

A BIO-REGIONAL APPROACH TO THE CHESAPEAKE BAY: THE ROLE OF CITIZEN AND GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN A WATERSHED-BASED PROGRAM

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A bioregion is a geographic area that contains one or more ecosystems, such as a watershed, that is independent of political or jurisdictional boundaries. But it is also a natural and cultural region with which people share a common identity characterized by a strong sense of place. While not formally established as a “bioregional program,” the effort to protect the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed is evolving into an excellent example how citizens can work with their federal, state and local governments for mutual benefit on a major coastal sea. Since 1983 the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States, has been protected by a formal state-federal agreement which has addressed critical issues through major governmental initiatives. We present three examples of organizations and programs that illustrate an evolving citizen-based, bioregional approach to the environmental safeguarding of the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed: the Coastal and Watershed Resources Advisory Committee (CWRAC), the Rural Communities Leadership Program, and the Chester RiverKeeper. CWRAC is an advisory committee with wide ranging representation and citizen participation. It has the opportunity to gather and disseminate the latest coastal information among its members. The committee has demonstrated the ability to develop a citizen-based coastal perspective that is regularly presented to government decision-makers. The Rural Communities Leadership Program addresses emerging issues in land use, sustainability of resource-based economies, and the vitality of villages and towns on the Delmarva Peninsula, a region that includes a portion of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The region is characterized by a working landscape based on farming, forestry, and fisheries, a rich cultural heritage, and a strong relationship to healthy terrestrial and aquatic environments – all threatened by poorly planned community development. The Program promotes the emergence of leaders who can assist their local communities define their futures, sustain their resource-based economies, and preserve local and regional environmental quality. The Chester Riverkeeper’s parent organization, the Chester River Association, was founded in the belief that citizens have a unique role to play in managing bioregions. The Riverkeeper is a professional staff member who serves as a full-time advocate for the Chester River, a Chesapeake Bay tributary, encouraging citizens to make lifestyle choices that benefit the watershed, providing oversight of government programs, and promoting a holistic perspective on environmental problems. In this paper we show that the evolving bioregional approach, which increasingly ignores political boundaries in favor of complete ecosystems, emphasizes local community involvement, and takes advantage of the “passion of sense of place” by communities and citizens alike, is becoming instrumental in advancing and sustaining the goals and activities of the larger Chesapeake Bay Program.