

Report Finds Chesapeake Forests Disappearing by 100 Acres Daily

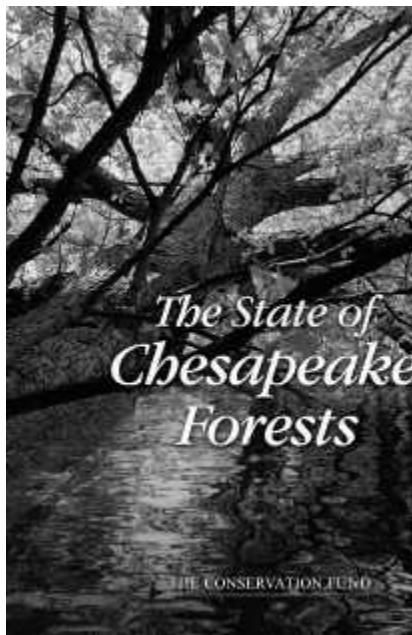
Eric S. Sprague

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest and was once the most productive estuary in the United States. It has an intricate shoreline that snakes over 5,000 miles in length—more than the shoreline of the entire Pacific coast of the United States. Its watershed is 16 times more expansive (64,000 square miles) giving the estuary the largest land to water volume ratio of any water body on Earth.

The health of this national treasure has been declining for decades. As water flows through the expansive watershed, sediment, nutrients, chemicals, and other substances wash off the surrounding land into streams, and eventually find their way to the Bay. Due to its broad and shallow nature, pollutants easily settle in the estuary and stay for long periods. The build up of these pollutants—especially nitrogen—from development, agriculture, and many other activities on land have dramatically affected water quality. The good news is that actions taken to protect and improve the land and its forests, no matter where they occur, have a cumulative ability to restore the Bay.

Chesapeake forests are crucial to maintaining the water quality of the Bay and its tributaries. Forests act as ‘sponges’ by capturing rainfall, reducing runoff, maintaining the flow of

streams, filtering nutrients and sediment, and stabilizing soils. Riparian forests that buffer streams significantly reduce the amount of excess nutrients that enter the water, sometimes by as much as 30 to 90 percent. Mature trees also provide root systems that hold soils in place, helping to stabilize streambanks and reduce erosion.



Chesapeake forests also safeguard wildlife habitat, contribute billions of dollars annually to local economies, protect public health, provide recreation opportunities, and enhance the quality of life for the watershed's 15 million residents (the Bay watershed stretches across New York, Pennsylva-

nia, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.)

Despite these benefits, forests in the Chesapeake Bay watershed are at risk. Since the mid-1980s, the Bay watershed has experienced a net loss of forestland at the rate of 100 acres each day. Chesapeake forests also lack regionally coordinated forestland conservation, restoration, and stewardship plans, making them more vulnerable to fragmentation, haphazard development, and invasive species, as well as less likely to be well managed.

To better understand and address these challenges, The Conservation Fund and the USDA Forest Service partnered to assess and report on the state of Chesapeake forests. This first-of-its-kind report synthesizes more than a decade's worth of data from public and private sources, highlights current forest conditions, forecasts future trends, and outlines key goals and strategies necessary to conserve and restore the forests of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The State of Chesapeake Forests can be found at <http://www.chesapeakebay.net/stateoftheforests.htm>.

Eric Sprague is a research associate of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation in Washington, DC. esprague@pinchot.org

