



ENVISION<sup>THE</sup>CHOPTANK  
COMMON AGENDA







NFWF



Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund

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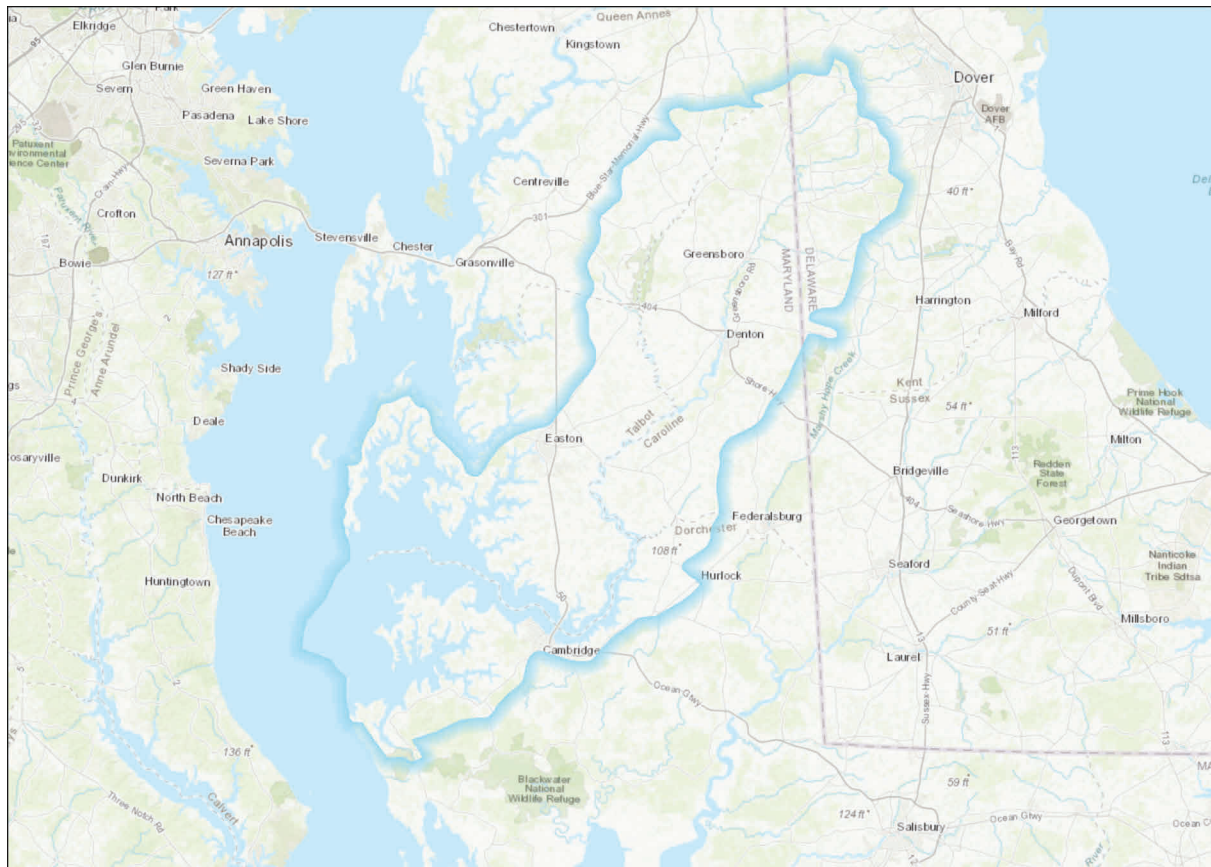
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# Introduction

The Choptank River watershed is a tremendous asset, a treasured part of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem that serves as an ecological, economic, and cultural engine for the region.

The area embodies the history and culture of the Delmarva peninsula, with rich traditions in agriculture, commercial fishing, and boat building, and a landscape that served as part of the Underground Railroad, where Harriet Tubman led slaves to freedom in the mid-1800s. With a patchwork of open spaces, productive farm and forestland, and bustling maritime towns that have endured since Tubman's time, the Choptank remains a place where ties to the land and water are of great importance.



*Choptank River Watershed, Maryland. Map: Chesapeake Conservancy*

The watershed contains a tremendous array of natural resources, including wetlands, forests, underwater grasses, fish habitat, and oyster reefs that support the natural resource-based maritime, agricultural, and tourism industries. Its waters provide critical habitat for spawning striped bass and river herring, and serve as one of the most productive blue crab fisheries in the Bay, bringing in 4.7 million pounds in 2015 with a dockside value of \$8.7 million.<sup>1</sup> The Choptank is also home to one of the largest oyster restoration efforts in the world.<sup>2</sup>

However, increases in pollutants, changes in land use, and impacts from a changing climate threaten the system. The upper Choptank watershed has lost more than 47,000 acres of wetlands,<sup>3</sup> and nitrogen levels have continually increased since water-quality monitoring by the U.S. Geological Survey began in 1965.<sup>4</sup> A recent climate vulnerability assessment for the Choptank found that the southwestern areas of the Choptank watershed are at a high risk for storm surge and stormwater flooding, indicating that adaptation efforts are needed to protect communities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Bellevue, and Tilghman Island.<sup>5</sup> Recent studies in the lower Choptank have also found signs of stress among white perch,<sup>6</sup> and recent rain events have resulted in elevated levels of bacteria in this portion of the river, posing health risks to swimmers and others who come in contact with the water.

Over the past several decades, organizations and agencies working with local communities and landowners have made great strides toward combating these threats, by conserving natural and working lands and implementing best management practices (BMP) to provide habitat and reduce the levels of pollutants entering local waterways. According to a GIS analysis by the Chesapeake Conservancy, through the use of conservation easements and acquisitions by natural resource agencies, more than 119,042 acres in the watershed have been permanently protected from future changes in land use. By the end of 2016, local partners, landowners, and farmers succeeded in establishing cover crops, an agricultural BMP, on 60% of eligible cropland.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 2017, the multiagency effort to restore oyster reefs in Choptank tributaries had restored over 670 acres of oyster reef.<sup>8</sup> And, although difficult to trace a direct connection, improvements in the health of fish populations, such as striped bass, have followed the increase in restoration efforts.<sup>9</sup>





To take these efforts to the next level and incorporate a more holistic view of conservation and restoration, organizations and agencies working in the watershed have come together as Envision the Choptank, believing that people and groups are most effective when they work together. With funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and facilitation by the Chesapeake Conservancy, this partnership of 15 organizations and agencies has worked together since 2016 to identify collaborative solutions to meet the mission of providing swimmable, fishable waters and enhancing the health and productivity of native oysters in a way that best meets the needs of the surrounding communities.



*Partners discuss common priorities, NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office*

The Envision the Choptank partnership will take on actions that not only support efforts to achieve the Chesapeake Bay Program's Total Maximum Daily Load standards set for the river, but that add value beyond improvements in water quality to ensure the long-term sustainability of the conservation and restoration efforts that have been achieved. By clearly understanding the socioeconomic and broader ecological concerns that interact with its mission and incorporating these concerns into their decision-making, the partnership will engage a broader audience in caring for the Choptank.

This document provides a snapshot of the status of the Choptank and outlines the challenges to improving and maintaining the health of the watershed. It then lays out a Common Agenda, a collaboratively-defined set of goals, objectives, and strategies developed to overcome these challenges and meet the mission of Envision the Choptank.

# Core Principles

Through all of its efforts, Envision the Choptank is committed to addressing the concerns of the local communities and its partner organizations. To that end, we will

1. Support an economically and ecologically sustainable rural economy that relies on natural resources such as clean water, productive fisheries, healthy soils, and abundant wildlife.
2. Collaborate across partner organizations to build on each other's strengths and create connections that ensure progress is sustained.
3. Make evidence-based decisions, using best available research and local knowledge.
4. Consider diversity, inclusion, and environmental justice for all projects.
5. Prioritize projects that address human health, a major concern for watershed residents.







OTHER • 7%

FOREST • 26%

AGRICULTURE • 62%

URBAN SPACE • 5%





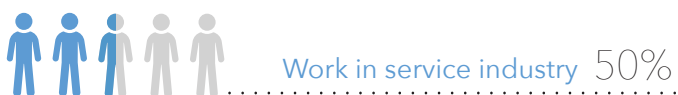
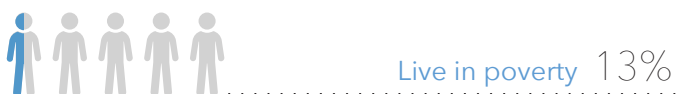
# Status of the Choptank

The Choptank River is the longest on the Delmarva Peninsula, flowing from central Delaware through Maryland and into the Chesapeake Bay.

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## 100,000 people

live in the Choptank watershed<sup>5</sup>



Its watershed includes portions of five counties—Talbot, Dorchester, Caroline, and Queen Anne’s counties in Maryland and Kent County in Delaware—and is home to about 100,000 people. The river’s watershed is dominated by agricultural uses and to a lesser extent forested areas, and also features important working waterfronts and expanding urban and suburban development in communities such as Easton and Cambridge, Maryland. Despite employing a relatively small number of residents, the agriculture and fishing industries are primary economic drivers in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Wetlands, which make up 21% of the watershed,<sup>2</sup> provide important habitat and act as natural filters, cleaning runoff before it enters streams, rivers, and the Bay. Historically, over 47,000 acres of wetlands have been lost within the upper Choptank watershed, which represents almost 11% of the entire Choptank watershed’s total area. This loss is fairly large when compared to other watersheds in Maryland.<sup>3</sup> In addition, approximately 25% of its 795 miles of shoreline is armored with manmade and hardened structures (e.g. riprap).<sup>2</sup>

Another concern is degraded water quality. When excess nutrients and sediment reach the river, they reduce water clarity, fuel algae growth, and contribute to low-oxygen “dead zones” that harm aquatic life and threaten the Choptank watershed economies that depend on thriving aquatic resources. Fertilizer added to farmland and lawns and stormwater running off of developed areas account for the majority of these pollutants. Nitrogen reaches streams primarily through groundwater,



## 119,042 acres

The amount of protected land in the Choptank watershed according to the Chesapeake Conservancy



## 3.9 billion

The number of oysters planted in Choptank River tributaries<sup>8</sup>



## \$77 million

The amount spent in 2011 on purchases related to fishing on Maryland’s Eastern Shore<sup>11</sup>

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### In 2015

The agricultural sector in the four Maryland counties that overlap with the Choptank watershed contributed



**\$876 million**

to Maryland's economy

**over 26% of the state's  
agricultural total.**

### In 2015

The four Maryland counties that overlap with the Choptank watershed contributed

**46%**

**of Maryland's seafood and  
aquaculture impact**



sometimes taking up to 30 years to move through the soil, while phosphorus and sediment flow across the land's surface, entering the river and its tributaries during rain events.<sup>12</sup> While recent years have seen some progress in upgrading major wastewater treatment plants and extending sewer lines, septic systems continue to contribute to the problem.

Fisheries are important economic and cultural resources in the region that are affected by changes in water quality. The waters of the Choptank serve as productive spawning and nursery habitat for fish, including striped bass, and these newly hatched fish are more susceptible to poor water quality than adults. As new agricultural conservation practices were introduced on farms throughout the Choptank watershed in the 1980s and 1990s, survival rates for the young fish in adjacent tributaries increased.<sup>9</sup> Researchers have also observed an increase in the overall abundance of striped bass and white perch over time.<sup>2</sup>

Oysters, another important fishery in the region, have seen a 98 percent drop off over time due to water quality, overfishing, and disease.<sup>5</sup> To address this, in 2013 the state of Maryland began working with partners to undertake one of the largest oyster restoration efforts in the world in Harris Creek, the Tred Avon River, and the Little Choptank River. A recent monitoring report showed that 98% of the reefs that were restored in Harris Creek in 2012 and 2013 now have thriving oyster populations.<sup>8</sup> Related research has also shown that oyster reefs reduce nitrogen, improve water clarity, and provide habitat for important commercial and recreational fish species, such as blue crabs. They are also expected to generate new oysters that will settle on nearby reefs open to public fishing.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the wild oyster fishery, Maryland's shellfish aquaculture industry has been growing annually since 2009, when aquaculture lease laws were changed to encourage shellfish aquaculture.<sup>14</sup>

Because the rivers in the Choptank region provide critical habitat for aquatic life and play key roles in the cultural, recreational, and economic livelihood of the region, it is important to monitor and evaluate their health. Each year, ShoreRivers issues a report card for the waters of the Choptank region based primarily on water quality measurements. The 2017 report card graded the two main tributaries in the upper portion of the Choptank—Tuckahoe and Upper Choptank—a C and C+ respectively, and the lower portion of the river a B. This represents a slight improvement for the upper watershed from previous years, and a decline in the lower watershed due to high-intensity rain events in the summer sending more runoff into rivers and streams.<sup>15</sup>



While positive trends are being seen as a result of conservation and restoration efforts in the Choptank watershed—like increases in underwater grasses and striped bass and white perch populations—challenges remain. Looking to the future, expected increases in the human population and the associated increase in impervious surfaces that comes with more housing, roads, and businesses, will continue to influence the Choptank ecosystem. In addition, low-elevation coastal areas are particularly susceptible to hazards such as sea level rise, storm surge, and stormwater flooding. Storm surges and stormwater flooding, both already damaging to Choptank area homes and businesses, are expected to intensify with rising sea levels and heavier, more frequent storms;<sup>5</sup> they are primary drivers of downstream erosion, sedimentation, and water-quality degradation.

*Workers process blue crabs in Cambridge, Maryland, David Harp Photography*





# Challenges

In 2017, the Envision the Choptank partnership began engaging stakeholders to clearly define the challenges that exist to improving and maintaining the health of the Choptank watershed and achieving the group's mission. The partnership also worked to tease out potential solutions to overcome these challenges. In particular, the group looked for ways a collaborative effort could complement ongoing work, fill in the gaps in existing conservation activities, and affect the context within which individual work is done. Ideally, these solutions would address the initiative's two-fold mission of improving the environment while addressing community needs.

Over the course of a year, the Envision the Choptank partnership interviewed 64 conservation and restoration professionals and surveyed 733 residents living throughout the watershed. It also held several focus groups that delved into the results of the survey. The primary challenges identified through these conversations included:

## Lack of Capacity

Local jurisdictions and agricultural service providers face capacity challenges that limit their ability to think long term and collaborate, leading to missed opportunities and reactive planning. Often, more landowners are interested in conservation and restoration opportunities than can be served by current staff levels.

## Economic Barriers

Approximately 12.8% of the population within the Choptank watershed live in poverty,<sup>5</sup> with four local towns listed among the top ten poorest in the state. Concerns over basic needs and day-to-day expenses make it difficult for residents to prioritize environmental concerns.

## Lack of Coordinated Messaging

Residents and landowners are often overwhelmed and confused by the information provided by the different organizations working in the watershed. They are unsure of the progress being made and uncertain where to find reliable information that best suits their needs.

## Isolated Conversations

A lack of dialogue between different stakeholder groups contributes to a reduced understanding of each community's needs and perspectives and exacerbates the tension between groups, making it difficult to find joint solutions and achieve shared goals.

## Inflexibility of Existing Programs

Current rules, installation requirements, long application processes, and disinterest in working with government agencies deter landowners from participating in some of the most well-funded conservation and restoration programs. The often-rigid nature of these programs leaves little room for innovative solutions that may be more appealing.

## Limited Funds for Certain Practices

While federal and state funding is available to subsidize many agricultural best management practices, few funds, if any, exist to incentivize others, including stormwater management practices, living shorelines, and residential best management practices such as rain gardens and native plantings.



At the conclusion of the stakeholder engagement process, the solutions that emerged to overcome these challenges were vetted and discussed through a series of four meetings held with those engaged throughout the process. These efforts culminated in the completion of the Envision the Choptank Common Agenda, the detailed set of objectives and strategies described in this document. Work in support of these objectives will address the primary threats to the watershed—land use change, pollutants, and a changing climate—by meeting the following goals:

- conserving natural resources,
- restoring habitat and clean water,
- engaging communities, and
- strengthening and expanding our partnership.

To further refine the elements of the Common Agenda, the Envision the Choptank partners will create a more detailed action plan. The plan will identify the steps needed to achieve the Agenda's objectives and strategies and describe specific metrics for each goal to evaluate the progress of the group.





# Conserve Natural Resources

Maintaining land as a mix of working farms, forests, swamps and marshes helps to maintain water quality and protect important habitats both on the land and in the water. Currently, the 1,000-square mile Choptank watershed remains relatively undeveloped with less than 10% of the land classified as developed;<sup>16</sup> however, recent trends show signs for concern. Between 1996 and 2010, the region lost 2,944 acres of forests, mostly to development. This included 960 acres of forested wetlands that had served the critical role of filtering runoff before it entered the streams and rivers of the Choptank.<sup>2</sup>

The rural landscape is closely tied to the cultural identity of the region and is a key factor in promoting tourism and attracting new businesses. Companies have recently relocated to the area due to the quality of life afforded by the natural environment. Residents and landowners also value the quiet country lifestyle and natural surroundings. Data gathered from the Choptank Community Survey suggest that residents strongly want to protect undeveloped areas and natural resources and focus future development in the towns and small cities of the watershed.

To this end, Envision the Choptank will work with local governments, including counties and municipalities, to provide information and technical assistance that supports their planning and policy initiatives and advances conservation. Individual organizations are working with private landowners to restore and conserve lands, but a gap remains in providing local governments with adequate data and research, access to funding, and partnerships that can enable localities to more fully consider information about natural resources and changing environmental conditions when making decisions. Envision the Choptank will help address capacity limitations faced by local jurisdictions in the watershed and help better inform the planning processes that guide land use and development across the watershed.







## Objective

Provide information and technical assistance about natural resources and changing environmental conditions to inform local planning efforts.

## Strategies

**Work with local government staff to understand and provide the tools and information that could better inform local planning efforts.** Envision the Choptank will work with local governments to better understand their needs related to natural resource management. The partnership will provide the data and information requested by local governments concerning issues such as the location, importance, and economic benefits of natural resources and coordinate the assistance provided across the partnership. For example, NOAA worked with the Town of Oxford and Talbot County, Maryland to evaluate their vulnerability to flooding and coastal hazards. This work resulted in the development of socio-economic, structural, and ecological indicators, which were then used by the community to address risk and identify adaptation strategies moving forward.

**Share examples of language and best practices used in county comprehensive plans and other policy tools to address the conservation of natural resources and changing environmental conditions, across jurisdictions.** The Maryland Department of Planning recently completed an analysis of all county comprehensive plans, detailing the language and tools used to address natural resource conservation and restoration and changing environmental conditions. Envision the Choptank will further this work by identifying additional examples where necessary and by sharing best practices across all counties and municipalities within the Choptank watershed.

**Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of natural resource conservation by collaborating across county lines.** To enhance the performance of policy tools that often are independently adopted and implemented by the Choptank's multiple local governments, Envision the Choptank will work toward a watershed-wide approach to natural resource conservation, supporting the sharing of new and existing resources among counties and municipalities. A similar effort by five of Maryland's Eastern Shore counties to share overflow 911 calls, rerouting excess calls in one county to its neighbors, has freed up phone lines, allowing a county's emergency services to respond to multiple emergencies at once.

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“Local government is really where the bulk of land-use decisions get made. We are looking for ways to preserve our beloved natural landscapes and waterways and having a partnership like Envision provides us additional resources and capacity to help us achieve that goal, for our citizens and future generations.” -- **Leslie Grunden**, Caroline County Department of Planning and Codes

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# Restore Habitat and Clean Water

Recent improvements in water clarity and a resurgence of underwater grass beds in the lower Choptank provide encouraging signs the Choptank River is responding to the restoration efforts of the past several decades. The combined work of many organizations, agencies, and individuals has made the region one of the highest adopters of best management practices in Maryland and produced one of the largest oyster restoration efforts in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, recent data and long-term trends indicate that there is more work to be done.

Long-term data suggests continued increases in nitrogen concentrations in the upper Choptank River,<sup>4</sup> which received a failing grade for total nitrogen in ShoreRivers' 2017 Report Card.<sup>15</sup> In the lower Choptank River, overall water clarity declined in 2017 from the previous year and concern over bacteria levels, elevated by recent rain events, caused the closure of the inaugural Maryland Freedom Swim in 2018, an open-water swim across the river.

Quality of life and the local economy remain closely tied to the river and the natural environment, as the seafood industry, tourism events, and activities like the Ironman Triathlon and kayak rentals depend on healthy waters. Residents and landowners within the Choptank watershed exhibit a higher level of concern for the natural environment than many others living throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed and want to see improvements. The majority of those polled in the Choptank Community Survey ranked pollution in the river and the loss of natural animal habitat as high priorities when considering all challenges facing the region.

To address these concerns, Envision the Choptank will increase and coordinate the implementation of best management practices and habitat restoration projects by directing efforts to the most-needed areas, enhancing the work of individual organizations, and leveraging the strengths of its partners. The initiative will add much-needed capacity, providing technical assistance that better connects landowners with partner programs, and will seek out new ways to fund restoration to address the inflexibility of existing programs and lack of funding for certain practices.







## Objective 1

Increase and enhance the implementation of best management practices (BMP) and habitat restoration projects on public and private lands.

### Strategies

**Complete the Bay Hundred pilot project and apply lessons learned to better engage private landowners in BMP implementation.** While developing the Common Agenda, organizations engaged in Envision the Choptank carried out a pilot project in the lower Choptank watershed to test several strategies for increasing BMP implementation on private lands. Ultimately, these practices will help improve water quality and support the health and productivity of local oysters. The partnership will share and incorporate the lessons learned related to collaborative fundraising, sharing a landowner assistance coordinator, and developing a fund to incentivize residential BMPs in future efforts. For example, the lessons learned from sharing a coordinator among organizations will improve the management of additional technical service providers the partnership anticipates hiring as part of the strategy described below.

**Identify and fill in gaps in the technical assistance available to public and private landowners.** In the Choptank watershed, additional help is needed to assist landowners, enhance outreach efforts, and match landowners with funding sources and expertise. Envision the Choptank will facilitate the delivery of additional technical assistance to supplement the efforts of agricultural service providers experiencing capacity limitations, provide a dedicated technical service provider to residential landowners, and support local governments working to implement improvements on public lands. To do so, the partnership anticipates hiring or contracting several landowner assistance coordinators similar to the one currently employed in the Bay Hundred pilot project. This type of support is called for in the 2017 Chesapeake Bay Commission report “Boots on the Ground: Improving Technical Assistance for Farmers,” which found the number of technical service professionals needs to increase by 30 percent across the Chesapeake Bay watershed in order to meet current demand and increase a further 30 percent to achieve the pollution load reductions set for 2025 by the Chesapeake Bay Program.<sup>17</sup>

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“What happens on the land impacts what's dissolved in and carried by groundwater and freshwater streams leaving the land. That freshwater in turn creates the conditions for organisms living downstream in rivers and estuaries. By putting tested best management practices on working lands in the most effective locations, we can protect the fish, crabs, and oysters we enjoy catching and eating in the Chesapeake Bay.”

-- **Dr. Tom Fisher**, Horn Point Laboratory, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science

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## Best Management Practices

Conservation practices, frequently called best management practices, or BMPs, are tools landowners can use to reduce soil and nutrient runoff, thereby protecting local water quality. Certain practices, such as planting trees and shrubs along streams have the added benefit of creating wildlife habitat.

Examples of BMPs Envision the Choptank anticipates working with include, but are not limited to:

- Planting trees and shrubs along streams
- Installing rain gardens and native plantings
- Restoring wetlands and streams
- Establishing living shorelines
- Creating bio-retention swales







## Objective 2

Identify and pilot new practices and/or programs to advance innovative restoration methods and incentive programs.

### Strategies

**Explore and implement new methods for increasing the implementation of riparian buffers on agricultural and residential lands.** Recent research by the Chesapeake Bay Program suggests that riparian buffers are one of the most effective restoration practices for reducing the flow of nutrients to rivers and streams.<sup>18</sup> Envision will continue to work with its partners and engage additional expertise to identify the ideal incentives and/or programs to increase the implementation of buffers on agricultural and residential lands. Envision the Choptank plans to assess the viability of ideas suggested during the stakeholder engagement process, including placing buffers only where flowpaths are located rather than along the entire length of a stream, and using the principles of agroforestry to grow products within buffers that could be harvested for additional profit.

**Explore and employ new avenues for funding best management practices and habitat restoration efforts.** Additional and more diverse funding sources are needed to provide landowners flexibility when their situation does not fit the one-size-fits-all model, additional funding to cover the landowner's responsibility of cost-share payments for agricultural BMPs in areas where economic barriers exist, and funds for instances where no or intermittent program funding exists, as is the case with residential BMPs and other practices, such as living shorelines. Envision the Choptank will investigate private sources of funds, green investment opportunities, and other mechanisms.

**Carry out collaborative, multi-practice restoration projects in key locations to reconnect the ecosystem.** Envision the Choptank will bring together multiple partners and technical expertise to identify degraded areas that, through targeted restoration efforts, have the potential to revive and sustain the ecological integrity of the watershed. These collaborative efforts will go beyond what a single organization could accomplish by addressing multiple habitat types and implementing a multitude of practices to restore the overall ecological functioning of an area. The Bay Hundred pilot project used a similar approach, employing GIS analysis to identify priority areas that, once restored, have the potential to improve water quality and habitat. Multiple organizations, landowners, and the local municipality are each playing a pivotal role, from fundraising to providing technical expertise, to implement and connect multiple practices. These practices include rain gardens and native plantings on private lands and two stream restoration projects.

*Volunteers create a garden of native plants, ShoreRivers*

# Engage Communities

Environmental issues impact a broad array of sectors from fisheries and outdoor recreation to health and real estate, and affect every member of society. The 2017 Choptank Community Survey found the majority of people living in the watershed care about the Choptank River and are connected to the resource, engaging in paddling, boating, fishing, and other outdoor recreational activities. They believe improving the health of the watershed is a high priority, and a large majority think the problems of water pollution can be fixed.

However, few believe their own actions contribute to water pollution, and less than half of those surveyed believe their individual actions will make a difference. Landowners and residents at times feel overwhelmed by the information available, have a muddled view of the progress made, and lack an awareness of the local environmental groups and public agencies working to improve the health of the watershed. In addition, several segments of the population are notably less connected with environmental efforts and less focused on protecting natural resources. Residents under age 35, African Americans and other people of color (20% of the population), and residents with a high school diploma or less (15% of the population) are less inclined to prioritize the Choptank River, according to the Choptank Community Survey.

Conservation organizations have had success inspiring and engaging many members of the community, but restoring and maintaining a healthy Choptank watershed will require reaching a broader set of residents and stakeholder groups. Envision the Choptank will need to build on existing partnerships and reach into new sectors and communities, inspiring those working in a variety of disciplines and from all walks of life.

To this end, Envision the Choptank will bring together stakeholder groups to promote a more thorough understanding of each other's perspectives, build relationships with audiences not often engaged in conservation and restoration efforts, and identify shared concerns and interests. The partnership will also promote success stories and information on how others can get involved in similar efforts. In carrying out this work, the partnership will engage a wider audience in developing conservation solutions and attempt to address the day-to-day concerns of residents through its environmental work.







## Objective 1

Facilitate dialogue and build relationships among stakeholder groups to foster ongoing collaboration and advance shared priorities.

## Strategies

**Convene stakeholders to understand and discuss the issues related to natural resource-based industries.** The Envision the Choptank partnership recognizes businesses engaged in natural resource-based industries are important to conserving and restoring the Choptank River, as these entities rely on a healthy environment for their success. To better understand the various perspectives and ways to support one another, Envision the Choptank will bring those engaged in natural resource-based industries together with conservation and restoration partners to identify shared goals and partnership opportunities. For example, the partnership anticipates hosting discussions with owners of oyster aquaculture businesses to better understand the challenges they face.

**Encourage dialogue with and among nontraditional sectors, such as the health care or real estate industries.** Increasing conversations with and among stakeholder groups, especially those not often engaged in designing conservation solutions, is needed to build trust and identify solutions that meet multiple needs. By providing opportunities for each group to learn and understand each other's viewpoints, Envision the Choptank will build the foundation for the sustainable relationships required for continued progress. To accomplish this, Envision the Choptank partners will develop informal events to engage with nontraditional sectors and participate in events and meetings where these groups are active. For example, the partnership could work with each county's Association of Realtors to discuss opportunities to engage new homeowners.

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“Envision the Choptank is a unique initiative that strives to engage more people from a wider variety of backgrounds in actions that will both improve the natural environment and help address citizens' everyday concerns. After all, your community is your heaven on Earth.”

-- **Paulette Greene**, Mt. Pleasant Heritage Preservation, Incorporated

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## Objective 2

Better engage residents and visitors in the protection and restoration of the Choptank River.

### Strategies

**Develop and promote conservation and restoration success stories to inspire action within watershed communities.** Recent studies and results from the Choptank Community Survey show that positive messaging that expresses how actions are making a difference is more effective than negative messaging in engaging the public. In recognition of this, Envision the Choptank will compile and share success stories from partner organizations and agricultural and residential landowners that describe how individuals and communities are having a positive effect on conserving and restoring the Choptank. The partnership anticipates developing a media campaign that includes highlighting the restoration achievements of individual landowners and providing information on who individuals can contact to carry out similar efforts on their own properties.

**Increase dialogue with residents less connected with the environment to better understand core values, foster new relationships, and implement collaborative opportunities.** Engaging the audiences identified as less connected by the Choptank Community Survey will require understanding the full range of concerns and values underlying the different viewpoints expressed by these segments of the population. To do so, Envision the Choptank will work through local social services providers, community interest groups, and other organizations that have existing relationships with these community members to build trust and prevent duplication of effort. For example, individuals engaged through the stakeholder engagement process suggested working with the Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center to better understand how the mission of Envision the Choptank may overlap with the needs and concerns of the non-English speaking community.

*Visitors learn about native plants and rain gardens, NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office*

# Strengthen and Expand the Partnership

Many organizations, agencies, researchers, and community groups were engaged in protecting and restoring the Choptank River watershed long before Envision the Choptank came to be. More than 25 environmentally focused organizations conduct all or part of their work within the Choptank watershed. In addition, countless volunteers and small businesses (including farmers, watermen, recreation providers, and others) do their part for the Choptank River. Many of the organizations working to protect and restore the Choptank River are nonprofits. Often, nonprofits compete with each other due to the ever-present need for funding, which tends to create a barrier preventing those organizations from working together.

One of the major reasons Envision the Choptank came into existence was to encourage individual organizations to come together to discuss common goals and challenges, visualize overlapping project locations, and learn more about each other. These activities enhance cross-organizational coordination and result in larger-scale improvements for the Choptank River and communities. Envision the Choptank creates a space in which nonprofits, government agencies, universities, and others can communicate openly and safely to come to mutually beneficial decisions.

Envision the Choptank partners believe they can make a larger impact working together toward a common mission than working individually. Envision the Choptank intends to operate as a partnership, building capacity by joining forces and sharing respective strengths to carry out projects with greater positive impact across the Choptank watershed.







## Objective

Maintain a strong Envision the Choptank partnership to foster ongoing collaboration and advance shared priorities.

## Strategies

**Facilitate regular communication among partner organizations to share information, identify additional collaborative opportunities, and discuss ongoing challenges in support of the Common Agenda.** A key component of Envision the Choptank's success so far is continuous communication through regular monthly in-person meetings. These meetings allow the partners to identify and overcome common barriers, discuss projects of common interest, and provide updates from their home organizations. Regular communication also instills a sense of community and camaraderie among participants—one of the most valuable results of bringing people together is the formation of new personal and professional relationships that lead to a better collaborative working environment. This document will serve as the guide as regular communication and meetings continue.

**Continue to diversify the participation in Envision the Choptank to represent the full range of community interests related to the mission.** Envision the Choptank recognizes that the current participants do not necessarily fully represent the interests and experiences of the population across the Choptank watershed. Envision the Choptank aims to include a broader range of diversity among network partners to ensure projects and decisions are representative of community interests, while at the same time making strides in environmental conservation and restoration.

**Create a suite of materials for partners to use when communicating about high-priority issues and the Envision the Choptank partnership.** To support the growth of the partnership, Envision the Choptank will ensure that all partners have the same background knowledge and are communicating a unified message to provide clear and consistent information to stakeholders. To reinforce the other objectives and strategies, such as the development and promotion of success stories, a common set of communication materials will be maintained for partner use.



“As part of Envision the Choptank, I’ve been able to participate in innovative projects that bring multiple organizations together with landowners to achieve on-the-ground results. By simulating the past agricultural successes we hope to offer similar or even new strategies to smaller landowners so that the many small successes can also contribute to our overall goal.”

-- **Craig Zinter**, Talbot Soil Conservation District



An aerial photograph showing several white research boats with blue and red accents on a dark body of water. The boats are equipped with various scientific instruments, including poles, sensors, and equipment on their decks. They are scattered across the frame, with some in the foreground and others further back. The water is dark and calm, reflecting the light from the boats.

## Measuring our progress

The Envision the Choptank Common Agenda is a three-year plan designed to achieve four goals: conserving natural resources, restoring habitat and clean water, engaging communities, and strengthening and expanding our partnership. Moving forward, the partnership will develop an action plan detailing the steps to achieve the objectives and strategies of each goal.

In these action plans, Envision the Choptank will also identify metrics that are directly affected by the actions of Envision the Choptank, such as the number of restoration activities implemented, acreage of habitat added, and the number and diversity of organizations and individuals engaged. Each will be tracked on an annual basis. Using these assessments, Envision the Choptank will adapt and adjust the Common Agenda as necessary.

Envision the Choptank partners welcome everyone to join in this collaborative endeavor. The initiative's success will depend on the diversity of organizations and individuals engaged. If we all work together, we can deliver results that improve both the environmental and the socioeconomic health of the watershed, creating a swimmable, fishable Choptank for all.



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#### **Credits**

Cover photo: Angler casts line into Choptank River, Chesapeake Bay Program

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