



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

Prepared by:

National Park Service - Chesapeake Bay Office

410 Severn Avenue
Suite 314
Annapolis, MD 21403

in cooperation with:

The Commonwealth of Virginia, State of Maryland,
Chesapeake Conservancy and Potomac Conservancy



Cover Photos:

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

Top left mid: Riverbend Regional Park (photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

Top right mid: Kayaking along the Chesapeake (photo credit: NPS archive)

Top right: Cherry Blossom of the Potomac Riverboat Company (photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

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)

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1.	Chapter 3 River Sections and Proposed Action Items	23
Introduction Purpose of the Potomac Segment Plan	1	Introduction (How to use Chapter 3)	25
The Region and the River	2	Cross Cutting Components	26
Health of the Potomac	2	- Orientation and Interpretation	
Stakeholder Outreach and Approach	3	- New/Enhanced (Physical) Connectivity	
Chapter 1 Foundation for Trail Development	5	- New/Enhanced Public Access	
Supporting Legislation and Plans	7	- Trail Promotion and Services	
Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.....	8	Resource Protection and Land Conservation	28
Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail	9	Proposed Action Items.....	29
Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail	10	River Section 1 – Great Falls.....	29
Recreational Opportunities and Visitor Experiences	11	River Section 2 – Metro Area	37
Chapter 2 Developing the Trails Along the Potomac	13	River Section 3 – Beltway to Belvoir Area	49
Planning Approach	15	River Section 4 – Mason Neck to Caledon	59
Orientation and Interpretation	16	River Section 5 – Maryland Peninsula Area	67
Trails Promotion and Support Services	18	River Section 6 – Southern Maryland	75
Public Access and Connectivity	19	River Section 7 – Northern Neck	85
Resource Conservation	20	Chapter 4 Coordination and Implementation Strategies	93
Collaborative Approach	21	Coordination Strategy	94
		Building Partnerships	95
		Management and Implementation	96
		Legacy of the Segment Plan	98

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>

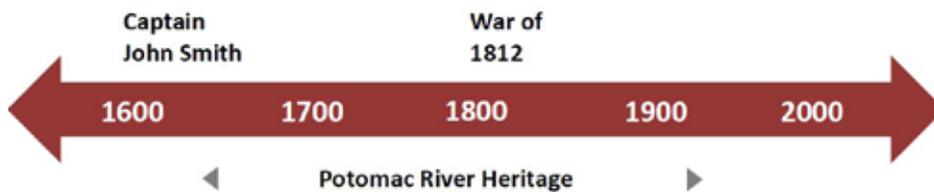
*Note that the document prints in the intended booklet layout if you select "print on both sides" and "flip on short edge".

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.

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

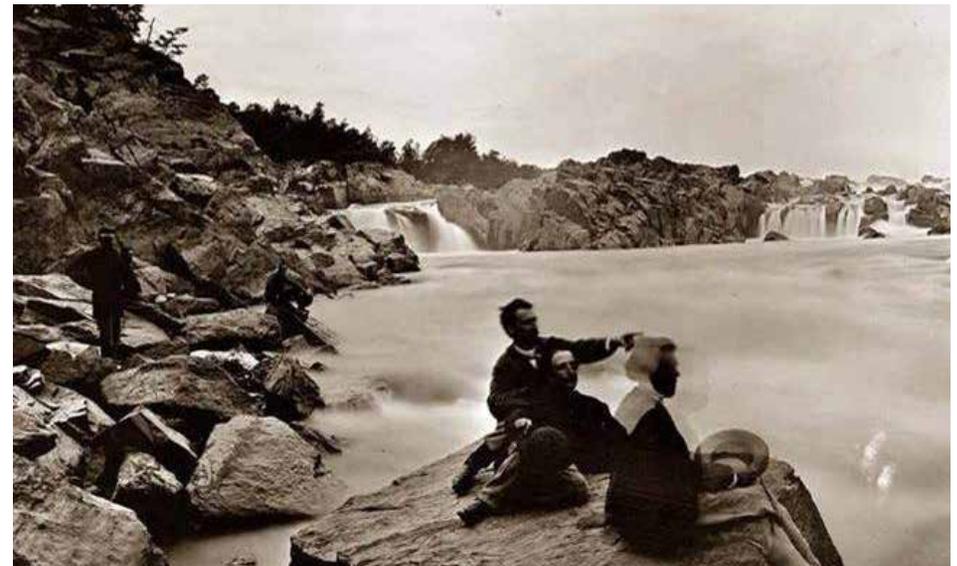
Opposite page: Visitors continue to be drawn to marvel at Great Falls Park. (photocredit: NPS archive)

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.



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”.





Introduction

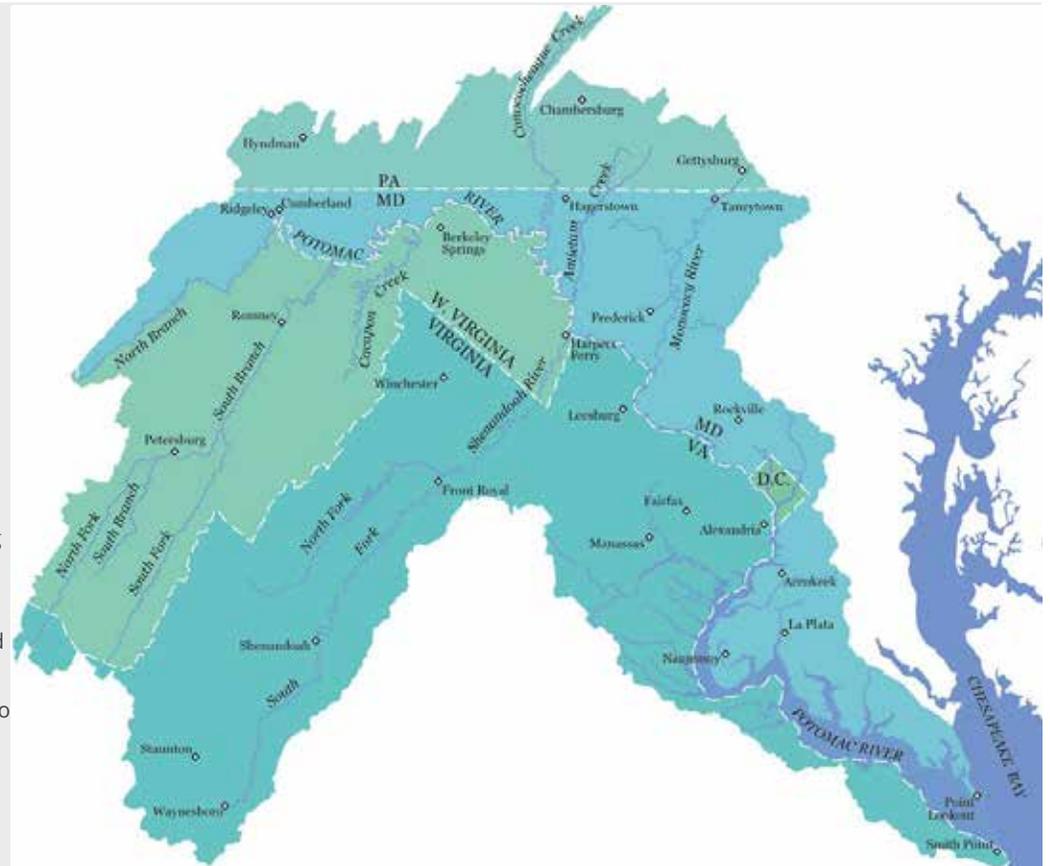
Purpose of the Potomac Segment Plan

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.

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).

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

This page: Graphic indicating the Potomac River Watershed area

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.

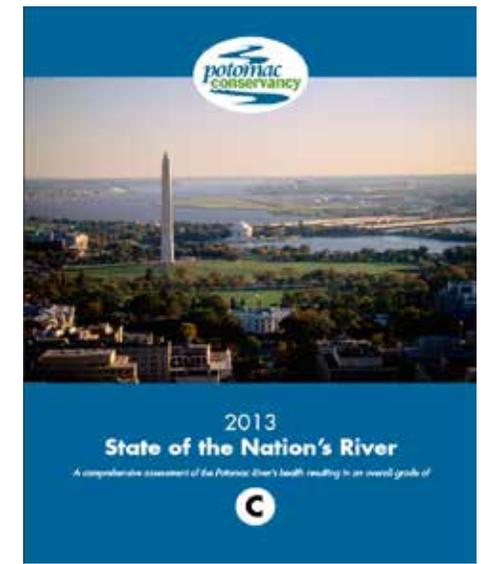
The water quality of the Potomac received a "C" grade in the Potomac Conservancy's 2013 State of the Nation's River report (an improvement from 2011's D grade). Nearly seven million people live within the Potomac Watershed, and the Potomac River provides 486 million gallons of drinking water to over 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.



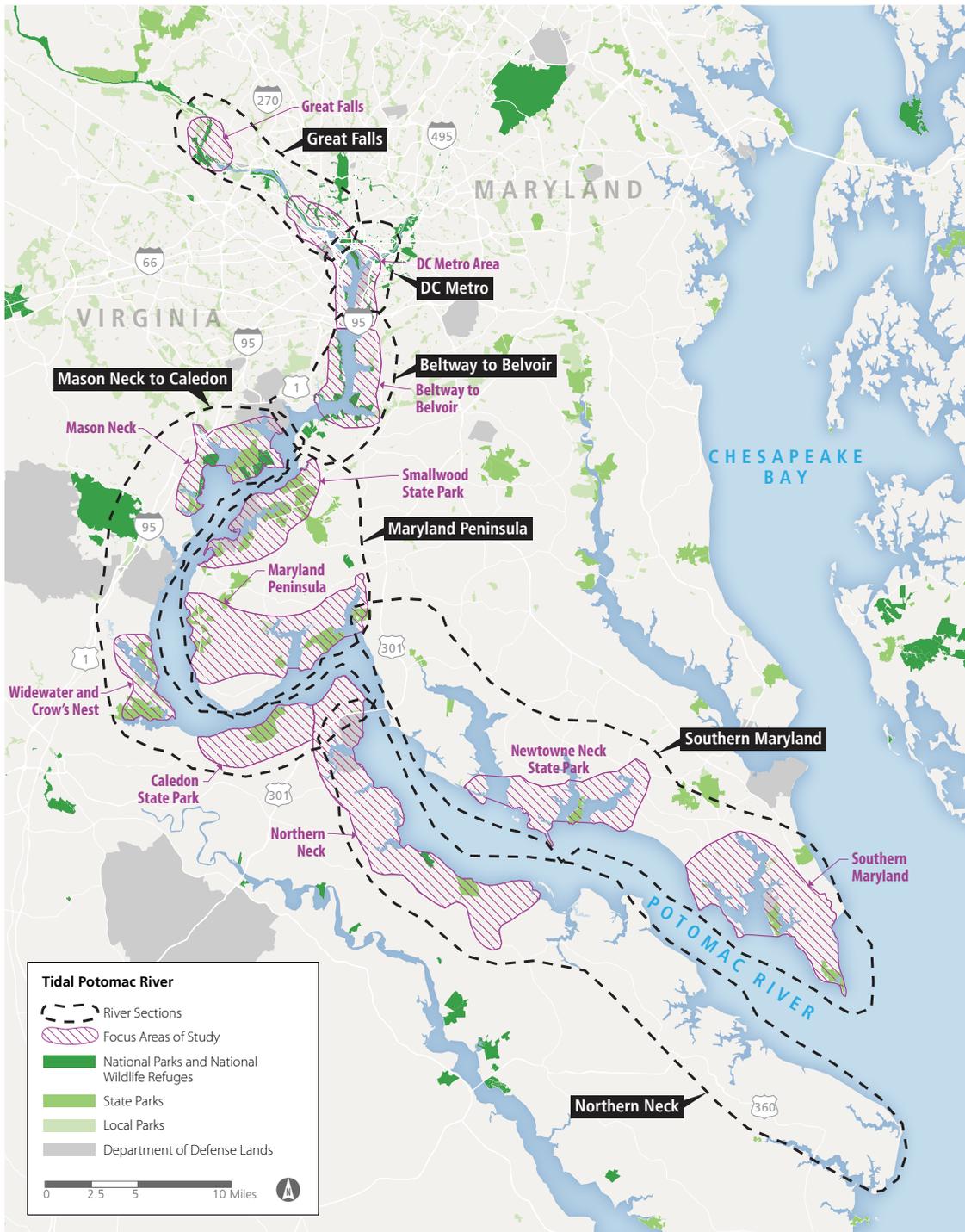
"We look for people to stand up, show up and speak up to local decision makers about the importance of clean water to the community; the importance of green spaces that contribute so much to the quality of life in the region."

-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.



Top: Riverbend Regional Park (photo credit: NPS archive)

Chapter 1

Foundation for Trail Development

Supporting Legislation and Plans	7
Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.....	8
Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail	9
Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail	10
Recreational Opportunities and Visitor Experiences	11



**National Historic and National Scenic Trails
within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed**

- Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail
- Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail
- Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail and Scenic Byway

Chapter 1

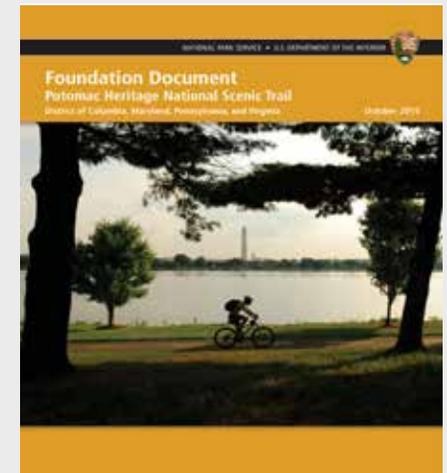
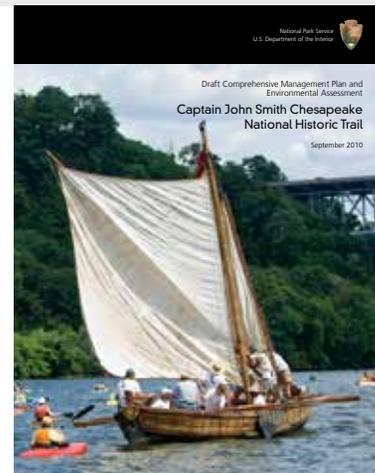
Foundation for Trail Development

Executive Order 13508

In May 2009, President Obama issued Executive Order 13508 on Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration. In the Executive Order, President Obama declared the Chesapeake Bay a “national treasure” and ushered in a new era of federal leadership, action and accountability. The purpose of the Executive Order is “to protect and restore the health, heritage, natural resources, and social and economic value of the nation’s largest estuarine ecosystem and the natural sustainability of its watershed.” The Executive Order contains goals to create new public access to the waters of the Chesapeake and to conserve landscapes to maintain water quality, habitat, sustainable working forests, farms, maritime communities and cultural, community and indigenous values. Specifically, a commitment was made to add 300 new public access sites and protect an additional 2 million additional acres of lands identified as high conservation priorities at the federal, state or local level by 2025 including 695,000 acres of forest land of highest value for maintaining water quality.

The development potential of these trails is fundamentally affected by 1) the specific objectives defined for the individual trails in their enabling legislation and comprehensive management plans, and 2) the resources and existing conditions upon which development objectives and trail enhancements are predicated.

While there are some federally owned properties along the trail routes, the majority of the public lands along the trails are owned by state park or local government agencies in Virginia and Maryland. Coordination with these agencies' management, development and conservation strategies to identify partnership opportunities for mutually beneficial projects is critical to the goal of promoting the national trails along the Potomac River.



Supporting Legislation and Plans

The National Trails System Act

The National Trails System Act of 1968 (the Act) [82 Stat. 919, Public Law 90-543], as amended, creates a national system of trails to provide for the outdoor recreational needs of an expanding population and to promote the preservation of and access to the outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation. The Act declares that trails should be established primarily near the urban areas of the Nation and secondarily within scenic areas and along historic travel routes. The purpose of the Act is to provide the means for attaining these objectives by instituting a national system of recreation, scenic and historic trails, and by prescribing the methods and standards by which additional components may be added to the system.

Supporting Planning Documents

Comprehensive Management Plans (CMPs) for both the *Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail* (CAJO) and the *Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail* (STSP) provide the guidance needed by the National Park Service (NPS) and partners to achieve the legislative mandates and visions for the trails (and the Star-Spangled Scenic Byway). The Foundation Document: *Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail*, complemented by local and regional plans and by statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plans, provides guidance for NPS staff, trail segment management partners and volunteers in development and management of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Interpretive plans have been completed for all three national trails.



Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail (CAJO) commemorates the explorations of Captain John Smith on

the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries from 1607 to 1609, tracing approximately 3,000 miles of his voyage routes. Established in 2006, it is the first water-based national historic trail. The promise of the trail is to help millions of people in the region and elsewhere experience, envision, come to understand and care to protect present-day resources that are reminiscent of what explorers and native inhabitants of the region may have experienced over 400 years ago. The trail is significant as: Smith's explorations of the Chesapeake Bay region, and his subsequent writings and maps, encouraged English settlement of Virginia, the Bay area and the eastern seaboard; the Chesapeake Bay region of 1608 was home to complex societies of thousands of native people; and the Bay's rich natural resources helped attract English settlement.

Purposes of the trail are to:

- Commemorate the exploratory voyages of Captain John Smith on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in 1607-1609;
- Share knowledge about the American Indian societies and cultures of the seventeenth century;
- Interpret the (historic and contemporary) natural history of the Bay; and
- Provide recreational land and water experiences on the trail.



"...Heaven and earth have never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation, were it fully manured and inhabited by industrious people. Here are mountains, hills, plaines, valleyes, rivers, and brookes, all running into a faire Bay, compassed but for the mouth, with fruitful and delightsome land. "

-Captain John Smith, Excerpt from publication referencing his maps and observations while exploring the Chesapeake Bay, 1607-1609

Key interpretive themes:

- Captain John Smith's voyages on the Chesapeake, and his subsequent maps and writings, profoundly impacted world politics and the evolution of our nation by spurring European settlement of the Bay region and the eastern seaboard, influencing colonial affairs for more than a century, disrupting the native peoples' lifeways in the mid-Atlantic, and increasing human influences on the Bay environment.
- Substantial and sophisticated societies of native peoples existed in the Chesapeake region centuries before Smith arrived and although their communities were disrupted and some were ultimately displaced by European colonization, many descendant tribes sustain their identities and cultural values in the region today.
- During the 17th century, Captain John Smith encountered a verdant and varied ecosystem in the Chesapeake Bay region and though much has changed during the intervening centuries, there are still places where such beauty and diversity endure, and efforts are underway to conserve and restore aspects of the Bay's integrity.

Left: Map of Virginia and Chesapeake Bay inspired by explorations of Captain John Smith in the early 1600s



Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail

The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail (STSP) was established in 2008 to commemorate the people, places and events that led to the birth of the

National Anthem during the War of 1812. The trail, coupled with the Maryland- Designated Star-Spangled Banner Scenic Byway, traverses approximately 560 miles of land and water routes in Virginia, the District of Columbia and Maryland along which British forces and American defenders travelled and fought. It traces the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac, Patuxent and Patapsco rivers, along with land routes stretching from Solomons to North Point. The trail commemorates an historic travel route of significance to the entire Nation; is recognized for its potential to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of America's expanding population; and its land and water routes offer outstanding recreational opportunities along the historic roads and scenic waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

Purposes of the trail are to:

- Protect the sites, landscapes and routes significant to understanding the people, events and ideals associated with the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake region and the story of the Star-Spangled Banner;
- Provide educational and interpretive opportunities related to the War of 1812 and its relevance to modern society; and
- Foster improved opportunities for land- and water-based recreation and heritage tourism.

Key interpretive themes:

- Almost thirty years after gaining independence, Americans resisted a land and water invasion by Great Britain
- Military events in the Chesapeake Bay region became central to the outcomes of a broader three-year struggle that established a foundation for the United States' economic independence and military strength.
- During the War of 1812, individuals in the Chesapeake Bay region endured great political, economic and emotional upheaval and faced personal choices that profoundly impacted domestic life, influenced the evolution of U.S. government and commerce and had ramifications far beyond the battlefield.



- In the early 1800s, the Chesapeake Bay region – due to its central location on the eastern seaboard, network of navigable waterways, robust natural resources and fertile agricultural lands – served as a hub for trade, industry and government, making it a prime target for the British.
- The United States flag and “The Star-Spangled Banner” anthem – symbolizing the resilience of the new nation and the American character – inspired a renewed sense of nationalism in U.S. citizens after the War of 1812. These endure today as potent international icons of the United States of America.



Top: Cannons and Flag at Fort McHenry (photo credit: NPS archive)



Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (POHE) is a developing network of trails between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Allegheny Highlands in western

Pennsylvania. Authorized in 1983, POHE was also recognized administratively in 1985 as a “unit” of the National Park System. At present, the POHE network includes approximately 710 miles of existing and planned trails and routes, recognized through “memoranda of understanding” between the NPS and various POHE segment management partners in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia. As articulated in the Foundation Document:

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail designation provides a means to establish an inter-connected trail network between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Allegheny Highlands and offers—through partnerships with and among agencies and citizen groups—exceptional hiking and other non-motorized recreational and educational experiences rich with geographic, ecological, historical, and social diversity. With the Potomac River as the namesake and a primary resource, the POHE corridor and evolving network are significant in a national context.

Purposes of the trail are to:

- Provide coordination among citizen groups; local, regional and state agencies; and federal land managers in the development and management of a braided network of trails for hiking and other non-motorized forms of travel within a corridor between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Laurel Highlands of western Pennsylvania;
- Serve as a national meeting ground of ideas and practices, reflecting a desire for the conservation of lands and waters, for educational opportunities combined with outdoor recreation, and for a celebration of regional diversity and distinctiveness;
- Increase environmental awareness for cleaner rivers and streams in the trail corridor; and
- Provide technical assistance and financial support to citizen groups; local, regional and state agencies; and federal land managers in support of the above.



Key Interpretive Themes:

- Between the Chesapeake Bay and the Allegheny Highlands, the trail corridor includes portions of five distinct physiographic regions. Each region, in different ways, has inspired and shaped hundreds of human generations with beauty, abundance and utility.
- The corridor designated for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail expresses George Washington’s vision of a “great avenue into the Western Country.” The first president’s association with the Potomac River strengthened his life-long goal of “the practicability of an easy and short communication between the Waters of the Ohio and Potomac.”
- The great national conflict of the Civil War is reflected in microcosm within the trail corridor, with the Potomac River often acting as a boundary between North and South.
- The Potomac River is recognized nationally as a model of successful restoration and serves as an ongoing challenge for sustained ecological health.



- As a boundary between north and south and an east to west route into the North American interior, the Potomac River has been a crossroads of opportunity, diversity and conflict.
- Routes connecting the Potomac River with the Forks of the Ohio provided an essential context for the development of the United States Republic.

Top: Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail marker on fence post (photo credit: Donald E. Briggs)



“Recreational opportunities are premised on reasonable water quality.”

-Don Owen, Potomac River Watershed Circuit Rider, Land Trust Alliance

Top Left: The Cherry Blossom of the Potomac Riverboat Company fleet (photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

Bottom Left: Canoe trailer (photo credit: Sultana Education Foundation Instagram feed)

Top Right: Mount Vernon Trail along the Potomac River (photo credit: NPS archive)

Recreational Opportunities and Visitor Experiences

The Potomac River offers a broad spectrum of visitor opportunities. As the fourth largest river on the Atlantic Coast, the river can vary from Class V rapids to a stream-like route, and from a bustling urban waterway to wide open “big water.” Users can find remote areas with hidden rivers and creeks, as well as busy port towns with ample amenities.

Visitors travel to historic sites, parks and wildlife refuges to reconnect with the outdoors and their heritage. These places and the recreational opportunities they provide are a significant source of the rich quality of life in the Chesapeake region. The existing and developing trails within the Potomac River corridor encompass diverse land and water routes, and connect with an array of public recreation and historic sites. The routes vary from the 18-mile

Mount Vernon Trail, to hiking trails within Douglas Point State Resource Management Area and the Northern Neck Heritage Trail Bicycling Route, to the 40-mile Occoquan Water Trail and the Point Lookout Water Trail. Driving routes include the George Washington Memorial Parkway and numerous scenic byways. Sites range from the popular Great Falls Park, with an annual visitation of nearly 500,000 visitors, to the remote Friendship Farm Park in southern Maryland.

Recreational and educational experiences offer a forum for visitors to explore the major interpretive themes of each trail. Through the use of recreational facilities and interpretive media and programming, residents and visitors can understand and appreciate Smith’s 17th century explorations on the Bay, American Indian cultures past and present, the ramifications of the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake region, and the lasting legacies of America’s colonial period.



“For over 20 years, Atlantic Kayak has been leading paddling tours to significant sites along the Potomac, which pre-dates two of the three national trails represented in this area. Experiences include paddling the bird-rich region of Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve near Alexandria; getting a water-based history tour of Georgetown; and visiting the tribal grounds of the Piscataway Indian Nation along Piscataway Creek. Strengthening the connections to trail resources on these tours with NPS interpretive stories would add to the experience.”

-Judy Lathrop, Owner, Atlantic Kayak Company

Important visitor-related resources include:

- Developed water trails throughout the Bay region
- Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System
- Existing public access sites, including those providing boat launches, beaches, swimming, fishing, camping and wildlife viewing
- Hiking trails and bicycling routes
- Scenic byways and auto tour routes
- Heritage tourism historical and cultural sites
- Federal, state and local parks/protected areas
- Visitor centers and contact stations
- Visitor support services including lodging, food service, rental equipment, etc.

Between Great Falls and Point Lookout, the Potomac River, its tributaries and the sites along their shores offer a wide variety of educational and recreational trail-related visitor experiences. There are a multitude of visitor support facilities, particularly between Great Falls and Mason Neck. The D.C. metropolitan area abounds with visitor attractions and associated amenities. Southern Maryland and Virginia’s Northern Neck boast myriad historic sites and quaint waterfront communities. Interpretive and educational opportunities are available at key sites throughout the Potomac corridor, including the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, the City of Alexandria, National Harbor, Mount Vernon, Piscataway Park and Westmoreland State Park. The three trail designations can serve to support existing and new partnerships necessary to enhance the robust menu of visitor opportunities and connect key sites along the Potomac River.

Top: Paddling along the Occoquan River (photo credit: Chris Spielman)