Hope for Our Southern Inland Bay: Little Assawoman

By Josh Thompson
Watershed Coordinator

An aerial view of the Little Assawoman Bay.

An almost tangible serenity envelops the little bay as spring rain falls and the soft lapping of water on the mud bank is the only sound. The lights of Fenwick Island, a few miles to the east, cast a dim glow in the eastern sky. It is the time of the Vernal Equinox, the beginning of spring, but the ocean temperature is still in the 40's and chills the winds off bay and sea.

A pair of black ducks pass overhead, then seconds later, reappear and dance and sideslip down through the thermals and, finally, wings cupped and red feet stretched toward the black waters below, touch down to roost in the shelter of this cove.

Behind me, the last light of day melts below the tree line on the western horizon and the light fades on the dark water of the Little Assawoman Bay. This quiet shore feels a long way from the wild parties and celebration of the coming summer season. *It is the season of re-birth , and perhaps a chance turn the tide on the health of this precious estuary.*

Since man set roots in the rich lands surrounding this bay and her tributaries, he has harvested, drained, and built over the wetlands, bottomland, and upland forests that once fed and filtered the water of this fragile system. For many years, with little understanding of the destruction and harm these actions caused.

As forested and grassed lands are cleared for development and agricultural use, we impair the bay's immune system; the ability of the land to filter and cleanse the water before it reaches the tributaries, or arteries of the bay itself.

The tremendous growth in population and the development and infrastructure to support it, has pumped an increasing amount of pollutants into the crippled watershed. Unable to filter these new pollutants, the waters of the Little Assawoman have rapidly declined in quality, no longer the pristine estuary that once nurtured a myriad of wildlife and juvenile fish.

Ignored and sometimes forgotten, the Bay now desperately struggles to maintain ecological balance. Too often, the problems have been ignored, or various factions living and working and farming on the watershed have each blamed the other for the losses. In fact, we have all played a role in this tragedy.

Standing in the dusk of this early spring evening, I am imagining a dim light through the darkness of this story. Several organizations have begun to take an active interest in the health of the Little Assawoman. We now have scientific understanding of the factors that have degraded this rare natural resource. Our injuries to the watershed no longer can be attributed to lack of knowledge, but of lack of will to act decisively on the information that we know.

We know the capacity of this bay to absorb the pollution of our habitation here. We recently took a huge step forward with the completion and adoption of the TMDL, or Total Maximum Daily Load, for the LAB, which set maximum loads for both nitrogen and phosphorus entering the Bay.

Building upon this good work, a dedicated team at DNREC has released the Inland Bays Pollution Control Strategies, which were presented at public hearings in January. These strategies address sources of pollution, both urban and agricultural, that must be improved upon in order to meet the TMDL and restore the health of the bays. Once passed, some of these strategies can be enforced and will ensure the use of the best practices available to combat pollution in the watershed. On another front, the Center for the Inland Bays has dedicated a significant portion of its resources towards the protection of the "forgotten bay". After teaming with and working closely with Delaware's major poultry integrators and conducting an extensive survey of the poultry producers in the watershed, the publication of a comprehensive watershed plan is not far around the corner.

The plan challenges every user of the watershed, from the major developer eating up open space, to the poultry producer who may need to do a better job of composting birds, to the homeowner dumping fertilizer on his lawn at rates ten times higher than allowed on agricultural fields.

While this document will not pull punches, it does attempt to set fair, achievable goals, and utilizes both proven practices and innovative, new techniques and technologies to address a complex problem. The plan is currently in the final stages of being formatted and will be under review within the next few weeks.

The development of land to accommodate growth is, perhaps, inevitable, as modern agriculture is necessary to feed this burgeoning population. Nevertheless, this does not excuse blindly condoning sprawl across precious remaining habitat, or the general ignorance of the average watershed user.

In many instances, individuals have voluntarily taken steps to educate themselves and implement sound practices for the sake of the environment. Too often, greed outweighs what is right.

Despite past failures, this time of year reveals the power of nature to endure, and holds hope for a restored Little Assawoman Bay with sparkling, pristine waters, teeming with life.

Here's What You Can Do to Help

- If you live in a development, educate yourself and your neighbors about your stormwater facility, and check periodically to ensure it is being properly maintained and functioning to its full potential.
- Call the CIB and learn what programs you can become involved with to improve the water that leaves your property, such as rain gardens and the Backyard Habitat Program.
- Take soil tests from your yard prior to applying any fertilizer, and then apply recommended rates accordingly. Be sure to apply lime to keep pH at optimal levels.
- Encourage your Homeowners Association to plant vegetation along all waterways and ponds, and ask them not to mow these areas.
- Collect your pet wastes and dispose of them properly.
- Educate your neighbors on the problems surrounding our bays.

Everyone must pitch in to improve the water.

A Gray Seal on a dune in Fenwick Island.

Baby Gray Seal Beached in Fenwick Island

By E.J. Chalabala
Wildlife Manager

In March, a baby Gray Seal made it's way out of the ocean and onto the dunes on Fenwick Island beach, one of a number of gray seals that have found themselves stranded on the Delaware coast recently. It's not only seals that get stranded on our beaches, but sea turtles, dolphins, porpoises, whales, and the occasional West Indian Manatee as well.

Why do these animals strand? There are a number of different reasons. They might have become ill due to natural causes or man-made, such as ingesting marine debris. Some are injured, entangled in fishing gear or six-pack rings or struck by a boat, others suffer from toxins in the marine environment. This gray seal had a laceration on it's upper back; the cause of the injury unknown. It found it's way back into the ocean the next day.

If you see a stranded marine mammal or sea turtle on Delaware beaches stay a safe distance away so you won't further stress the animal, and for your own personal safety. Call the MERR hotline at 302-228-5029.

The Marine Education, Research & Rehabilitation Institute, Inc. (MERR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of marine mammals and sea turtles. MERR will get a volunteer to the scene to evaluate the condition of the animal. If it requires further evaluation, the volunteer will act as a caretaker for the animal, protecting it from interference until a MERR employee arrives. If the animal appears to need medical attention, it is transported to the MERR lab. For more information, go to the website merrinstitute.org.

What you can do to help

- Report stranded animals to MERR immediately.

Pick up trash on beaches and around the Bays that may injure animals

- Dispose of fishing line that can tangle around animals and birds or be ingested.
- Observe speed limits in the Bays; animals are particularly vulnerable in shallow waters.
- Practice clean boating.

Beaver

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through surface and groundwater. The extended time that water remains in the organically rich environment of beaver ponds assists in the permanent removal of this nutrient through a microbially controlled process called de-nutrification.

Creating "Cradles of Life"

If beaver populations increase, improved water quality would not be the only benefit. Beavers are creators of wetlands, one of the most important habitats for the health of the Inland Bays, and for the diversity of living things that live in the wet areas. Sometimes called "cradles of life," wetlands are our most diverse ecosystems, home of countless species of plants and animals.

On the recreation and economic side, these habitats offer trapping and hunting opportunities by providing idea habitat for wood ducks and other game species.

Economic Damage Concerns

Concerns about beaver activity causing economic damage through flooding can be mitigated with an active management program including the use of devices such as the Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler to manage water depth in beaver ponds.

With enlightened management, the American Beaver can be our natural partners in our effort to restore habitat and water quality in the Inland Bays, mending a hole in our riparian ecosystem.