

"Saving" Places: The Management of Enclosed Coastal Seas

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Environmentalists often seek to "save" places such as old growth forests and the Chesapeake Bay. Why? John Muir a century ago spoke of a moral commitment to preserve Nature as an object of romantic reverence and religious contemplation. At the same time Gifford Pinchot defended the opposing economic rationale, namely, that we should exploit resources efficiently in order to maximize the long-run benefits nature offers humankind. We use the Bay as a liquid highway between major ports, and as a sewer for storm water and treated sewage. Against these functions - none of which is dependent on water quality - all other uses pale into economic insignificance. A native jellyfish makes swimming nearly impossible in the Bay. Oysters, crabs, and other fish feed directly or indirectly on nutrients in treated sewage. Over-harvesting far more than pollution, in any case, damages the modest capture fishery which now faces increasing competition from aquaculture.

What is true of the Chesapeake is true of many natural environments: The less dependent economically on them we become, the more we may value them for aesthetic, cultural, and moral reasons. People behave casually toward things they perceive as merely useful. As attitudes change, such things lose their status as temporary objects that will eventually be replaced and become something permanent, an antique less to be used than to be preserved. This happened to areas here in Baltimore and other coastal cities as well. Estuaries like the Chesapeake, the North Sea, and the Baltic once seemed like the kinds of places where you dump things, mine minerals, and float ships. Now we perceive them differently: We recognize them as *rei publicae* -- shared public places to be valued for their character, identity, and history, not just for the uses they may serve. Thus, the principal reason we set about to protect our coastal seas has to do with our commitments to the continuity of places - continuity that requires a sense of community with the past, with each other, and with nature.

What may worry us most in the degradation of our coastal seas is the prospect, then, of becoming ourselves strangers to the earth, of never quite settling into it, of losing touch with the places that help constitute the identity of our communities, and therefore being at home nowhere. In the environmental regimes humans construct to govern enclosed seas we even find nations which are at odds over other issues joining together in a common purpose. It is this act of making peace not only with the rest of creation but also with each other - learning to put aside differences to act on common commitments - that may be the most important outcome of the preservation of enclosed coastal seas.