

Next to the Chesapeake Bay, the suburbs of Washington DC are exploding with growth. According to the Census Bureau, the region's population has increased 194,000 in the last two years. Almost every waterfront lot is slated for construction, destroying much of the native wildlife habitats. The polluted run-off from rapid development has resulted in the declining health of the Bay's waters. In turn, aquatic pollution and habitat destruction has caused the decimation of the Bay's most fragile wildlife. According to the Washington Post, my favorite turtle, the Diamondback terrapin, Maryland's official reptile, is facing extinction because they are being "killed by urban sprawl, boats and crab traps particularly in Texas and Maryland."



The Diamondback Terrapin

I grew up on the Bay. I am seventeen years old and my bedroom window is fifteen feet from the water. Childhood fun was kayaking and catch-and-releasing all kinds of reptiles. I have raised dozens of turtles and snakes from eggs, but I have only seen the Diamondback terrapin twice in the wild. Years ago, I was very alarmed when I was told there was a "dead zone" lurking off our beach. I began seeing huge fish kills washing ashore. The water changed colors and smelled. Like many kids, I felt a strong desire to protect our environment, but I did not know how.

That hopeless reaction changed to anger when I read that the endangered Diamondback terrapins were being hunted in Maryland with no law to protect them. A order had come in from China

for 10,000 terrapins for soup. The Governor was against any turtle harvesting moratorium bill due to pressure from the fishing industry. I began the "Save the Terrapins" project when I created a petition drive to support a legislative bill to outlaw hunting terrapins. With hard work and many rejections I collected hundreds of signatures. I was invited to testify to the Maryland House Environmental Matters Committee (and in front of television cameras, angry fishermen, and experts). The "Save the Terrapins" law (HB 760) was enacted and the turtles were protected. At the hearing, I met the director of the National Aquarium, Dr. Jack Cover, who has influenced my thinking to this day. He said I could protect the environment best by continuing my education, being curious, teaching others, and staying involved.

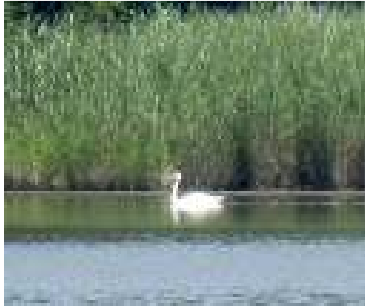
My "Save the Terrapins" petition helped stop the Diamondback slaughter in Maryland, but I soon saw the turtles faced more problems. Surviving terrapins needed a healthy underwater vegetation ecosystem to support them, but it was fast disappearing. The wetland marshes they needed to reproduce in were vanishing with each new construction project.



Evening on Pennington Pond

To provide a terrapin habitat, I motivated my friends to restore a trash filled wetland area and its tributary stream in Triton Beach Park. The wetland was a mess after years of neglect. With help from the kids, we restored it into a community asset now called the Pennington Pond Wildlife Habitat. Today the wetland filters clean water into the pond and out to the Bay. I still help maintain this area and often

find younger neighborhood children exploring this special wetland. It is registered as wildlife refuge habitat by the National Wildlife Federation #150,767. (www.penningtonpond.org)



Chesapeake Wild Swan

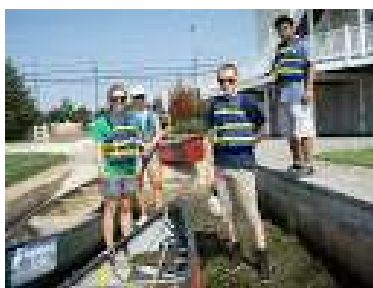


Healthy Bay Grass feeds Terrapins



Wetlands filter and clean water

Last summer, I volunteered assisting research scientists to survey the health of the Bay. I wanted to learn how to improve the Pennington Pond habitat I helped create near my home, hoping the Diamondbacks would return. We went by boat and canoe to dozens of locations to collect underwater plants, analyze water quality samples, and record the wildlife. My job was to dive overboard to gather the samples in the muddy waters. Everyone was on look out for terrapins. I felt very useful and happy to assist, but we did not record a single Diamondback terrapin sighting.



The team at the dock



Canoes are the way to explore



Looking for Terrapins

Unfortunately, our team did record a large decline in terrapin habitat aquatic vegetation. In deep waters and shallow streams, many of the grass beds that once supported thousands of terrapins were gone. The water was so polluted by nitrates from runoff, it created oxygen free environments

where nothing can live. We found dead zones with no fish, no plants, no reptiles, only barren lifeless mud. The dead zones were a result of pollution from suburban population growth and this knowledge is now published.



Bay grasses dying off



A dead zone in shallow water



Water quality study area

I once feared the "dead zones". Now I realize there is an attainable solution for terrapin restoration. Where healthy wetlands can filter and clean streams and run-off, we found that wildlife diversity is increased. Thus, one important solution for restoring the Bay's terrapin population is simply shielding our wetlands from trash, pollution, and human destruction.

My generation of environmentally conscious citizens can and will turn around the declining Chesapeake Bay ecology system and will save the terrapins from extinction. Kids like me can easily clean up trash. We will educate the growing population about the fragile natural species around them. Future biologists like myself will provide the federal, state and local governments with the knowledge and information for successful environmental planning, wildlife conservation, and pollution control. Within the next thirty years, my generation can ensure a balance between the restored environment and the needs of the hundreds of thousands of people who use the Chesapeake Bay for fishing, tourism, boating, and housing.

My project to help "Save the Terrapins" has led me to plan a profession in the field of environmental science. My calling is the protection of the Chesapeake animal species and this field requires a college

degree. Along this future pathway of environmental protection, I will always share the answer to my childhood question of how to be an effective guardian of our planet. As Dr. Jack Cover said, you can protect our environment best by furthering your education, being curious, teaching others, and staying involved. And that is just what I am doing.



Chris Farrow in the Chesapeake wetlands