

1125 West Street * Ste. 200 * Annapolis, MD 21401 * 410.461.2623

www.blacksofthechesapeake.org

July 6, 2023

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
United States Senate
730 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Sarbanes
U.S. House of Representatives
2370 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

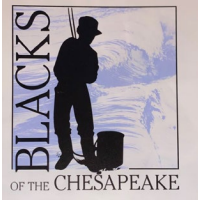
RE: *Chesapeake National Recreation Area*

Dear Senator Van Hollen and Representative Sarbanes:

On behalf of the Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation (BOCF), I am writing to thank you for your leadership to create the Chesapeake National Recreation Area (CNRA), a new unit of the National Park System in the Chesapeake watershed. BOCF documents, promotes, and educates the public about the significant contributions of African Americans to the bay's maritime industries and culture, and we are committed to preserving and conserving the environment. We strongly support the establishment of this new national recreation area, and we look forward to working with you to ensure that the Chesapeake is recognized for its natural and historic significance by inclusion in the National Park System, and that this unit includes the critical contributions of Black Americans to the American experience in the mid-Atlantic.

African Americans have a long-established history in the Chesapeake watershed. Familiar historical figures, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, have deep connections to the bay. Southern Maryland counties are the cradle of African American history and culture, between the Patuxent and Potomac tributaries. These navigable waterways spawned the growth of our nascent nation, as fishing and farming industries flourished. However, these ancient rivers were waters of hope and despair for enslaved and free Africans, given their place in history with the Underground Railroad. The Chesapeake Bay and its connecting rivers served as a pathway to the north. During the Civil War, the watershed was divided over slavery. Black citizens were crucial to the Union war effort, engaging in wartime operations and serving in the army. The 1860s also saw the growth of the fishing industry in the region and, with it, the presence of African American watermen.

The perseverance, productivity and resourcefulness of African Americans have had a profound impact on the cultural and historical heritage of our country and the Chesapeake Bay. Despite the invaluable impact that African American communities have had on the watershed for hundreds



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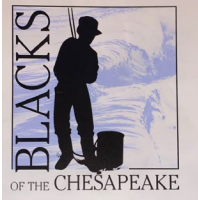
of years, our history has been underreported. Black history is American history, and American history is Black history. The two of them cannot be told separately or considered apart. This is one of our country's wrongs that we are working to make right. We think all of us in the modern era can acknowledge that and give the same honor and respect to African American history as the "founding fathers" history that we were all taught. We now need school systems, governments, and all institutions to see the value of this inclusive mindset. We use the BoCF platform to repeatedly share the message, "*This Bay is Your Bay- This Bay is Our Bay*: It belongs to everyone, and we are all tied to its history, culture, and ecosystem." The CNRA is an important way to underscore this message.

As a fellow waterman and longtime proponent of recognizing, preserving, and commemorating the impact of African Americans and our history in the watershed, I know that the Chesapeake Bay watershed is a natural wonder, fully deserving of national park status. We strongly support the goals of the new recreation area to recognize the Chesapeake's national significance, conserve and interpret these resources, expand public access, enhance tourism and local economies, engage watershed communities, promote diversity and equity, improve water quality, and advance the conservation goals of the Chesapeake Bay Program and the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network. The FY '22 Federal Directed Spending allocation will expedite the needed master-planning, infrastructure improvements, as well as environmental assessment- shoreline erosion mitigation, historical & cultural interpretation of the future 5-acre Elktonia Heritage Park, making it an affiliate unit of the National Park Service. We also appreciate the potential inclusion of historical sites with essential black history that have never been open to the public, including the Whitehall Estate located on the Broadneck Peninsula of the greater Annapolis area.

We endorse the acquisition of land and land-based resources via willing donation, purchase from a willing seller, and/or exchange or transfer from another Federal Agency. And we support the requirements that nothing in the Act would impact or affect commercial or recreational fishing or enlarge or diminish the jurisdiction of each State, with respect to fish and wildlife management.

Establishing the CNRA will allow all stories of the watershed, its citizens, and its history to be shared with visitors from across the world. The creation of the CNRA will enhance public understanding of the Bay at participating National Park Service sites and partner sites to tell the story of the outstanding, remarkable, and nationally significant resources of the Bay watershed.

The Maryland Congressional Delegation's recent support, under the leadership of senior Senator Benjamin Cardin, for the acquisition of Elktonia, Carr's & Sparrows Beaches African American Land Conservation & Heritage Preservation Project, to be returned for public access and a much-needed education and cultural history venue, must be "another milestone" in elevating black voices along the Chesapeake, and not the "last milestone."



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Passage of the CNRA will aid the Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation in identifying and amplifying other historical and cultural sites located along the reaches of the bay. Columbia Beach in Shadyside, MD is currently undergoing a robust nomination process to become the first African American community in Anne Arundel County, MD to receive designation as a National Historical Landmark through the U.S. Department of the Interior, evidencing the BOCF's strategic plan is consistent with the goals and objectives of the CNRA. Our work is to map and interpret a string of "Black Pearls"- (historically and culturally significant) - African American sites on the bay, extending to Tidewater & Northern Neck of Virginia.

The passage of the CNRA legislation will greatly facilitate the participation of faculty, staff and students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) to fully engage in efforts to improve the water quality of the bay and tributaries particularly in communities with large minority populations and bordering urban waterways.

Thank you once again for leading this important initiative. We look forward to working with you on bill introduction and final passage to establish this new national recreation area in the Chesapeake, and to helping the National Park Service and its partner tell the full story of African American history in the Chesapeake.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

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Vince Leggett
Founder and President
Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation

Cc: The Honorable Ben Cardin
The Honorable Mark Warner
The Honorable Tim Kaine
The Honorable Bobby Scott