



July 20, 2023

Senator Chris Van Hollen  
730 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Van Hollen,

On behalf of Washington College, I want to thank you for this opportunity to support your effort to designate a unified Chesapeake National Recreation Area (CNRA) as part of the National Park System.

The Chesapeake Bay, as the largest estuary in North America, with its extensive marshlands, seagrass beds, and oyster reefs serve as critical habitats for a myriad of plant and animal species. The bay's complex food web and nutrient cycling processes also play a crucial role in maintaining water quality and sustaining the overall health of the region's aquatic life, which support a broad range of social and economic activities. The Chesapeake Bay is thus a valuable scientific laboratory and site of cultural study for our students and faculty at Washington College.


The Bay ecosystem and the people who live within it are a key focus of our Environmental Studies and Science Programs, and our Center for Environment and Society (CES). CES engages nearly 300 undergraduates a year through courses it supports, paid internships it provides at leading regional environmental organizations, research and capstone projects, recreational opportunities, and applied programs with community partners. For instance, our public archeology partnerships and landscape history programs bring to light the past livelihoods of those who came before us — both in prehistory and post-colonial contact — through analysis of cultural material past and present as well as oral histories. Our grassland restoration programs seek to bring back key avian and plant species, and our bird banding station monitors bird populations along a critical migratory pathway. We currently co-own conserved lands on the banks of the Chester River with private landowners that make up one of the largest conservation easements in the state of Maryland. CES's full immersion, experiential learning program the "Chesapeake Semester," and summer field courses, "Headwaters to Bay" and "Black Life in Bellevue," make use of many sites around the Bay.

Washington College's Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience likewise centers much of its work on the distinctive history and identity of the Chesapeake region. Specifically, its major initiative Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project, launched in collaboration with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, works to define the Chesapeake Bay watershed as a national heartland of Black heritage, with a four-century legacy that stretches from the first enslaved Africans' arrival in 1619 to the present. Here, on the shores of the Chesapeake, a distinctively African American culture first developed and grew — folkways and foodways, faith practices, musical legacies, and artistic traditions that have left deep

imprints on broader American culture — and where some of the nation’s greatest freedom fighters — Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall — were born and launched their struggles. This Black legacy is embodied not just in the Bay region, but also within countless large and small communities across the watershed. The Starr Center’s work to uncover, preserve, curate, and interpret this history has engaged Washington College students, faculty, and staff in collaboration with hundreds of community members across the Upper Eastern Shore and beyond. The Chesapeake Heartland Project has drawn national attention and material support from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the state of Maryland, and others. Historians at the Starr Center would also be ready to work to help connect new sites — especially sites significant to African American heritage — to the CNRA.

In summary, the proposed Chesapeake National Recreation Area would give the Washington College community of students, staff, and faculty the opportunity to broaden our areas of inquiry and expand experiential learning, public education, and community engagement to highlight the estuary’s ecological, cultural, and historical significance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mike Sosulski".

Mike Sosulski  
President  
Washington College