

Our Bay: Resolving to achieve a cleaner bay

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New Year's resolutions to quit smoking, lose weight and save money may be tough to keep, but resolving to contribute to a cleaner, greener environment is easier and certainly can be more fun.



There are plenty of things we can do to help the Chesapeake Bay, and many of them are inexpensive, fun or educational. We've compiled a list of 50 actions you can take in 2009 to do your part to help the Chesapeake Bay.

1. Get involved. Join a local watershed group, sign a petition, attend a meeting, volunteer.
2. Get educated. Read up on bay issues. Frequent the Web sites of environmental advocacy groups and government agencies. Invite an expert speaker to your community meeting. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation has a speakers bureau, www.cbf.org/speakers.
3. Bend a politician's ear. Make sure they know the environment is important. To learn about the current issues before state lawmakers, head to the Miller Senate Office Building at 5 p.m. Jan. 26, when environmental groups kick off their 2009 lobbying effort. Maryland League of Conservation Voters tracks the issues at www.mdldcv.org.
4. Calculate your nitrogen footprint. Excess nitrogen fuels algae growth, which leads to the bay's oxygen-deprived "dead zones." Learn how much nitrogen you send to the bay by going to www.cbf.org/yourbayfootprint.
5. Plant a tree. They slow down rainwater, prevent runoff and absorb carbon dioxide that causes global warming. They also help keep your home cool in the summer and add to your property value. Learn more at www.trees.maryland.gov.

6. Skip the fertilizer. Improper fertilizer use sends nitrogen and phosphorus running into streams and ultimately the bay. Residential homeowners are among the greatest sources of nutrients from fertilizer.
7. Hold your water. Install a rain barrel to collect water from your downspouts, reducing harmful runoff and saving water. Use the water to irrigate your flowers or vegetables. Or plant a rain garden to soak up water. If you need help, consult a landscape architect.
8. Switch to low-phosphorus dishwasher soap. This will be the law of the land in a few years, but you can buy low-phosphorus detergent now in most grocery stores. Less phosphorus in the water means less has to be treated by sewage plants.
9. Pick up a bay book. We like William Warner's classic work on blue crabs, "Beautiful Swimmers." Kids can check out the Chadwick the Crab series. Ask a librarian for ideas or check out the "local interest" section of bookstores.
10. Fight global warming. Climate change may hurt the bay's wildlife and wetlands and wreck our shorelines. Use compact fluorescent light bulbs and turn off unneeded electronics. Get more ideas at www.chesapeakeclimate.org/action. Figure out your "carbon footprint" at www.nature.org/initiatives/climatechange/calculator.
11. Meet your local riverkeeper. Many local watershed groups hire riverkeepers to be full-time advocates and patrol the rivers for environmental scofflaws. There are riverkeepers on the South, Severn, West/Rhode and Chester rivers. Visit www.waterkeeper.org.
12. Eat locally - maybe as local as your own yard. Food that's grown locally travels less, which means less nitrogen oxide and carbon dioxide pollution. Try growing some of your own vegetables, visit your local farm or farmer's market or join a community-supported agriculture cooperative. Visit www.marylandsbest.net.
13. Eat organically. Organic farmers don't use chemical fertilizers, which can harm the bay. They also eschew herbicides and pesticides. Patronize restaurants that serve local, organic food.
14. Eat Chesapeake seafood. Although crabs and oysters are in trouble, regulators keep a close eye on the population to make sure they won't be wiped out. Visit www.marylandseafood.org.
15. Share the bay with a child. Tell them what the bay was like when you were a kid and what promise it holds. Chaperone a field trip, take a kid fishing, set a positive example.

16. Recycle. Although recycling has less of a direct effect on the bay, anything that reduces waste and reduces the exploitation of natural resources is good for the environment.

17. Drive a car with low nitrogen emissions. Up to one-third of nitrogen in the bay comes from air emissions from sources such as cars. Compare pollution among different models at www.epa.gov/autoemissions.

18. Don't wash your car in the driveway. Move it into the grass so that soap, chemicals and excess water soak into the ground rather than going straight into storm drain and the bay. Or take it to a car wash that recycles its water.

19. Conserve water. This puts less pressure on sewage plants. Take shorter showers, run the dishwasher and clothes washer only when full, install a low-flow shower head, don't water the lawn, use rain barrels.

20. Landscape with native plants. These plants are accustomed to our climate and require little or no watering, fertilizers or pesticides. Learn more at www.mdflora.org or ask for help at your local nursery.

21. Upgrade your septic system. Conventional systems don't reduce nitrogen that seeps from the septic tank into groundwater. New systems cut nitrogen in half and "flush fee" grants are available to cover most of the cost. Go to www.aahealth.org and click on "hot topics" for information.

22. Hold polluters accountable. Reporting a possible environmental violation is the first step to getting it fixed and making polluters pay. Figuring out the right agency can be tricky, but here are some numbers to get you started.

Anne Arundel County hotline: 410-222-7777.

Maryland Department of the Environment: 866-633-4686.

Maryland Department of Natural Resources "911" for the Chesapeake Bay: 877-224-7229.

Natural Resources Police emergency number: 410-260-8888.

Natural Resources Police "Catch a Poacher" hotline: 800-635-6124.

23. Be a bay-friendly boater. Don't dump your waste overboard, get it pumped out! Don't toss fishing line in the water. Use a certified "clean marina" if you can. Learn more at www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/cleanmarina.

24. Encourage your workplace or school to be bay friendly. Some ideas: plant trees, install rain gardens or rain barrels, save energy, serve local food at meetings, give employees time off to volunteer.

25. Become an oyster gardener. Waterfront property owners and waterfront community groups can raise oysters over the winter and have them planted in sanctuaries in the spring. Visit www.cbf.org.

26. Get to know your watershed. Do you know what watershed you live in? Go to www.chesapeakebay.net/wshed.htm and enter your ZIP code to learn more.

27. Clean a stream. The bay may be far away, but everyone lives near a stream. Project Clean Stream in April is a bay-wide effort, but you can organize a clean up at any time.

28. Skip the female crabs. It's illegal for recreational crabbers to keep females now and commercial crabbers have limits on their female catch. Female crabs can produce millions of eggs each and are vital to the health of the population.

29. Fish responsibly. Only keep what you plan to eat. Use barbless/circle hooks during catch-and-release. Properly dispose your fishing line - don't leave it in the water or in places where birds might pick it up and put it into their nests.

30. Don't empty your aquarium into natural bodies of water. This is how the infamous snakehead fish ended up in that Crofton pond several years back. Find a home for unwanted pets at www.mdapi.com/goldcircle.html.

31. Don't dump oil and chemicals down the storm drains. Those drains eventually lead to the Chesapeake Bay and the water in them does not get treated. Anne Arundel County has regular hazardous waste collections. Visit www.aacounty.org/DPW/WasteManagement/householdWaste.cfm.

32. Go birding. You can learn about ospreys, bald eagles, geese, swans and other birds that depend on the bay. Many parks and environmental centers have beginner birding programs. Or check out www.mdbirds.org for links to groups, including the very active Anne Arundel Bird Club.

33. Fight invasive species on your property. You might have phragmites, kudzu or other nonnative invaders. Learn more at www.mdinvasivesp.org.

34. Fix your shoreline. If your bulkhead or riprap is failing, the permitting agencies will now require you to consider a soft, "living shoreline" that softens waves and attracts wildlife. Learn more at www.dnr.state.md.us/criticalarea/guidancepubs/Living%20shorelines-FN.pdf.

35. Put your money where your mouth is. Like the ideas of an environmental group? Send them a check. Or consider buying a "Treasure the Chesapeake" license plate - the proceeds go to on-the-ground projects that help the bay.

36. Tune in to bay TV. "Outdoors Maryland" on Maryland Public Television explores the state's natural resources. It airs on Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m. MPT also has bay programming during Chesapeake Bay Week in April.

37. Compost instead of using the garbage disposal. Compost can help your garden and not using the disposal will relieve pressure on sewage treatment plants. Local master gardeners hold regular composting demonstrations at Quiet Waters Park near Annapolis.

38. Pick up your dog's waste. It's gross, but important. Pet waste contains bacteria and nitrogen that washes into creeks and harms swimmers and promotes algae growth.

39. Support businesses that help the bay. Ask about their environmental practices and check out members of Businesses for the Bay. Visit www.acb-online.org/b4b.

40. Speak your mind. Start a blog, write a letter to the editor, speak up at a community meeting, testify at a government hearing. Write The Capital at capletts@capitalgazette.com.

41. Preserve undeveloped land. Property owners can put a conservation easement on their land that limits development on the parcel forever. There are tax benefits, too. A land trust can help you sort through the details.

Scenic Rivers Land Trust: www.srlt.org.

Magothy River Land Trust: www.magothyriver.org/mrlt.

Eastern Shore Land Conservancy: www.eslc.org.

Maryland Environmental Trust: www.dnr.state.md.us/met

42. Grow underwater grasses. Grass-growing projects usually start in March. You set up a tank in your home or business, watch the shoots sprout and then wade into the water for a planting in early summer.

43. Look out for litter. Those plastic bags, papers and soda cans can end up in a stream if someone doesn't pick them up.

44. Go wading. Get out your white sneakers and join a local "wade-in" in May or June.

Wade-ins are fun, low-tech way to learn about water clarity by literally wading into the water until you can't see your feet.

45. Visit a museum. The Annapolis Maritime Museum (www.amaritime.org) has finally reopened. A little farther away, you could try the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels or the Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons. A full list is posted at www.baygateways.net.

46. Learn about lighthouses. Local lighthouse history is full of stories about the Chesapeake Bay. Get info at www.cheslights.org. The Annapolis Maritime Museum offers summer tours to the iconic Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse. Visit www.amaritime.org.

47. Take a trip. There is amazing beauty and history throughout the bay watershed. Venture to Smith Island, the last inhabited offshore island in Maryland (www.smithisland.org) or check out the marshes of Blackwater Wildlife Refuge near Cambridge (www.fws.gov/blackwater). More destinations are at www.baygateways.net.

48. Visit a park. Several local parks offer bay experiences, including waterfront parks at Downs Park in Pasadena, Sandy Point State Park near the Bay Bridge and Quiet Waters Park near Annapolis. Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary is a gem in south county.

49. Spread the word. Share what you know about the bay. Encourage others to adopt bay-friendly practices.

50. Last but not least: Enjoy the bay! Go fishing, paddle down a creek, go for a sail, look for birds, take a stroll on the beach, splurge for a sunset dinner at a waterfront restaurant.

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