



New wave of preservation targets Chesapeake's underwater history

NOAA asking states to identify potential sites

By Lara Lutz

Traditionally, marine archaeology has little to do with the restoration of the Bay's troubled ecosystem. But the new federal action plan to restore the Bay may change that.

The plan gives fresh focus to places of historic and cultural value, including those that rest on the Bay's bottom.

As a result, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration wants to see new protected areas in Chesapeake waters selected for their historic or cultural value rather than ecology. The federal action plan specifically tasks the agency with finding candidate sites in the Bay region.

Recognizing that the Bay and its rivers lie entirely in state waters, NOAA will bring resources to the effort, but ask for state leadership in identifying potential sites and the ways in which a protected area might be managed.

"Our hope is to not only work with Maryland and Virginia, but to have them take the lead, while we support the states in doing it," said Paul Ticco, who coordinates NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary program for the East Coast and Great Lakes. "This is not a top-down approach."

Ticco said that the preservation of historic and cultural marine sites is underfunded in the Bay region and NOAA resources can help protect them for future generations.

Preserving such sites could also promote public involvement with the Bay restoration. For example, the NOAA model for National Marine Sanctuaries, one of several classifications within the National Marine Protected Areas program, features an outreach program that weds history, science and stewardship into one package.

"A site in the Bay would have a multiplier effect," Ticco said. "Visitors might come to learn about a shipwreck, but they can also learn about the conservation of Bay resources, pollution and what individuals can do to help."

No specific amount of federal funding is linked to the effort, but Ticco anticipates supporting a future site with NOAA resources for both outreach and science.

NOAA already works with a long list of federal, state and nonprofit partners to manage the 14 marine sites designated as National Marine Sanctuaries. The sanctuaries are a mix, given federal protection for both ecological and cultural reasons and ranging in size from a tiny tropical reef in American Samoa to 135,000 square miles of the waters surrounding the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

The closest sanctuary to the Chesapeake Bay is the wreck of the USS Monitor, an ironclad gunboat that sank off the coast of North Carolina in 1863.

Sanctuaries, however, are only a part of NOAA's program for National Marine Protected Areas. Included under that umbrella is a network of protected areas that has been set up by federal, state, tribal or local governments with definitions and guidelines that suit local needs.

Last spring, Maryland took a first step in joining that network when it nominated the wreck of a German submarine, U-1105, sunk in the Potomac River. Known as the "Black Panther," the submarine was given to the U.S. Navy as a war prize at the close of World War II. The Navy used the vessel for study and experimentation before sinking it off Piney Point. In 1994 the boat was named a Maryland Historic Shipwreck Preserve. Last spring, the state nominated it to become one of the first marine protected areas in NOAA's network.

The designation of any protected site in the Chesapeake, as well as its management, will depend on broad public input and agency partnerships. Portions of the protected area could remain open for boating, diving or fishing, including commercial harvest.

Susan Langley, underwater archaeologist with the Maryland Historic Trust, has partnered with a number of federal agencies to explore historic marine sites in the Bay region. "At this point, a marine protected area is nothing but a positive," Langley said. "They are really very flexible in this program. Everything is discussed and negotiated." Langley leads the on-going effort to survey the Maryland portion of the Bay for important archaeological sites. After years of research in the Bay's murky water, roughly 35 percent of the job is complete.

"The largest percentage of vessels tends to be late 19th and early 20th century - a lot of work boats, sailing boats and steamboats," Langley said.

Some of the region's most dramatic maritime remains lie in Mallows Bay on the eastern shore of the Potomac, about 30 miles south of Washington. Mallows Bay has been called the largest ship graveyard in the Western hemisphere, cradling more than 100 vessels that span two centuries of U.S. history. Many hulls are still above water, dramatically reclaimed by trees, grasses and waterfowl.

Mallows Bay may be a candidate for protection. The historic resources are vast and intertwined with the river ecosystem. Visitors could explore the site without diving underwater.

"Personally, I've been enamored about doing something at Mallows Bay for ages," Langley said. "It's got lots to see, endangered species, great kayaking and fishing, and there could be trails. It's the place we need to be looking at."

Sens. Benjamin Cardin and Barbara Mikulski and Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland have written to NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenko to express formal support for a sanctuary at Mallows Bay.

Sites from the War of 1812 may also draw interest. The war's approaching bicentennial has spurred tourism campaigns and interpretive projects throughout the Chesapeake region, including the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail and Scenic Byway.

The Patuxent River was the scene of a dramatic confrontation between American defenders in "Barney's Flotilla" and British invaders. Joshua Barney led his collection of barges and gunboats to resist the British raids on the Chesapeake Bay. He ultimately scuttled the flotilla near Jug Bay in a last ditch attempt to thwart their advance on Washington, DC.

Now, Langley and other archaeologists are examining the flotilla's submerged remains and may have located Barney's flagship, The Scorpion.

Ticco is looking for input on these and other sites as he begins outreach to officials and legislators in both Maryland and Virginia.

"We hope we can work with other partners to raise awareness of the Chesapeake Bay and the entire suite of Bay issues, be they environmental, ecological, or cultural," Ticco said. "This is another piece of the puzzle."

Lara Lutz is a writer and editor who lives on the South River in Mayo, MD.