

WETLANDS

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Chesapeake Bay
Program

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TRUE OR FALSE?

Wetlands are dead, barren areas where nothing lives.

True

False

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest and most productive estuary in the United States. Its entire shoreline, including wetlands and islands, encompasses more than 11,600 miles—more than the entire west coast of the U.S.

The Bay's productivity has declined sharply in recent years—as the human population has increased beyond 16 million—and land use practices, which include the destruction of wetlands, are a major cause of this decline.

- Until recent years, wetlands were viewed as undesirable, unappealing infestations harboring snakes, insects and rodents.
- Between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s wetland losses averaged more than 2,800 acres per year.
- In agricultural areas, wetlands were drained, cleared and put into crop production.
- In expanding urban areas, wetlands were filled to provide land for more houses, office buildings, industrial facilities and sanitary landfills.



Wetland Types

Wetlands are the transitional link between the water and the land.

- 'Wetland' refers collectively to marshes, swamps, bogs and similar areas found between dry land and water along the edges of streams, rivers, lakes, ponds, and coastlines.
- Although most wetlands have standing or flowing water, many are dry for part of the year. For example, estuarine wetlands that are influenced by the tides may be dry twice a day.
- Several wetland types occur throughout the Chesapeake watershed

due to its variability in topography, climate, soil, hydrology, salinity, vegetation and other factors.

Scientists divide wetlands into two main groups: estuarine or palustrine wetlands:

- [Estuarine wetlands](#)  are tidally flooded by salt or brackish water and are found chiefly along the shores of the Bay and its tidal rivers.
- [Palustrine wetlands](#)  are freshwater areas, situated on the floodplains bordering rivers and streams, fringing the shorelines of lakes and ponds, filling isolated depressions and covering broad flat areas at or near sea level.

Wetlands also are characterized by their vegetation, as:

- Emergent wetlands, commonly called marshes and wet meadows, dominated by grasses, sedges and other herbaceous or non-woody plants;
- Shrub wetlands, including shrub swamps and bogs, characterized by low to medium-height woody plants; and
- Forested wetlands, largely wooded swamps and bottomland hardwood forests.

Wetlands cover only about 4 percent of the 64,000-square mile Bay watershed, but they are vital to the health and productivity of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. In recent years, public support for wetland protection and restoration and concern about wetland destruction have steadily increased. Protecting wetlands is an important part of the Chesapeake Bay restoration effort.



Wetlands Protect and Improve Water Quality

- Healthy wetlands remove and retain excessive nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, from the water.
- Forested riparian (or streamside) wetlands remove about 80 percent of the phosphorous and 90 percent of the nitrogen from water, which act as water contaminants and may result in unhealthy algae blooms.

- Wetlands also can minimize sediment loads and absorb chemical and organic pollutants before they can enter the Chesapeake Bay.

Wetlands Help Control Flooding and Erosion

Wetlands often have been referred to as natural sponges that absorb flooding waters.

- By temporarily storing floodwaters, wetlands help protect adjacent and downstream property owners from flood damage.
- Wetlands in urban areas are especially valuable for flood protection, since urban development increases the rate and volume of surface water runoff, thereby increasing the risk of flood damage.
- Wetlands are often located between rivers and high ground and, therefore, are in a good position to buffer the land against erosion.
- Wetland plants can reduce erosion by binding soil with their roots.

Wetlands Provide Habitat for Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife

Tidal estuarine and palustrine wetlands provide vital habitat for fish, shellfish, waterfowl, wading birds and mammals.

- [Striped bass](#), [menhaden](#), [flounder](#), [oysters](#) and [blue crabs](#) are among the most commercially important fish and shellfish that depend on estuarine wetlands.
- Palustrine wetlands also provide valuable fish habitat and support a variety of birdlife, including ducks, geese and many songbird species.
- [Mammals](#) that are commonly found in wetlands include [muskrat](#), [white-tailed deer](#) and beaver.

Wetlands foster the production of many species including [fish](#), [shellfish](#) and [waterfowl](#), and plants such as wild rice and blueberry. Forested wetlands, which are the most common type of palustrine wetlands, supply valuable timber products.

Recreation in Wetland Areas

Waterfowl hunting, fishing, and crabbing are popular activities in these areas, but wetlands also provide rich opportunities for bird-watching, swimming, boating and nature photography.

Ways YOU can help:

- **Identify** wetlands on your property and avoid disturbing these areas during construction.
- **Learn** about the habitat values of wetlands on your property and the types of plants and animals that inhabit or frequent the area.
- **Maintain** vegetated buffer areas around wetlands to conserve their habitat values for fish and wildlife.
- **Encourage** local governments and private developers to adopt innovative land use planning that would conserve wetlands.
- **Comment** on public notices and attend public hearings concerning wetland permits and regulations.
- **Donate** wetland areas or give funds for the purchase and management of wetlands to private conservation agencies.
- **Restore** wetlands on your property where former wetlands have been destroyed or degraded (government financial and technical assistance is often available).
- **Conserve** wetlands and their values whenever possible. When planning to use wetlands for production, such as hunting, trapping, or forestry, consult federal and state agencies (e.g., the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and your state departments of conservation and forestry) to learn how you can minimize the impacts of these activities on your wetlands.

Other Sites of Interest:

- [Wetlands - Chesapeake Bay Region - USGS](#)
- [Remote Sensing and Ecological Research in Wetlands - USGS](#)
- [Association of State Wetland Managers](#)
- [Environmental Concern Inc.](#) A non-profit organization dedicated to wetland restoration, research, and education since 1972.
- [Wetlands - EPA Office of Water](#)
- [National Wetlands Inventory](#)
- [Backyard Conservation - National Resources Conservation Service](#)
- [Restoration, Creation, and Recovery of Wetlands Wetland Functions, Values, and Assessment - USGS](#)
- [Virginia Department of Environmental Quality - Wetlands, Surface Water, and Surface Water Withdrawals/Impoundments](#)

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