

Preserving the Watermen's Way of Life

The town of Solomons, on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay in Calvert County, Md., was once the center of a flourishing community based on commercial fishing and boat-building. Over the last thirty years, however, development has greatly altered the structure of the region's economy. An influx of suburbanites who live in the county and commute to jobs in Baltimore, Annapolis, and Washington, D.C. has driven up prices and created a "conflict of cultures" between new residents and old. Pollution has contributed to a decline in the productivity of the Bay and its tributaries, forcing many watermen out of business. In the words of one old-time fisherman, the heart of a "real watertown" has been converted into "two blocks of nothing but solid junk shops." Today, there are probably fewer than twenty working watermen in Calvert County.

On Maryland's Eastern Shore, small-scale commercial fishing is still viable and watertowns are, relatively speaking, intact. Most of the Eastern Shore is too far from major metropolitan areas to be transformed into the next suburban frontier. Yet the region faces intense development pressures, from second-home construction and recreational tourism, at a time when many of the traditional uses of the land and the Bay have become less viable economically. As one waterman predicted, "We're going the way of the whaling fleets of North America."

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in business, such efforts are usually ad hoc attempts to hold onto a dying past a little longer, and rarely the harbinger of a deliberate policy of preservation.

Similarly, Americans cherish their rural land- and seascapes, yet until recently they have surrendered them to the onslaught of progress and development. Unlike magnificent and supposedly "pristine" natural areas, such as the Grand Canyon and Yosemite Valley,

farmland and coastal fisheries were not set aside in preserves. While local communities would often resist the loss of farms or working harbors to subdivisions or waterfront condos, these protests, too, had an ad hoc character; in the absence of any principled basis for preservation, they appeared to be little more than futile, self-interested pleas to be spared from the development that was occurring everywhere else.

Over the past two decades, however, the environmental movement has come to recognize that some rural landscapes, especially farmland, have a beauty and harmony distinct from, but not inferior to, that of wilderness areas (the historic focus of preservation efforts). At the same time, environmentalists have developed a new appreciation for rural vocations. Such vocations are instrumentally valuable in protecting landscapes that bear the stamp of human habitation; there may be no more effective way to preserve open space in developing areas than to preserve farming. Just as influential, though perhaps less explicitly, is a belief that these vocations are intrinsically valuable, an inherent part of the landscape which environmentalists seek to preserve. If tilled fields and terraced hillsides have significant aesthetic, cultural, and moral value, so do the activities of tilling, planting, and harvesting.

Several jurisdictions, including Maryland, have recently adopted a host of legal and regulatory mechanisms, many borrowed from Great Britain, to protect farmers' holdings and thus preserve the rural landscape. Under Smart Growth and Rural Legacy legislation, the state attempts to slow development in rural areas and redirect it to older urban and suburban areas. These laws empower state and local authorities to purchase conservation easements from farmers and allow third parties to purchase farmers' development rights for use elsewhere. In both cases, the laws limit the subdivision of farmland while providing capital for farming operations.

Smart Growth and Rural Legacy policies have not yet been directed toward watermen. In part, this is because the watermen's relationship with valued environments is more ambiguous and complex than that of farmers. What constitutes a waterman's holding? The stretch of the Bay or the tributary he uses most frequently? His boats, rigging, traps, and docks? His share of watertown life and community? All three seem necessary to maintain watermen on the Bay, but

it isn't clear which of these can or should be the focus of preservation efforts. Moreover, watermen cannot be made into conservators of the rural landscape by the same means as farmers. For example, watermen rarely have land or other real property that is coveted by developers—assets that can be preserved by easements or transferred development rights.

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The watermen's work has long been subject to a regulatory regime, but one with a very different orientation. These regulations are informed by a conservationist ethic that seeks to maintain natural resources for human sustenance and convenience; their goal is to enhance the long-term productivity of watermen through limits on their catch size and fishing seasons. (Many watermen have, perhaps shortsightedly, opposed such regulations.) The new policies, in contrast, express a preservationist ethic: they seek to maintain rural livelihoods not for their economic yield, but for the way of life they represent.

Although these policies haven't yet been adapted to commercial fishing, there is a growing recognition that the watermen's livelihood is an integral part of what is worth preserving in America's coastal areas. "To me," writes Bill Goldsborough, the principal fisheries scientist from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, "one of the main reasons that you want to save the Bay is to maintain the watermen's culture, the watermen's way of life. . . . Without them, if you just imagine Chesapeake Bay without any commercial fishing activity, it's really kind of a sterile body of water." In much the same spirit, Tom Horton worries that "much faster, and more irreversibly than we are losing our water quality on the Chesapeake, we are losing our human diversity."

Horton's remark suggests another source of the impulse to preserve traditional livelihoods: a concern for diversity that encompasses watermen as much as farmers. The lives and work of watermen would seem to possess several qualities that have become increasingly rare in post-industrial America: an intimate involvement with the natural features of the landscape, a direct connection between work and sustenance, and a high degree of personal autonomy. If, however, we seek to preserve commercial fishing for the sake of human diversity, we need to examine whether the watermen really do possess a distinctive culture, or whether the portrait of watermen as hardy, self-reliant subsistence workers is merely a romantic

anachronism. We must ask, too, whether any qualities and attitudes that set the watermen apart are likely to conflict with a preservationist agenda. It may be that the relevant tools of public policy are ones that the watermen themselves are reluctant to employ even for their own apparent benefit, or that policies intended to sustain the watermen's culture would in fact subvert it.

This essay offers a sketch of some of the values and experiences that appear central to the watermen's self-conception, drawing on recent interviews and focus-group meetings in Calvert and St. Mary's Counties. Its purpose is to provide some understanding of how the watermen see themselves, what they cherish in their work, and how they understand the forces that threaten it. Combining ethnography with environmental ethics, we have tried to see whether the differences in perspective and lifestyle between watermen and the dominant culture are really as large, and as important,

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as one might suppose, and whether certain legislative and regulatory strategies are appropriate for preserving what is truly distinctive in their way of life.

Nature and Human Activity

It is their interactions with nature that would seem most likely to distinguish the watermen from their new neighbors and, more generally, from those in the economic mainstream of late twentieth-century America. Watermen on the Chesapeake typically begin their involvement with the Bay and the shoreside environment at a very early age. Many of their earliest memories have to do with the past abundance of various fish species in the Bay, and the clarity of the water before the effects of pollution began to be felt in the 1960s. Fishing for both profit and food was much easier then; children could take part and keep some or all of the money they earned. (From the watermen's point of view, the children of newcomers to the Chesapeake region seem strangely disconnected from the adult world—unable to share in the work that their parents do, and acquainted hardly at all with the life of the Bay.)

The sources of value in the watermen's work and memories are not limited to the material gain they enjoyed from their fishing activities, nor to the romantic experience of communing with nature. Instead, the watermen's scheme of valuation combines the two. One of the men we met remembers seeing so many eels on a river bottom "that they look[ed]



Photograph by Michael W. Fincham. Reprinted courtesy of Maryland Sea Grant.

like wheat grass in the field out there." With equal acuity, another recalls rising at four in the morning to catch the eels, which were then shipped to Baltimore in "great big giant wooden barrels." Aesthetic and practical interests are unself-consciously conjoined. Similarly, when the watermen talk of the simple beauty of caught fish and shellfish, tied into this beauty is their knowledge that the catch is valuable.

While acknowledging the physical demands of their vocation, the watermen also express an appreciation for the peace and quiet of work on the Bay. These aesthetic satisfactions of fishing are closely linked to the independence of the job; as one focus-group member explained, "You have nobody there with a hatchet over your head, telling you when you've got to do this, when you've got to do that." Nor is one bothered by co-workers "whining" that they aren't paid enough for their labor. Instead, there is a shared understanding that the harder a waterman works, the more he earns: "Look, you swing these shafts, or you pull that net a little bit harder, and you'll make a little bit more money." A fishing party that catches some bluefish can "see the gains right there."

Speaking more abstractly, we can say that the watermen make little distinction between beauty and utility, or even between nature and human activity. They value the Bay not only as a source of bounty and delight, but also as a source of independence; its beauty

is closely linked with their own sense of autonomy and agency as they wrest their living from it. Many environmentalists also value interaction with nature, but they tend to see themselves as respectful outsiders, venturing into alien territory and leaving nothing but footprints. The watermen are considerably more familiar, and less constrained. Yet they are never guilty of seeing the Bay merely as an exploitable resource.

Vernacular Libertarianism

For all their concern about new threats to their way of life, the watermen are reluctant even to discuss policies to control development and in-migration. They cherish their own freedom and are reluctant to consider government restrictions on individual economic activity (although they often accept *social* restrictions on other individual activities—for example, on the amount of time spent each day fishing, on children's behavior, or, on Smith Island, on drinking in some settings.) This deep libertarian streak makes watermen suspicious of government intervention of any kind. They regard government oversight as a "hatchet" which they are reluctant to wield against anyone else, even those whose affluence and greed threaten their survival. Americans are often libertarian when it comes to their own liberty interests; what is striking about the watermen is the consistency with which they apply their philosophy.

**Saving the Seas:
Values, Scientists, and International
Governance**

**L. Anatheia Brooks and
Stacy D. VanDeveer, editors**

Saving the Seas is a collection of eighteen essays by leading thinkers in the area of marine and environmental management. The contributors focus on the world's coastal seas, where stakeholders compete for intensely sought-after resources—not only fisheries, harbors, shipping and defense infrastructure, but also culturally important places and traditional ways of life.

Saving the Seas resulted from a convening of scientists, citizens, and management experts under the banner of EMECS—the Environmental Management of Enclosed Coastal Seas—at international meetings held in Kobe, Japan, and Baltimore, Maryland. The publisher, Maryland Sea Grant, is a member of the Coastal and Environmental Policy Program at the University of Maryland.

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This vernacular libertarianism is reinforced by a strong fatalism, which sees both the decline of the fisheries and the spread of development as inevitable. "There's a lot of stuff you can't do nothing about," one waterman explained. Development "is just like a big shark. . . . It's got a big mouth on it and it just keeps eating up anybody in its way." In general, the watermen do not perceive development as a direct or indirect effect of government policy; they do not recognize the state's hand in the proliferation of new homes on the land and leisure craft on the water. Thus, they tend to view curbs on development as a simple denial of access to the Bay, which they oppose, rather than as an

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effort to undo or redress the effects of past government intervention on behalf of development, which they might find easier to accept. In their view, restricting the influx of tourists and migrants would not only be unfair, but futile as well.

Historically, there is one threat—pollution—against which the watermen have been willing to support regulation. Tom Horton notes that in the 1880s, during their industry's prime, Chesapeake oystermen used their political clout to force Baltimore to construct the nation's most modern sewage treatment plant to protect water quality in the Bay. Today, however, less and less of the Bay's pollution comes from point sources like the Baltimore municipal sewer system, more and more from the sediment and chemical run-off of an increasingly developed, impermeable watershed. But while the watermen clearly recognize the connection between development and pollution, they do not seize on that connection to justify restrictions on the former.

Status and Authenticity

Each of the watermen we met was intensely aware of his relative standing in his own community. Status comes with age and experience and long residence in the place one was born to. A tone of formality and mutual respect pervades their conversations; for instance, absent or deceased watermen are often referred to as "captain," the title given by watermen to the working owner of a fishing vessel. In a gathering of watermen from a county such as St. Mary's, all the participants know each other well. In speaking of difficult issues, they look to one another for support and confirmation.

In the communities of the Chesapeake, there is a clear sense of what it means to be a "real" waterman. In conversation, the men are exceedingly careful in describing their lineage and work experience, always mentioning any feature of their history that might qualify their right to the title of waterman. (One focus-group participant had migrated to the area as a young man, and so couldn't claim a familial tie to the trade; another had grown up on a farm.) Although at least two of the men had been to college, neither touched on that part of his life, except once in passing.

To be sure, being a genuine waterman isn't the only path to status and respect. The oldest participant in the group had "taken to the shipyards" in his youth and become a master carver. At times he sounded apologetic about this, admitting that he had never had the physical stamina for life on the water. But he also made sure to mention that he had operated a charter boat for two summers and thus "got to know what the Bay was all about." The other members deferred to him and acknowledged his seniority in their community. Another participant, the one with the widest experience of the world outside the Bay, gave a full account of his working life, as if to establish his authority to speak on various matters. He became the unofficial leader of the group, and the majority of questions and comments by the other watermen were directed to him.

The watermen's notions of status and authenticity help to explain why they are so offended at the assertiveness of wealthy professionals who have moved into the Bay region. For example, in the live-and-let-live watertown economy of the past, the untidiness of commercial fishing operations troubled no one. The nets and rusty gear that lay around the

power to impose their ideas of rurality on the watermen and their operations violates a traditional understanding of how authority is acquired and exercised in these communities.

The Preservationist Challenge

This sketch of the watermen's lifestyle and self-understanding suggests that their culture is indeed distinctive. But it also suggests that their culture is highly vulnerable, and that the very qualities that set it apart may also make it resistant to preservationist strategies.

Preserving livelihoods is a more complicated business than preserving natural landscapes. Ecologists have long cautioned that even the simplest interventions in nature have complex and often unanticipated effects. The complexity and uncertainty are greater when the object of preservation is a human activity. The agents may not accept the preservationists' means or share their values; alternatively, the very attempt at preservation may transform the character of their work in ways inconsistent with what they value in it.

We have noted that the watermen are reluctant even to discuss, let alone request, government restrictions on the kind of development they see as threatening their way of life. Admittedly, their cooperation would not be necessary to impose limits on development. But a culture that values personal freedom so highly might be compromised if it were heavily dependent on coercive state action for its survival.

Subsidies may be even more subversive than restrictions. Many watermen understand the worth of their vocation as inhering in their confrontation with the hardships and caprices of nature; its beauty and dignity lie in the watermen's struggle to sustain themselves and their families from the life forms around them. As we have seen, the aesthetic satisfactions of their work are conjoined with a sense of the immediate benefits they derive from the Bay. A program of subsidies would attenuate the connection between nature and subsistence. The result might be what Erving Goffman calls the "keying" of an activity from one frame to another—from natural to social, from hunting-gathering to performance. A waterman kept in business by protectors of his vocation may be doing something of value, but he is no longer wresting a living from the sea.

Some environmental ethicists argue that the very decision to preserve or designate a wilderness area renders it an artifact. This seems a bit overstated—after all, the rocks and rivers go about their business despite the designation, and so do the animals, as long as the tourists resist feeding them. But preserving a community's way of life is a different matter, and the claim that the act of preservation is self-defeating seems far

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yards and landings were taken for granted; so was the noise of boats and trucks starting up in the early morning. But the newcomers often arrive with the expectation that they have purchased a kind of idyllic rural serenity, and complain to local authorities when this is diminished. They may also expect to catch oysters and crabs for recreation, and blame local watermen for "overfishing"—a phrase the watermen detest—when these are found to be scarce. Some of the new residents may actually be motivated by a kind of preservationist sentiment. But to the "real" watermen, the newcomers' sense of what is worth preserving is hopelessly sanitized and inauthentic. Moreover, the fact that some new residents have rapidly gained sufficient political

more plausible for culture than for nature. When the state keeps watermen in business because it values their activity rather than their catch, those watermen are no longer working for themselves or their customers, but for a broader public.

Of course, any new policies would seek to keep farmers and watermen in business as producers, not performers. But if a dwindling proportion of their income actually comes from the sale of crops or catch, and if the purpose of the subsidies that make up the difference is not to yield larger harvests or catches but

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to maintain the activity of farming or fishing, then the transformation from producer to performer may be inevitable. The farmers and millers at restored "colonial" villages may actually sell their products to tourists, but they do not make a living from those sales. A person paid to engage in a traditional activity that can no longer be justified in economic terms, by a society that values the activity itself, has arguably become a reenactor, even if it is his own past life he is reenacting. Given the watermen's intense concern with authenticity, such a performance might seem particularly demeaning.

Yet the transformation of watermen into performers has already begun without direct state intervention to preserve their communities and livelihoods. Although the watermen speak of themselves as a dying breed, insisting that they would rather move on or retire than change their way of living, they have adapted to new circumstances. One waterman we met has turned his skipjack into a floating classroom; others crew on charter boats. In one respect, this transformation is encouraging. It will keep some of the more enterprising watermen on the Bay, whatever the state of the fishery or the local economy. Moreover, the transformation of watermen into educators may well give future generations a deeper appreciation of their natural and social history than they would otherwise have. But museum talks and educational boat trips offer no opportunity for the kind of grueling, exhilarating encounters with nature that have enriched the watermen's own lives.

Some might draw a harsher conclusion—that the preservation of watermen on these terms would be a fraud, an historical-restoration-without-walls that owed much of its appeal to ignorance or self-deception about what the watermen were actually up to. It may show more respect for the watermen to let them die

out, as they often threaten to do; a living memorial may be less dignified.

Perhaps, however, there are less subversive ways of preserving the livelihoods of watermen, ways that would maintain the connection to hunting and gathering on which the integrity of their work depends. Price supports for local fish harvested by traditional methods might well offend the watermen's sense of independence, but by placing added value directly on the catch, they might preserve the character of the watermen's work as resource extraction, while evincing a social recognition of its dignity and worth. Perhaps the state could also support the watermen less directly, by promoting the kind of consumer demand for traditionally produced local products that has created a cottage industry in organic and boutique farming. This demand could be met by a new generation of "craft" fishermen whose catch would be sold at premium prices at upscale markets. While the demand for the local may express a patronizing enthusiasm for the yield of an idealized rural economy, it might sustain some watermen in their traditional vocations without the heavy hand of direct government subsidy.

Finally, greater efforts at pollution control offer the possibility of enhancing the productivity of the Chesapeake Bay and of restoring some of the abundance that figured so prominently in the watermen's attachment to the environment of their youth. Such a policy would advance the conservationist tradition while addressing more recent preservationist concerns. Environmental protection—the end that was to be served by maintaining rural vocations—would itself become a means of keeping those vocations alive.

—David Wasserman and Mick Womersley

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