The Chesapeake Bay Watershed

A watershed is all of the land whose water and rainfall will eventually drain into a particular river, lake, bay, or other body of water.

The Chesapeake Bay watershed is 64,000 square miles and has 11,600 miles of tidal shoreline, including tidal wetlands and islands. The watershed encompasses parts of six states: Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as Washington D.C. Approximately 17 million people live in the watershed; about 10 million people live along its shores or near them.

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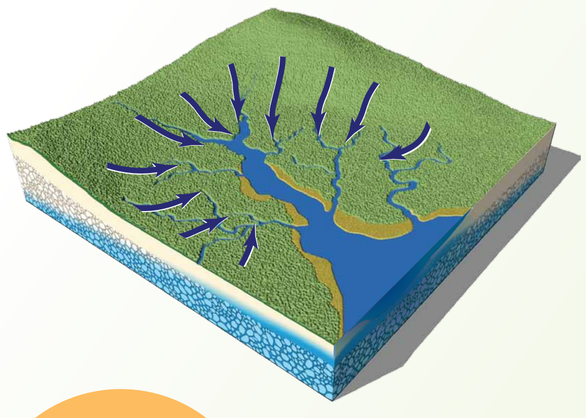
Natural History

Formed about 12,000 years ago as glaciers melted and flooded the Susquehanna River valley, the Chesapeake Bay is North America's largest estuary and the world's third largest. An estuary is a semi-enclosed area where freshwater from rivers and streams mixes with saltwater from the ocean to form brackish water. Fifty major tributaries pour water into the Chesapeake every day. The Susquehanna River alone drains 42 percent of the Bay watershed. There are more than 100,000 miles of streams, creeks, and rivers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Even though we all don't live along the shores of the Bay, virtually everyone in the watershed lives within a 15 minute walk to a stream or river that flows into it.

This watershed model shows how water moves downhill through streams, rivers, and the ground toward the bay.



Fragile Habitat

The Chesapeake Bay is shallow. Nearly 200 miles long and 20 miles wide, the Bay only averages 21 feet deep. As a result there are large shallow areas where sunlight can penetrate to the bottom creating ideal places for underwater grasses to grow. Underwater grasses make excellent spawning and nursery grounds for many Bay animals. The Bay supports 3,600 species of plant and animal life, including more than 300 fish species and 2,700 plant types.

Unfortunately, being so shallow also means the Chesapeake Bay holds a relatively small volume of water, limiting its ability to dilute pollutants. The main sources of these pollutants include sewage, runoff from urban and suburban areas, commercial agriculture, and air pollution from automobiles, factories, and power plants. What we do on the land affects water quality for all communities living downstream.

CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
Saving a National Treasure