

The Potomac and the Bay

Covering the waterfront

By Rona Kobell





Potomac facts

- ◆ The Potomac River basin encompasses 14,670 miles
- ◆ It includes 4 states and the District of Columbia
- ◆ It has 5 million people, and counting.
- ◆ It is governed by none of these states, but instead by the Interstate Commission of the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission
- ◆ Its topography varies widely, from urban waterfront dining in the District to a poultry industry in the Shenandoah Valley

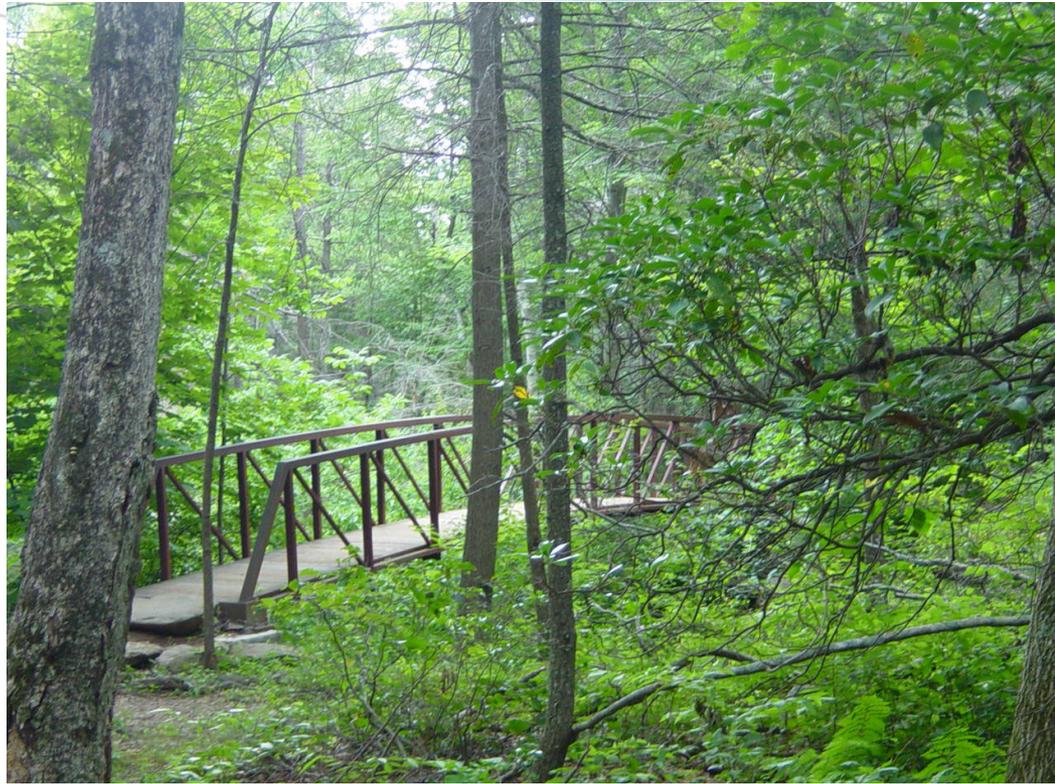
Why does the river matter?

- ◆ One Third of all the freshwater flowing into the Chesapeake Bay comes from the Potomac.
- ◆ 20 percent of its nitrogen
- ◆ 20 percent of its phosphorus
- ◆ It is the single largest source of sediment to the bay: 4.1 billion pounds per year, according to USGS
- ◆ That makes the Potomac one of the biggest sources of the bay's pollution, second to the Susquehanna.

What are the sources?

- ◆ Blue Plains treatment plant – one of largest in nation
- ◆ People – stormwater, construction, sediment, etc.
- ◆ Agricultural uses
- ◆ Poultry production and poultry manure

Canaan Valley State Park



Has the river gotten worse?

- ◆ Evidence shows that it has
- ◆ N and P rates are higher
- ◆ Culprits are growth and the nascent chicken industry
- ◆ Legislation to protect the river is either not enforced or weak.

Algae bloom



What will it take to clean it up?

- ◆ Money
- ◆ \$30 million for Blue Plains upgrades.
- ◆ 2 million people use the facility, and upgrades will cut the 8 million pounds of nitrogen in half. It was the only plant in watershed to meet its goals.
- ◆ \$400 million in the farm bill for agriculture, targeting the Potomac.
- ◆ Smart growth incentives

Growth



How to cover the waterfront

- ◆ It's a science job, but tinged with advocacy groups, so you have to sort of the signals from the noise and figure out people's agendas.
- ◆ Try not to keep it too dry – this is water we're talking about. Relate it as much as possible to people's experiences.
- ◆ Keep your agencies straight – and find people within and without them who will talk to you.

How to cover the waterfront

- ◆ Get out there!
- ◆ Whatever you do in science, be sure to get out of your office, away from that report, and breathe life into your story. If you are pitching the story, take the reporter out with you.
- ◆ Find guides – watermen, researchers, recreational boaters – to help tell the story

The government and the bay

- ◆ So many agencies, so little time
- ◆ The models verses the real data: know what to trust
- ◆ Be able to explain yearly changes and connect them to behavior.

Is the Bay ever going to get better?

- ◆ Yes, but it probably can't get back to the way it was in the 1950s.
- ◆ In some places, it actually has improved, because industry has left. Examples include Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Dupont Country in Delaware.
- ◆ But it won't really improve until we take collective responsibility for our actions.

How to help get your story out

- ◆ Remember, reporters who are covering the Olympics may not be environmental experts.
- ◆ Be patient; make sure they understand the complicated ecosystem.
- ◆ Maximum disclosure, minimum delay: Hold press conferences to talk about things, get ahead of what might be a bad story.
- ◆ Be clear about the problems and the causes.

Make it fun

- ◆ Waterways offer bounty, not just problems.
- ◆ Find stories to tell around food, fishermen.
- ◆ Cultivate relationships with local and national reporters whenever possible.
- ◆ They will pay off later. I promise!