

ADOPTED ON 06/04/2024

ST. MARY'S RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

Strategic Plan 2024-26

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ST. MARY'S RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

Strategic Plan 2024-26

Mission

The St. Mary's River Watershed Association (SMRWA) seeks to protect, improve and promote the sustainability of the St. Mary's River Watershed through collaborative efforts with the economic, academic, environmental, agricultural, historical, social, cultural, political, and recreational stakeholders in the community.

Vision

It is envisioned that the St. Mary's River will be increasingly fishable and swimmable with vibrant aquatic habitats and a watershed that is accommodating to smart development and resilient to varied land uses. It is also envisioned that it will also be an increasingly utilized community recreational resource. Realization of this vision will be reflected in the following indicators:

- A sustainably growing harvest of healthy disease-resistant oysters;
- A growing acceptance of and investment in the public stewardship of the watershed;
- Productive research in support of enhancing the sustainability of the watershed; and
- Increased recreational use of the river.

Strategic Focus

This plan builds on the strong momentum of the current SMRWA program. To this end it is strategically focused on three interrelated areas of program initiative: enhancement of environmental sustainability, engagement of stakeholders, and development of new knowledge through research. These three areas of focus will be supported by a fourth initiative: the development of administrative, financial, and associated supporting resources.

Enhancement of Environmental Sustainability

The focus for enhancing environmental sustainability will be continuing aquatic habitat restoration initiatives, initiating supporting watershed projects, and the application of new knowledge developed through research.

- Aquatic habitat restoration will focus on continuing the building of oyster reefs and the development of submerged aquatic vegetation.
- Watershed initiatives will include stream buffer, tree canopy, and complementary individual projects.

Engagement of Stake Holders

The growing acceptance of and investment in the public stewardship of the watershed depends on the increased engagement of stake holders. This will require a broad program of public information complemented with increased volunteer opportunities, collaboration with complementary organizations and businesses, and facilitating the expanded recreational use of the St. Mary's River.

- Public information will be emphasized (newsletter, public events such as A River Affair and Riverfest, tabling at public events)
- Information will be developed to support the formulation of appropriate government environmental policy
- Increase volunteer opportunities will be created (reef ball production, oyster production, oyster distribution)
- There will be collaboration with complementary organizations and businesses on joint projects, including oyster production/distribution and research, riverbank cleaning, and Riverfest.
- Expanded recreational access and use of the St. Mary's River will be pursued through collaboration with other organizations seeking to improve recreational access to the river.

- Research

There will be two distinct foci for research initiatives during the Plan period: documenting the changes in the River's health that have led to its condition to date, and studying opportunities for continuing improvement in its sustainability. In the interests of enhancing the scope of the research as much as possible, both will be pursued in collaboration with complementary parties.

- Research will focus on documenting the progress made to date and identifying opportunities for productive future initiatives.
- Researchers will collect and evaluate data on current water quality conditions in strategic areas of the watershed to determine progress to date.
- Data will be collected and evaluated on the current health and extent of current oyster population.
- Based on the data collected, the research program going forward will be designed with the intent of enhancing environmental sustainability, strengthening stakeholder engagement, and informing public policy.

Program Implementation

Each of the three program focal areas will encompass specific projects.

Enhancement of Environmental Sustainability

- Oyster reef development will continue to be a leading program focus. This will require securing new areas for reef expansion, reef ball construction, and reef ball placement.
- Oyster growing projects will include a shoreside nursery in combination with the Marylanders Grow Oysters program that engages waterfront home owners in fostering oysters as they grow to maturity for planting in reef areas.
- Watershed projects will focus on storm water management (including rain gardens), tree canopy, and stream buffers. The initiative will collaborate with other organizations, such as the Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust, to host a series of workshops on native plants and native pollinators in home landscaping, and on coping with invasive plants. There will also be a program for setting up rain barrel systems.

Engagement of Stake Holders

The emphasis will be on expanding outreach to the watershed community and building SMRWA membership.

- Public events such as A River Affair and Riverfest will be developed further to involve more participants and more collaboration with other organizations.

- Volunteer opportunities will be expanded, particularly for reef-ball construction and placement, the Marylanders Grow Oysters program, and watershed activities.
- The Homeowner's Guide to Backyard Conservation will be more broadly distributed.
- The Newsletter will be produced quarterly and distributed on-line to members and other interested parties. It will include an annual report.
- Collaboration with complementary organizations such as continuing to work with the St. Mary's River Yacht Club and Historic St. Mary's City on the annual clean-up of the St. Mary's River and working with St. Mary's College of Maryland to provide internship opportunities for students in the Marine Science program.
- Additional activities will include tabling at public events, displays at local libraries and the farmers' market, Letters to the Editor, and perhaps the identification of a mascot.

Research

Historically, the St. Mary's River had extensive oyster reefs and was considered a very productive oyster river, but over-harvesting and environmental stress degraded the oyster habitat and reduced oyster abundance. In 2010, the state of Maryland designated the Upper St. Mary's River as a no-harvest oyster sanctuary, and this protection enabled SMRWA to build oyster reefs in that area in an effort to restore oyster productivity.

- Future research will focus on the extent to which the restored reefs are productive (high oyster density, healthy with heightened disease resistance), and providing ecological services for other organisms.
- Because the larvae that are carried on estuarine flow, tides, and currents tend to colonize new areas, it will be important to assess the extent to which the restored reefs are a significant seed source for the St. Mary's River downstream from the sanctuary.
- Collaborative research ties with St. Mary's College of Maryland and the University of Maryland's Chesapeake Biological Laboratory will be continued as well as with Maryland's Department of Natural Resources and NGO's such as the Marylanders Grow Oysters program, the Friends of St. Clements Bay, and the St. Mary's River Yacht Club.

Strengthen Administrative, Financial, and Associated Supporting Resources

For SMRWA to meet the challenge of making the watershed more sustainable it will be necessary to meet in-house, long-term needs for staffing, equipment, technology, and financial resources.

Enhance Administrative Capacity

SMRWA has adopted proven business practices and has responded effectively to a variety of needs, both planned and unforeseen, although it might have been able to do more if its resources had been greater. During the next three years, individual contributions, including membership dues, and corporate donations will continue to be important sources financial support. Grants will be needed to provide increased stability for the Association's overall budgetary needs as well as for professional development and equipment acquisition. Beyond 2026, SMRWA will need to address additional resource demands to add a half-time staff and acquire a permanent base for operations.

Refine Use of Best Business Practices

Adoption of recognized best business practices has enhanced SMRWA's structural and functional capacity and will continue to do so into the future. The use of time-tested techniques for the organizational structure, personnel management, constituent management, financial solvency, and infrastructure development of non-profit entities have been, and will continue to be, fundamental to the Association's success. Increasing emphasis on and resource allocation to professional development will offset any anticipated setbacks due to staff succession.

Strengthen Fund-Raising Capacity

With a growing agenda of activity and with a reasonably stable stream of income from membership dues, it will be increasingly necessary to strengthen the grant-based flow of income (currently approximately 70% of the total budget). This will require winning increasingly larger grants from current supporters and engaging new supporters. Given the increased workload that this will entail, it is anticipated that at some near future point additional staff will be required.

Build System of Working Group Engagement

With the growing agenda and the current staff resources it will become increasingly necessary to decentralize leadership for implementing each of the program initiatives. This will be done with a system of working groups representing each of the program foci:

- Enhancement of Environmental Sustainability;
- Engagement of Stake Holders including education and public relations activities;
- Research; and
- Management.

Work Program for 2024

In the interests of efficiency and coherence, the Work Program for 2024 envisions several activities that will each serve complementary areas of Program Implementation.

Enhancement of Environmental Sustainability

- Oyster reef development will focus on expanding the size and density of the oyster reefs in the sanctuary. This will involve completing the current reef restoration project adjacent to St. Mary's College, securing clearance for reef restoration of a new site within the sanctuary, and the making of new reef balls for deployment in 2025 on the restoration site held by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR).
- Preliminary data indicate that the five acre reef site adjacent to St. Mary's College is meeting and beginning to exceed its restoration goals. The project will be completed this year with placement of the final 272 reef balls waiting in inventory.
- In coordination with the DNR, the SMRWA will apply to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a permit to establish a new restoration site that will allow for further reef ball deployment,
- Over the course of the year 100 additional reef balls will be made as part of the education and volunteer involvement initiative. These new reef balls will be deployed in 2025 on the 1/10 acre site held by DNR adjacent to Horseshoe Point. (Note: cement reef balls must be allowed to mature in the open air for one year before being deployed in the water.) The permit DNR holds for this site contains a special requirement for the engagement of a licensed contractor to deploy these reef balls. It will be necessary to raise additional funds to cover this requirement.

- Oyster growing projects will continue to expand in collaboration with the Marylanders Grow Oysters program under which water-front property owners, currently 80, host submerged cages, currently a total of 467, of growing oysters in preparation for release on the restored reefs. The objective will be to identify additional participants and distribution methods, particularly in collaboration with schools and other programs.
- Watershed projects will involve identifying areas for stream buffers and engaging volunteers in planting trees. Additionally, there will be an increased collaboration with St. Mary's College in its seagrass research program. There will also be the initiation of a rotating program with collaborating organizations of demonstration/education projects on rain gardens, rain barrels, native plants and plant pollinators, composting basics, and beekeeping.

Engagement of Stake Holders

- Public events, such as A River Affair and Riverfest, will be expanded to engage a wider audience.
- Volunteer opportunities, such as the River Cleanup and tree planting will also be expanded to provide more stakeholder engagement. Activities such as reef ball construction and deployment will reinforce other objectives such as oyster reef development.
- Distribution of The Homeowner's Guide to Backyard Conservation will continue, but on an expanded scale, particularly through tabling at public events and the various education and demonstration initiatives.
- Newsletter (quarterly) and annual report will be enhanced and expanded in circulation. Emphasis will be placed on sharing information that engages public interest in the role of the SMRWA.
- Collaboration with complementary organizations is essential for enhancing the substance and expanding the reach of SMRWA programs. To this end, a concerted effort will be made establish and build productive relationships with organizations and institutions interested in supporting the sustainability of the watershed and river. These stakeholders would include educational and research institutions, service clubs, relevant government bodies, and recreational associations.
- Additional activities that build the visibility of the SMRWA's programs will focus on outreach publicity. These will include organizing the expansion of volunteer opportunities and the engagement of government officials as well reaching out to potential stakeholders through activities such as displays at the library and at the Oyster Festival. They will also include educationally oriented kayak tours along the waterfront.

Research

- Determining the extent to which the restored reefs are productive will require designing a study and securing supporting funding for addressing three questions: their contribution to enabling a growing population of healthy disease-resistant oysters; their contribution to feeding spat to down-stream locations outside the sanctuary; and the extent they provide a suitable environment for other complementary marine organisms.
- Establishment of collaborative research ties will be critical to expanding the SMRWA research program. This will involve continuing and deepening current research relationships as well as broadening them into new areas of inquiry. Working research relationships with new collaborative partners will be pursued.

Strengthening of Administrative, Financial, and Associated Supporting Resources

- Administrative Capacity, particularly for fund-raising, will be strengthened. The initial focus will be on securing funding for, and then hiring, a part-time communication and administrative manager to assist with office needs. The results will be assessed to plan for further strengthening in 2025.
- Business practices will be simplified through the creation of standard protocols for operation. The Work Program for 2025 will be prepared.
- Fund-Raising Capacity will be enhanced through development training for the Executive Director. The number and scope of grant applications will be increased. Membership will be increased. Revenue from A River Affair will be increased substantially. Sponsorships for Riverfest will be increased.
- Build System of Committee Engagement by developing management protocols to decentralize specific program responsibilities to specific standing committees and then supporting the work to those committees with the necessary resources.

Periodic Review and Adjustment of Plan

This plan is intended to serve as a continually evolving guide to the program initiatives and activities of the St. Mary's River Watershed Association. Each December it will be reviewed and adjusted as necessary to accommodate the then current situation. A Work Program for the following year will be developed.

It is expected that the Executive Director will prepare a year-end "State of the Program" report reflecting the accomplishments and challenges of the year and providing a summary of the revised plan for the subsequent year.

Next Strategic Plan 2027-30

During the final year of this plan the process will be initiated for having the 2027-30 Strategic Plan in place to take effect beginning January 1, 2027.

Looking Further into the Future

Beyond the immediate planning horizon, it will be necessary to address two significant upcoming considerations: what should the SMRWA be planning for its role in the celebrations of Maryland's 400th anniversary in 2034, and what should the Association be planning for in response to the anticipated impacts of climate change. Responses to these considerations will be woven into future iterations of the strategic plan.

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