

# Atlantic CoastWatch

## Sediments Choke Chesapeake

The Conowingo Dam on the Susquehanna River, just north of Havre de Grace, Maryland, supplies hydroelectric power to customers in and near Philadelphia. It also, reports the *Washington Post*, stores in its reservoir millions of tons of sediments that have flowed down the 440-mile river. Last September's Tropical Storm Lee "produced record flows in the river, forcing officials to open the gates. Four million tons of sediment rushed through in about four days, equal to what the [Chesapeake] bay normally gets in four years."

This "jailbreak for the sediment," as the *Post* called the event, turned the color of the bay's water from blue-green to coffee-colored. The shift prompted widespread fears that the released sediment would form a "dead zone" within which oxygen deprivation would have disastrous consequences for many marine species that a consortium of federal and state agencies has been trying mightily to protect. Observers recalled the four-day downpour from the 1972 Hurricane Agnes, when the sediment-laden Susquehanna smothered crabs and grasses and provoked "the most damaging event in the history of the bay."

Officials expressed varying views about how to react to the new crisis that Tropical Storm Lee provoked. It would take months, it was noted, to assess the full damage from that storm and from Hurricane Irene, and the extent to which a new "dead zone" would be formed in the chocolate-colored waters. But all agreed that the Conowingo sediment constitutes a major threat to current Chesapeake restoration efforts.

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## Fracking Conflicts Sharpen

In the Marcellus Shale region of the eastern US, hydrofracking to obtain natural gas is not only invading vast deposits deep underground. It is also causing conflicts between neighbors, landowners, rural and industrial interests, towns, economic development protagonists, nature lovers, hunters, and environmentalists. Governments at many levels are at odds and mistrustful of each other.

Tons of water go into a well, along with chemical additives (which industry is only beginning to disclose), and emerge as flowback, polluted brine combining a host of heavy metals and radon.

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### December 2011

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Atlantic CoastWatch is a news digest for those concerned with sound coastal development.

## Atlantic CoastWatch

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## Sayings

*The recent decision of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to limit the menhaden catch to more sustainable levels won widespread acclaim. In an editorial, the New York Times called the commission's action "a victory for consumers and for conservationists like the Pew Environment Group, which for years has been sounding alarms about the menhaden's decline and its consequences for the ocean ecosystem." The paper termed it "a fish that is vital but never reaches the dinner table." Explained Bill Goldsborough, fisheries director at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation:*

"Specifically, ASMFC voted to adopt a target fishing rate that will maintain the population at 30 percent of its original size. Accounting for variability, this should ensure that the population drops no lower than 15 percent at any one time (instead of the 8 percent that it is currently).

"The importance of the commission's decision can hardly be overstated. Menhaden is a vital species along the Atlantic and a foundation of the entire ecosystem. Swimming in schools, the small silvery fish is harvested for fish oil and meal. It is also a preferred food for many fish and birds, including striped bass and osprey, as well as an important source of bait for crabs and lobsters. But menhaden have been overfished 32 out of the past 54 years, and its population now stands at its lowest point on record. Today our management of menhaden has finally started accounting for this fish's critical role in our waters. Easing harvest pressures will help replenish the stock and finally give the menhaden population a chance to rebound."

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*(What follows was submitted by David Kyler of the Georgia-based Center for a Sustainable Coast.)*

"In my profile of the current stage of the proposed deepening of the Savannah harbor ("Sayings," August 2011 issue), there was some editing that resulted in a misleading description. In addressing control of potential adverse impacts, the Stakeholder Evaluation Group adopted a brief but comprehensive set of conditions that, in effect, formed the basis of "adaptive management" requirements. If these conditions were met, in managing the project the **US Army Corps of Engineers** could provide unprecedented protection against unanticipated impacts threatening the degradation or destruction of important public resources, including critical wildlife and fisheries habitat.

"The problem is that the management process proposed by the Corps in its draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) falls far short of complying with the SEG memo. The Center for a Sustainable Coast made comments to that effect in reviewing the EIS, and we are now waiting to see if the Corps will correct such deficiencies in the revised, final EIS. However, due to the complexity of coordinating approval of the multiple federal agencies involved and the unknown cost of correcting unforeseen, deviant impacts, it is doubtful that adequate control can be ensured."

## Powering Puerto Rico

Residents of Puerto Rico, heavily dependent on expensive imported oil, pay triple the national average for electricity, reports the *New York Times*. High power costs have trapped the island in severe economic doldrums, and kept the regime of **Governor Luis G. Fortuno** grasping to offset what he has called a grave energy “emergency.”

One partial solution is a proposed \$450 million natural gas pipeline planned to run northward from the island’s south coast across a mountain range to the north coast town of Arecibo, then eastward to power-hungry San Juan. Environmentalists oppose the project which, they say, would lose the island 270,000 trees and endanger numerous species of plants and animals. Critics also allege abnormalities in the contracting process for the 92-mile pipeline, which was originally scheduled to be completed this year, but still lacks a required permit from the **US Army Corps of Engineers**. Work continues on an environmental impact assessment.

Under construction in the town of Guayama, reports the *Puerto Rico Daily Sun*, is a privately financed and managed \$98 million photovoltaic center that will generate 20 megawatts of energy, directly serve 6,500 houses, and employ 200 people. **AES Ilumina**, the widely experienced company in charge of the project, says that it will start serving customers this coming summer.

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## Courts & The Seashore

Few coastal issues provoke hotter debate than the question of beach access for the general public in areas where private shorefront property ownership prevails. In New Jersey and elsewhere, said the *New York Times*, many jurisdictions respect the “ancient principle” that “a beach should be open to the public from the water’s edge at least up to the ‘mean high water line’.” But that definition is subject to many interpretations, the *Times* continued. Local property owners and beach clubs have limited parking, levied stiff fees, concealed road-to-beach pathways, and installed “no trespassing” signs in efforts to discourage public use. New Jersey courts have gingerly bowed to public pressure in recent years, ruling in one case that the public “may also use a stretch of dry sand whose width will depend on the circumstances.” In Maine, many property owners own beaches all the way down to low water. Legal public use of the intertidal zones has been limited to fishing, fowling, or navigation. But this year, says the **Island Institute’s** *Working Waterfront* newspaper, a six-judge panel affirmed the “right of the public to walk across intertidal lands to reach the ocean for scuba diving.” Three of the judges called this a form of navigation.

## People

The *Hilda M. Willing*, the last working skipjack in the upper Chesapeake Bay, is being put up for sale by her owner and captain, **Barry Sweitzer**. This will be the first season in her 106 year history that the venerable oyster-harvesting sailboat will not be working. The reason is that, according to Maryland’s **Department of Natural Resources**, 74% of the oysters north of the Bay Bridge died off as a result of last spring’s record freshwater flow, from the Susquehanna in particular, which accounted for very low salinity in the upper Bay from March through July. Other watermen from those areas are now heading south to find their shellfish.

## Awards

The **Natural Resources Council of Maine** (NRCM) has given its top award for 2011 to **Everett B. “Brownie” Carson**. He led the Council for 27 years. His successes include beating back dams to keep the West Branch of the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers free-flowing, blocking a Bucksport coal plant that would have polluted Acadia National Park’s air, and overall helping to make NRCM “one of the most effective state-based environmental advocacy groups in the nation.”

**Groove**, an adult female leatherback turtle, swam the most miles and took first place in the 2011 fourth annual Tour de Turtles, sponsored by the **Sea Turtle Conservancy** (STC). To win this migratory marathon,

whose entrants included 15 sea turtles of four different species (loggerhead, leatherback, hawksbill and green), Groove swam 1,378 miles from her feeding site near last summer's Gulf of Mexico Oil spill, STC said. Each turtle in the race, equipped with a satellite-tracking device, represents a cause that threatens its survival, said the *Vero Beach News*. Groove was "swimming to raise awareness about the impact of Commercial Longline Fisheries on sea turtles and other marine life." Adele, a green turtle, won second place, swimming 1,217 miles from Costa Rica.

### Species & Habitats

The best way to control the invasive snakehead fish population may be to eat them, perhaps sauteed, according to **Chad Wells**, executive chef of the Alewife restaurant in Baltimore, *oldtown-crier.com* reported. Commercial sale of snakehead has been sanctioned by the Maryland **Department of Natural Resources** (DNR). One fisherman expects to supply 600 pounds per day.

Nutria, semi-aquatic rodents that destroy wetlands, will be eradicated from the remaining 350,000 acres of potential habitat on the Delmarva Peninsula by December 2015, said the *FWS Journal*. The South American rodent eats up to 25 percent of its body weight in plants and roots per day. Nutria were introduced to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in 1943 for their pelts, the *Star-Democrat* said, "but when that market failed, the animals were allowed to reproduce unchecked."

## Media

⌘ Included in the 20th anniversary **Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital**, which will run at venues all over town from March 13-25, 2012, are several works of direct interest to Atlantic Coast Watchers. **Alexandra Cousteau** will present her documentary *Expedition Blue Planet*, which emphasizes the Potomac. The program will also include a screening of an older film, *Potomac Reflections*, by **Robert Cole**. The film *Capital Buzz* will highlight beekeeping in the Washington, DC area. *The Big Fix*, a new film by **Josh and Rebecca Tickell**, will examine the damage done by the **BP** oil spill. The full program will be posted on the festival's website, [www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org](http://www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org).

⌘ New from **Restore America's Estuaries** (RAE) is a Wetlands Carbon blog that will, says the organization, be "dedicated to exploring the role coastal wetlands play in sequestering greenhouse gases and disseminating the latest news and research behind national and international 'Blue Carbon' efforts." Coastal wetlands, RAE continues, "may sequester and store carbon at rates three to five times greater than temperate forests, making them efficient—and perhaps essential—carbon 'sinks' as global temperatures and sea levels rise." [www.estuaries.org/blog.html](http://www.estuaries.org/blog.html). Other new blogs include *Green Antilles.com*, and one called *Deadrise* that covers environment and science news from Hampton Roads, VA.

⌘ Oceans teem with plastics that might degrade only after 500 years. That visible ocean pollution is accompanied by invisible threats from pesticides, fertilizers, and petrochemicals. The heedless throw-away consumer culture is to blame, says **Donovan Hohn** in his ocean-spanning book *Moby-Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea and of the Beachcomers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists, and Fools, Including the Author, Who Went in Search of Them* (Viking 2011). The toys--plastic blue turtles, green frogs, red beavers and yellow ducks--were on a container ship bound in January 1992 from Hong Kong to Tacoma, Washington. The ship lost part of the toy cargo due to a steep roll in the North Pacific. In his travels to dramatize the threats from ocean plastics, Hohn did not find a single duck. But he did learn that plastics in the seas are killing birds and fish.

## With Appreciation

Generous support has recently been received from **Nelse L. Greenway** and **Decatur** and **Sally Miller**, as well as from these other donors: William C. Baker, Florence B. Fowlkes, David P. Hunt, Caroline M. Macomber, Leigh and Lynden Miller, Hector and Erica Prud'homme, and George and Katharine Woodwell.

## Regulating Caribbean Drilling

With Cuba set to start drilling for oil off its north coast, a mere 100 miles from Florida, the US finds itself in a pickle as to how to encourage safe practices and respond to a possible oil spill. Direct interactions with the Cubans are difficult, reported *McClatchy Newspapers*, because of chilly political relations. Some Cuban-Americans express fears that US drilling assistance would bolster the Castro regime and weaken the hand of dissenters on the island.

The best US hope, says McClatchy, lies in maintaining a close collaborative relationship with **Repsol**, the Spanish company that is beginning oil exploration operations on behalf of the Cubans. Repsol has “wide US interests,” said **Michael Bromwich**, an **Interior Department** official who oversees offshore drilling operations, and has pledged allegiance to “the highest industry standards while working in Cuban waters.”

But even if Cuban drilling safety is maintained, the region also faces threats from other Caribbean exploration operations being conducted by Jamaica and the Bahamas as well as Mexico. These countries are also “in the process of implementing the most advanced and up-to-date drilling regulations and standards,” said Professor **Jorge Pinon** of **Florida International University’s** Cuban Research Institute. But he wonders about their ability to enforce their own rules.

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## NC Gold Rush

North Carolina, the first place where gold was discovered in the United States, was the nation’s top producer for much of the early 1800s, according to the *Charlotte Observer*.

The California gold rush of 1848 put an end to that bonanza, although “commercial production of gold sputtered along until 1915,” says the **Reed Gold Mine** web-site. There was renewed activity during the Depression, but the last of the mines was closed in 1942.

Since then, recreational gold panners have been haunting the original sites throughout the state. With the recent hike in the price of gold, now almost \$1800 an ounce, what had been a hobby has become more serious business.

The prospectors’ equipment has become more sophisticated, provoking environmental dangers. They use machines called suction dredges to vacuum the river bottom, then filter the water in sluice boxes. Out, along with the released mud and sediment, come aquatic insects, fish eggs and mussels, all altering the dynamics of a stream.

Following the newly active panners, several exploration companies are looking into re-opening some of the historic mines.

During the late 1970s striped bass numbers declined alarmingly--especially in the Chesapeake Bay, which is the spawning ground for nearly 90% of the Atlantic population, according to a report from the **US Fish and Wildlife Service**. Restoration efforts, begun in 1980, have included sometimes drastic measures over the years and the stocks have grown gradually. This year the Maryland **Department of Natural Resources** reported a successful spawning class, the best in almost ten years according to the *New York Post*. This is good news, but it will not immediately affect the numbers of adult catchable fish, as it takes several years for them to grow.

### Reports

In reaction to reports that **President Obama** had directed the **EPA** to abandon new smog rules, reported *Mother Jones*, **Environment America** “took a look at the data on ground-level ozone pollution around the US.” While air quality has “improved significantly” in recent years, the group concluded, 48% of all Americans “still live in areas with unhealthy levels of smog pollution” that can cause respiratory problems or even death. Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia all ranked among the top-five smoggiest big cities, said the report.

Scientists have recently discovered that a specific bacterium originating in human fecal waste has a deleterious effect on corals. It causes a disease called “white pox” which has contributed

heavily to an 88% decline in elkhorn coral in the Florida Keys in the past 15 years, according to an article by **Pascal Fletcher** in *Planet Ark*. These findings underscore the need for wastewater treatment plants throughout the region. Key West built one in 1989 and it has continued to periodically upgrade the system. The changes have caused a noticeable improvement in the condition of surrounding coral reefs.

### Restorations

In 1947, New York City opened the 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Receiving 20 barge loads of trash per day, it grew to become the world's largest landfill at one time, and in fact its largest manmade structure. "You could see nothing but garbage and seagulls going by," recalls one nearby resident. But in 2009 the city's **Department of Parks and Recreation** launched a massive, 30 year effort to convert the dump, which closed in 2001, into a green, beautiful, wildlife-rich park three times the size of Central Park in Manhattan with multiple recreational amenities.

Eyes tend to glaze over when, for what seems the umpteenth time, a comprehensive new plan to restore the battered Everglades makes the front pages. But this fall, in the wake of a visit to the region by **Interior Secretary Ken Salazar**, Washington announced a new fast-track planning effort that actually seems to have some bite to it. According to the *Miami Herald*, planning to restore the central portions of the "River of Grass" will be com-

## ME Lobsters: Bonanza or Trouble Ahead?

Lobsters now provide 80% of Maine's seafood income. In recent years, the lobster harvest has just kept growing. In 2010, 94.7 million pounds were landed as compared with 20.1 million in 1985 according to the State's **Department of Marine Resources**.

Meantime, the economic diversity of the state's marine resources has declined by almost 70% according to a paper in *Conservation Biology* by a team of researchers headed by **Robert S. Steneck**, a marine biologist at the **University of Maine**. He points out that reliance on a single species is risky--he calls it a "golden trap." If anything should happen to the lobsters, it would be economically and ecologically disastrous. Lobster shell disease has taken its toll in Long Island Sound and southern New England in the past several years. If the disease should spread to Maine, the higher density of the lobster population would make it all the more vulnerable.

According to Steneck and his colleagues the super abundance of lobster reflects the lack of species diversity in the Gulf of Maine. Cod, haddock, hake, halibut and swordfish have all been overfished and their numbers severely reduced. These species were lobster predators. Now the lobsters' chief predators are humans and other lobsters. Humans further affect the imbalance by virtually providing the lobsters with feeding stations in the form of baited traps. The smaller ones can come and go as they please through specially designed vents.

"Locally caught herring and menhaden were the mainstay baits used by Maine lobstermen," reports the **Maine Lobstermen's Association's** newsletter. But, in another ominous sign of the shrinking diversity of the Gulf of Maine's fish population, bait dealers are now offering fish from around the world. This was partly due to a reduction in the herring quota in 2010, according to **Dana Rice**, a dealer quoted in the newsletter. And now, as reported in the *Washington Post*, the **Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission** has just announced its plan to also cut down the menhaden harvest, effective in 2013, because of the steep decline in their numbers, making it likely that imports of bait will continue.

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## Seashells Gone, Says *Onion*

All the good seashells have been taken, a group of Florida environmentalists reported last month, according to the *Onion*. A report coauthor told the paper that "there's nothing left but blemished, fractured, and just plain weird-looking ones." It was suspected that "most of the satisfactory shells had been stripped away by aunts with nearby beach houses, while the remainder had been picked up by 14-year-olds with few if any, friends."

## Chesapeake Sediments Continued from p. 1

Some, such as **American Rivers**, called for the dam's gates to remain open in order to prevent it from failing, and to enable the river to perform its natural function of carrying the sediment away. Others sought ways to increase the dam's sediment-trapping capacity. Many observers echoed the *Bay Journal*'s statement that "this year's weather is a stark reminder that the bay remains in such a fragile state that Mother Nature can easily trump management efforts."

## Fracking Conflicts, Continued from p. 1

This liquid stays aboveground, demanding foolproof containment and treatment if groundwater and rivers are to be protected. Every drilling operation releases some methane, a potent global warming agent. An imperfect well or facility can also contaminate drinking water. Gas leases can violate mortgage provisions.

*New York Times* op-ed writer **David Brooks** laid out the benefits of local, plentiful and cheap gas, and cited an MIT study which found the environmental record of shale gas drilling to be "for the most part good." He held that risks could be managed with a reasonable regulatory regime. Rep. **Maurice D. Hinchey** (D- NY) countered by pointing to "the shale gas industry's reluctance to address the serious risks and its relentless efforts to oppose even the most minimal public health protections."

A center of controversy in recent days has been the **Delaware River Basin Commission** (DRBC), which covers a portion of the Marcellus region with representation from Delaware, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania as well as from the Federal Government. A final vote on DRBC draft natural gas development regulations, planned for November 21, was delayed indefinitely. One proximate cause may have been the promise of **Delaware Governor Jack A. Markell** to vote no. Adding further doubt about the vote's result was New York State's concern for New York City's water supply.

Markell's letter to the DRBC cited Delaware's concerns as a downstream state whose citizens depend on the watershed for two thirds of their water supply. While recognizing the promise of local, low-emission, cost-effective energy, as well as the potential for needed direct and indirect jobs and tax revenue, Markell held that "it is more important to get it right than to get it fast." Striking a balance between economic development and responsible stewardship requires close coordination of multiple regulatory regimes, he continued. He pointed out that "Some of these regulatory schemes (1) have yet to be finalized; (2) have just been finalized but not fully evaluated; or (3) are final but not adequate."

pleted in six months rather than the six years previously scheduled. Paperwork will be sharply reduced, and restoration projects will be linked to each other, not conducted within separate stovepipes. Salazar, **Council on Environmental Quality Chair Nancy Sutley**, EPA Administrator **Lisa Jackson**, and **Florida Governor Rick Scott** all pledged redoubled efforts to stem the decline of a treasured ecosystem.

Molasses is being used to make groundwater, under a New Jersey plant, 99 percent clean of six volatile organic compounds. Among these are PCE and TCE (trichloroethylene), which are linked to cancer in lab studies, *northjersey.com* reported. This cleanup use of molasses involves a relatively new process called enhanced anaerobic bioremediation in which, after the molasses feeds microbes in the soil, they multiply and stimulate the breakdown of contaminants in the groundwater.

The Chesapeake's low-lying Poplar Island, vanishing at the rate of 13 feet a year, had shrunk to less than 10 acres by 1990. Complete disappearance loomed. But thanks to an ongoing effort by the **US Army Corps of Engineers**, it is now a 1,140 acre reserve, and it may grow by half again or more. Using soil dredged from the Baltimore shipping channel, and launching a planting program to encourage the rebirth of marshes and wetlands, the engineers have managed to recreate a haven for birds, small mammals and aquatic species.



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Tax-deductible contributions for Atlantic CoastWatch are especially needed.  
Checks can be made payable to the Sustainable Development Institute.

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## Products

⌘ Energy from poultry litter and biofuel from algae grown from chicken litter are in prospect for the Chesapeake's Eastern Shore. **Fibrowatt**, owned by **Homeland Renewable Energy**, is considering building a \$300 million poultry litter combustion facility on the bay, reported *Delmarvanow.com*. The facility would generate at least 10 megawatts (more than triple the output of a comparable wind turbine), create 32 full-time jobs and as many as 80-100 jobs for truck drivers. An existing Fibrowatt plant produces 55 megawatts of power that can take care of a city of 40,000, the *Chesapeake Bay Journal* said.

⌘ **Levi Strauss** and other companies are becoming aware of the growing shortage of water in many areas where cotton is grown, and it has started producing a line of "**Water-Less**" jeans, which display a special logo on their tags.

The company estimates that the changes instituted in their manufacturing process have produced an average 28% saving of water, and as much as 98% for some products. The accompanying message to customers urges them to use water wisely by washing in cold water and only when necessary.

## Funding

The **US Commerce Department** has awarded a \$3 million Economic Development Administration grant to the **University of Maine**. The funds will be used to purchase equipment for its new Offshore Wind Energy Laboratory. The plan is to design and manufacture prototype wind blades up to 70 meters long.

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## Weird Weather

In sum, reported **Joe Romm** in his well-known *ClimateProgress* blog, "Flood damage from the remnants of Tropical Storm Lee in the Northeast on September 8 is now estimated at more than \$1 billion, and two outbreaks of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes—one in April and one in June—now have damage estimates exceeding \$1 billion. A remarkable seven severe thunderstorm/tornado outbreaks did more than \$1 billion each in damage in 2011, and an eighth outbreak July 10-14 came close, with damages of \$900 million. In total, the fourteen billion-dollar disasters killed 675 people. Tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods in these fourteen disasters killed over 600 people, putting 2011 into fourth place since 1940 for most deaths by severe storms."