



Chesapeake Bay restoration scrutinized for lack of diversity

State, federal leaders may endorse new initiative in August

By Jeremy Cox

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam has made environmental justice a cornerstone of his administration. He revived his predecessor's Council on Environmental Justice in January 2019 and signed a bill last March establishing it as a permanent body of the executive branch.

But under Northam's watch, state regulators approved a permit for a pair of powerful energy companies to build an air-polluting compressor station in a community founded by people freed from slavery. A federal appeals court overturned the permit in January, citing the state's failure to adhere to its own law, which requires officials to weigh whether a project disproportionately impacts minority communities.

For activists on the front lines of environmental justice, the episode is symptomatic of the racism embedded within the historically white-dominated environmental movement. The dissonance within the Northam administration showed that well-meaning words often don't lead to action, critics say.

"It feels like it's a lot of hot air," said Mary Finley-Brook, a professor of geography and environment at the University of Richmond who was a member of an earlier version of the governor-appointed council.

Across the Chesapeake Bay watershed — and environmentalism writ large — the nationwide protests sparked by a white police officer's killing of a George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis have increased scrutiny of the color problem plaguing the green movement.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately sickened Black and Hispanic populations, adding fuel to the drive for change, activists say.

Mainstream environmental groups historically have been dominated by white people who, often in the pursuit of so-called "universal" objectives such as saving bald eagles and ending acid rain, largely ignored issues important to people of color. Bereft of widescale advocacy and often battling racist land use practices that put them at a disadvantage, minority communities repeatedly lost battles against new landfills, industrial plants and other polluters.

In the days after Floyd's death, many Chesapeake area groups dispatched press releases or posted social media messages declaring solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement — more than 40, according to one count. Many vowed to launch or redouble efforts to right past wrongs, such as increasing the diversity among their boards and employees.

The multi-state and federal partnership leading the cleanup of America's largest estuary was already undergoing its own racial reckoning. The Chesapeake Bay Program hired Virginia-based Skeo Solutions to study the regional partnership and develop a "diversity, equity, inclusion and justice" strategy in 2018. The 61-page draft report was published in April.

Program officials are drafting a two-page statement that the Chesapeake Executive Council may sign in August to reaffirm their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and justice in all areas of the Chesapeake Bay Program. The council includes the governors of the watershed's six states; the mayor of the District of Columbia; the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and the Chesapeake Bay Commission, a body of state legislators from across the region.

"Jurisdictions are rallying behind this very timely and important statement to take action," said Ben Grumbles, head of the Maryland Department of the Environment and chair of the Bay Program's Principals' Staff Committee.

The statement won't carry the weight of a law or regulation. It's voluntary and, according to the proposed language, "subject to the availability of appropriated funds." But Grumbles said it will represent a "very strong and clear commitment with numbers and guideposts and milestones."

The initiative is drawing mixed reviews from Black environmentalists. It is badly needed, they say, and long overdue. They're also skeptical as to whether the states and agencies back up their words with thoughtful, sustainable actions.

For the Bay Program and other predominately white environmental organizations in the watershed, "it's all about building a relationship authentically," said Mariah Davis, policy and campaigns managers for the Choose Clean Water Coalition. She also heads its equity workgroup. "The trust has to be there."

"All these organizations are signing these [diversity] commitments. The governors are going to sign this [Bay Program] commitment," said Chanté Coleman, vice president of equity and justice with the National Wildlife Federation. "We need to see action. It has to be more than just virtue-signaling."

A history of exclusion

People of color have led and participated in environmental battles for decades, said Whitney Tome, executive director of Green 2.0, which pushes for diversity in green groups. But from John Muir to Al Gore, the conventional narrative about environmentalism has largely been framed around white action.

"They were led by middle- to upper-class whites who had the money and time to get involved in the regulatory system," Tome said. But "the environmental justice movement and people of color were looking to protect places near their homes because they were often harmed by environmental degradation and pollution. Where was the landfill placed? These were often placed near where people of color lived."

Calls for environmental justice first rang out in the 1960s and '70s, seeking equitable treatment and meaningful participation for all people in

Photo: Reggie Parrish of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency speaks during a meeting of the Chesapeake Bay Program Diversity Workgroup in 2016. (Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program)



Patuxent Riverkeeper Fred Tutman attends a rally in Annapolis, in 2010. (Matt Rath/Chesapeake Bay Program)

the creation and enforcement of environmental policies.

Fred Tutman, a longtime Maryland environmental activist who is Black, said that for people of color, environmental and social issues often overlap. An all-too-common example: neighborhoods with high cancer rates because of toxic contamination. But predominately white environmental groups rebuff his pleas to intervene because, they say, doing so would go beyond their mission statement.

“They’re one-note organizations,” said Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper and currently the nation’s only Black riverkeeper. “My sense is they don’t do much in the Black communities unless there’s a grant in it for them.”

Missing diversity

The Chesapeake Bay watershed’s environmental workforce historically has been composed of mostly of white people.

The watershed drains a 64,000-square-mile swath of land stretching from Cooperstown, NY, to Virginia Beach, VA. People of color represent 35% of the region. But they accounted for just 14% of the people who work for or with the Bay Program during the first programwide demographic survey in 2016. Among the program’s leaders, people of color were more scarce — just 9%.

By 2019, those percentages had risen only about 1% apiece. Skeo’s report recommends increasing diversity to 25% for all staff and to 15% among leadership. About half of the 750 people associated with the Bay Program responded to the surveys; the questionnaires didn’t go out to the full workforce of the environmental agencies in each of the participating states.

Similar trends permeate the nonprofit

sector. A 2019 survey of staff representing more than 100 environmental groups in the Bay watershed found that less than 20% of respondents believed their boards and senior managers reflected the region’s diversity. Only about a quarter thought their organization had proper diversity training.

Lack of diversity is a problem for environmental organizations across the country, big and small. A 2014 study prepared on behalf of Green 2.0 found that 16% of environmental group boards and staff were minorities. Only 12% were in leadership positions.

The Annapolis-based Chesapeake Bay Foundation is the largest group advocating to clean up the Bay. But its president, William C. Baker, acknowledges that the organization remains underrepresentative of the population it serves. People of color make up just less than 10% of its staff, he said.

“It’s a failure of our organizations to be deliberate” about whom to hire and promote, Baker said. The group now steers recruiters toward historically Black colleges and universities, he added. The foundation has made strides on its board, raising its minority membership to 24%.

The Chesapeake Conservancy has increased board diversity to a similar level. Its staff of 35 includes members of the Asian American, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, Middle Eastern, Native American and other communities working at all levels of the organization, including the executive vice president of programs. President and CEO Joel Dunn said diversity is a priority. “The health of the organization is at stake, because leaders of the future will not look the same as leaders of today.”

‘Smoke and mirror games’

If the Chesapeake Executive Council endorses the proposed strategy in August, it will apply only to the state and federal partners in the Bay Program. But nonprofit environmental leaders across the region say its adoption would stoke their own efforts.

“They’re a North Star for all of us,” said Kate Fritz, executive director of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. “This is a great step for the movement in general.”

Structural barriers, however, often impede access to environmental jobs, Finley-Brook said. Younger people of color, for instance, usually can’t afford to accept unpaid internships the way many of their white counterparts can, so they struggle to get a foot in the door.

The few who manage to get hired, she added, tend to grow disillusioned and quit. Starting positions are usually part-time or temporary.

With few co-workers who look like them, people of color in the environmental field say they can feel distanced from their white

colleagues. Sometimes, that’s reinforced by micro-aggressions or what one Black environmental professional calls “sophisticated racism.”

“I don’t think there is a lot of awareness and sensitivity among many white environmental groups,” said Zora Lathan, a former National Audubon Society employee and founder of the Chesapeake Ecology Center in Anne Arundel County, MD.

Lathan said she grew tired of having white environmentalists speak to her as if she were a novice. On the other hand, she has received many invitations from white groups to participate in events or on boards. When she’s the only person of color who shows up, she notices.

“There are a lot of smoke-and-mirror games going on with white groups,” Lathan said. “I’ve even had it where people want to take pictures and put me on the brochure, and that’s it. It’s to show we’re working with people of color, but it’s only telling people of color what to do.”

Funding favors white communities?

Chesapeake environmental efforts lack outreach to people of color, research suggests.

A 2017 analysis of 40 Virginia environmental groups’ websites, for instance, found it is “exceptionally unlikely” for their mission statements to mention environmental justice. Any remarks on the concept in newsletters or issue papers were “sporadic” and rarely represented a broad commitment, the College of William and Mary study showed.

Few studies in the Bay watershed have examined environmental work in a racial context. But one study cited by the Bay Program’s diversity committee found that projects in part of the Bay watershed favor white communities.

The analysis looked, in part, at where new nontidal wetlands had been created in Maryland. Of the 75 state-sponsored wetlands projects that were performed, only three were in census tracts in which people of color were a majority. More often, they represented about 16% of the population. That’s well below the their 40% statewide population, according to the 2014 study, which was a collaboration among two University of Maryland researchers, Tutman and a fourth author.

The study also investigated how the state spent federal Clean Water Act funding to address polluted runoff. From 1999–2012, Maryland doled out \$28 million under the program. Only two watersheds where the number of people of color is greater than the statewide average ranked among the top 10 funding recipients: the Anacostia and Back River watersheds.

To close the funding inequity, the authors recommended that state and federal officials



Zora Lathan, founder of the Chesapeake Ecology Center in Anne Arundel County, MD, said that race was a continual dynamic throughout her career in the environmental field. (Dave Harp/2014)

clear hurdles for urban stormwater retrofits to get more financial support. Locally, such a change would benefit areas with a more diverse population, including the Patuxent River region, Anacostia watershed and Baltimore, they argued.

Tutman and fellow researchers said the Chesapeake Bay Program’s emphasis on curtailing nutrient and sediment pollution has come at the expense of addressing urban problems such as trash, microplastics and toxic contamination.

Treating urban areas as “sacrifice zones,” Tutman said, is partly a product of the lack of diversity among the watershed’s governmental and nonprofit leadership.

“These movements need us,” he said. “They need our singing and dancing and our energy. Who ever thought white people could save the Chesapeake Bay all by themselves, and we [people of color] will all stand by and applaud? We’re a part of this.”

Report details shortcomings

The Chesapeake Bay restoration was formally launched in 1983. But it wasn’t until 2014 that the federal government and participating jurisdictions added a “diversity outcome” strategy. To ensure the effort’s success, it said, the partnership would have to do a better job of engaging people of color, said Rachel Felver, spokeswoman for the Bay Program.

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The partnership hired a consultant and designated a team to identify the next steps.

Over the past six years, “the Chesapeake Bay Program has been working together to understand the situation, learn from history, listen to experts and know what has informed the shortfalls,” Felver said.

Among the problems they uncovered:

- A lack of diversity in leadership roles at all levels
- Too few programs targeted to youth in underserved communities
- Not enough employment opportunities and professional development targeted toward people of color
- Inadequate communication and outreach
- Not enough effort to address environmental justice issues

The proposed diversity statement urges the states and federal government to, among other things, hire a more-diverse staff, account for environmental justice in grant-making decisions and develop long-term relationships with organizations predominately serving people of color.

Signs of progress

Some environmental justice advocates see signs of hope that the Bay Program’s adoption of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice goals could bear long-awaited results. And

some momentum is already visible in the nonprofit sector. The Chesapeake Bay Trust, best known for running Maryland’s Bay plate program, had no minority staff a little more than a decade ago. Today, it’s 45%. Over the same period, it has increased the diversity among its volunteers from 10% to 49%.

Executive Director Jana Davis credits the organization’s creation of a diversity committee in the early 2000s. The key was accountability, she said. In 2008, at the committee’s behest, the Trust began tracking and publicly reporting its diversity data.

Last year, the nonprofit partnered with the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network and the Choose Clean Water Coalition to author an environmental justice guide for watershed groups. “A lot of people in our community care about these issues, but they’re not doing a lot to make change,” said Kacey Wetzel, the Trust’s outreach director.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation now has an attorney, Taylor Lilley, focused solely on environmental justice.

The state of Maryland’s establishment in 2010 of the Chesapeake Conservation Corps, a training program for environmental workers ages 18–25, has emphasized recruiting a diverse workforce of young adults who launch careers with regional nonprofits and government agencies.

In 2014, the Maryland League of Conservation Voters created an environmental

program targeting the Latinx community. Chispa, meaning “spark” in Spanish, can trace its accomplishments to the way it frames its environmental initiatives, said Ramon Palencia-Calvo, the director.

For instance, instead of flatly imploring Hispanic subsistence fishermen not to eat fish caught in the contaminated Anacostia River, Chispa recommends ways they can consume it as safely as possible.

“I think that is a key to our success, to meet them where they are, rather than them come to us,” Palencia-Calvo said.

Black environmentalists say the past few weeks and months — trapped indoors by COVID-19 quarantine, outraged by repeated acts of police violence — have taken a toll on their mental health. It’s time, they say, for white people to stand up and join the pursuit for environmental justice.

“People of color who are doing this work are tired or exhausted,” said Mariah Davis of the Choose Clean Water Coalition. “We were already tapped because this is such a huge need in our community. But now given COVID-19, we’re even more tapped. So, this is the time for white environmentalists to reflect internally and do their own research and lead their own [diversity, equity, inclusion and justice] trainings and not to expect people of color to do their work.”

White-led environmental groups are increasingly pitching in to help communities



Mariah Davis of the Choose Clean Water Coalition said that improving diversity and inclusion in the environmental sector depends on white environmentalists taking the time for research, self-reflection and building authentic relationships with others. (Dave Harp)

of color fight such battles. But Davis cautions against “parachuting in” without forging lasting relationships with those communities.

“It’s all about building a relationship authentically,” she said. “We’re going to continue to lose on environmental issues if we don’t invest in people who bring us value.” ■

Blue crab population dipped in 2019

Committee says numbers are not cause for action yet

By Karl Blankenship

Although the Chesapeake Bay blue crab population declined last year, the overall population of the popular crustacean is neither overfished nor depleted, according to the most recent scientific review.

The overall population declined from 594 million in 2019 to 405 million in this year’s winter dredge survey, but the review by the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee found the overall population was still near the long-term average observed over the three-decade history of the survey.

It also reported that last year’s harvest of 61 million pounds was the highest since 2011, but still below the long-term average since the survey began in 1990.

The committee includes fishery scientists and managers from around the region who annually review results of the winter dredge survey, as

well as other data such as harvest estimates from recent years, to determine the status of the blue crab population and make suggestions for any needed changes to regulations.

They then make recommendations to the three agencies that manage blue crab harvests around the Bay: the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Virginia Marine Resources Commission and Potomac River Fisheries Commission.

After the population reached dangerously low levels, the states acted in 2008 to reduce the harvest of female crabs to help maintain reproductive potential. Since then, the average number of females has typically been at a higher level. This year’s survey estimated there were 141 million female crabs in the Bay, which was more than double the minimum threshold number of 70 million, though below the management target of 215 million.

Still, the report said, the number of females

in the population over the last decade has increased over those seen in the decade prior to 2008, which has “allowed the stock to regain some of its natural resilience to environmental changes.”

As a result, the report said the states should continue implementing regulations that are in place. But it also said that jurisdictions should implement ways to more accurately track commercial and recreational harvests, such as electronic reporting and harvest validation, which would support even more precise management.

It also made a number of research suggestions, including supplementing the annual winter dredge survey, which samples crabs buried in the mud at 1,500 sites each winter, with a shallow water survey. It noted that a large fraction of the juvenile blue crab population winters in areas not covered by the current survey.



Soft crabs are packed for shipping from Smith Island, MD. (Dave Harp)

Much of the decline in this year’s survey was in juvenile crabs.

Blue crabs are one of the species most closely associated with the Bay and popularized in the book, *Beautiful Swimmers*. But their population can vary naturally from year to year, based on weather, water temperature and other environmental conditions, as well as on how many are caught, and that can make management a challenge. ■