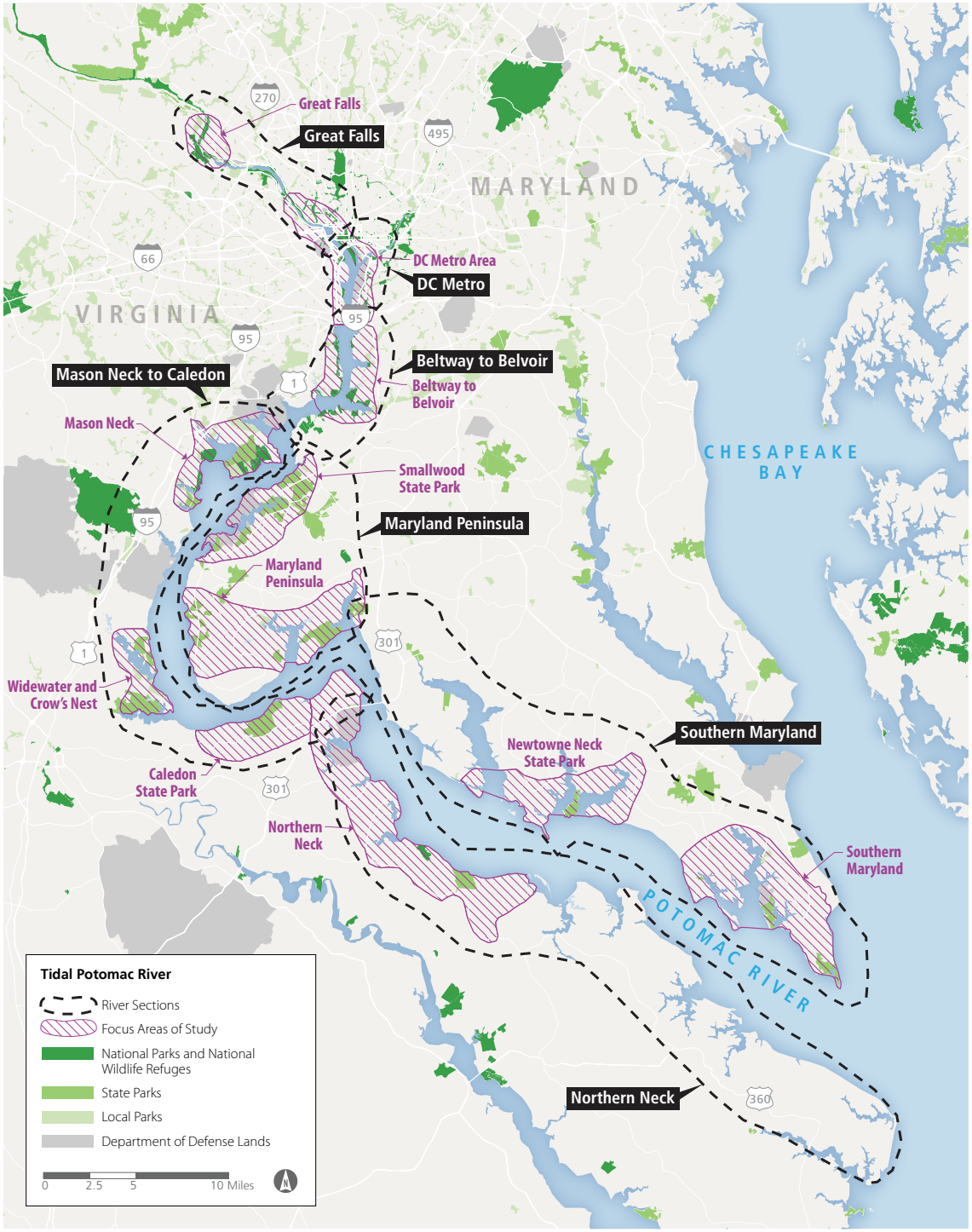
"We look for people to stand up, show up and speak up to local decision makers about the importance of clean water to the community; the importance of green spaces that contribute so much to the quality of life in the region."

-Hedrick Belin, President, Potomac Conservancy



http://potomac.org/river-friendly-growth

This page: Mason Neck State Park (photo credit: Christopher A. Koberg)



A series of meetings and interviews with a variety of stakeholders provided key insights regarding ways to further develop the trails along the Potomac. Interviewees included tourism officials; local, state and federal government representatives; American Indians; site managers; private sector tour operators; and non-governmental entities.

Interviewees concluded that to make the trails more viable and "real", several conditions and activities are necessary:

- Cultivate the areas with significant trail-related resources which already have visitor services and operational capacity.
- Connect people to trail-related places, stories and themes through technology, integrated signage and interactive and immersive experiences.
- Use multiple media, events and other promotional tools to raise the trails' visibility and encourage visitors to experience the resources associated with each trail.
- Conserve lands to link and buffer existing sites and to preserve natural and cultural features or landscapes.
- Complete and market early project successes to build momentum and to help generate funding for additional phases of trail development.

An assessment of resources within the river corridor, along with numerous site visits, suggests a number of distinct "focus areas" with high-quality trail-related resources, enriched existing or potential trail experiences and existing capacity to provide visitor services.

Based on this assessment, the following core approach was developed to enhance the trails along the Potomac in the near-term:

- Identify river sections with distinct characteristics, demographics and jurisdictional boundaries;
- Within each section, define one or more focus areas targeted for relatively rapid trail-related enhancement;
- Outline a set of strategies for enhancing these focus areas and connecting, promoting, interpreting, protecting and further developing the trails;
- Address additional areas for trail-related enhancement; and
- Recognize associated locations that can provide support services.