Stephen Badger

This Land is Your Land

Connecting people and places

By Kristen Peterson

Cunningham Falls

Maryland's land tells a rich historic narrative. Shots were fired at Fort Frederick during the French and Indian War. The first stone for the B&O railroad was laid in 1828 by 90-year-old Charles Carroll — one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In the 1950's, cities witnessed an exodus as citizens headed toward the white picket fences of suburbia. And the tale of our land is one still unfolding. Today, our vibrant landscape continues to be shaped… by design.

Maryland has a well-earned reputation as a leader in land conservation, with 475,000 acres of land managed by DNR as a part of the public trust. Conserving and planning for a vast network of connected open spaces, forests, parks, playgrounds and trails does not happen in a vacuum, nor does it happen by chance.

So, how does it happen?

Every five years the State prepares a *Land Preservation and Recreation Plan* in cooperation with local governments and their complementary plans. Essential to managers and planners, it qualifies the State to receive federal land acquisition funding and offers a comprehensive "to do" list for expanding outdoor opportunities, inspiring stewardship and protecting our natural and cultural resources.

The most recent plan, approved by the National Park Service in April of this year, charts a course for outdoor recreation and land preservation through 2018. The result of a year and a half of research and development, the Plan is the most collaborative, citizen-oriented set of strategies for State land Maryland has produced to date.

Project goals for the next five years include expanding trails, creating new picnic areas, upgrading visitor centers and other facilities, and improving access to water and nature spaces. The projects are designed to meet the ever-changing needs of our citizens and visitors, while protecting our living and natural resources.

"Our citizens are the reason for this Plan," says John F. Wilson, DNR's Associate Director of Land Acquisition and Planning, who led its development. "So, we went through an extensive public outreach process to ensure we gained valid, usable feedback from residents across Maryland."

The information gained from the outreach — which included surveys by phone and online, and multiple citizen stakeholder meetings — resulted in four key focus areas: coordination among local, county and State planning efforts; promotion of health, economic and environmental benefits; access to water and land-based recreation for all citizens; and connections between trails and public lands to the places where people live, work and play.

Working together

The DNR Land team worked with their colleagues across the Department, as well as other State agencies, stakeholders, and local and non-governmental organizations to develop the Plan. Moving forward, DNR will continue to collaborate with federal, State, county and local officials to review opportunities and determine where and how to invest through 2018.

Mark Hollis

Park Ranger Alyssa Henn guides a group hike at Patapsco Valley State Park.

DNR

Tuckahoe State Park hosts a race.

Early in the process, DNR assessed where recreation areas, land and water-based natural resources and trails had gaps. By sharing this information with its partners, DNR can help coordinate long-range planning efforts. For instance, when a county bike path comes close to overlapping with a State trail, the State can work with the county to connect the two for a more extensive and accessible trail network.

"Planning in a vacuum does not benefit anyone," says Adam Bossi, Natural Resources Planner, who hopes to meet with every county planning or parks and recreation office in Maryland by the end of the summer. "County and local governments, as well as DNR, provide many diverse parks, natural areas and opportunities for nature-based recreation. By working in tandem, we can improve public recreation and natural resource conservation projects for the benefit of Maryland residents and visitors."

Getting the word out

During the public outreach process, lack of time was cited as a top reason for not participating in outdoor recreation more frequently. Another key reason is that people aren't always aware of the programs and facilities offered.

"In today's day and age, we are competing with television, the internet, social media and mobile phones," says Wilson. "It's ironic that all of this technology that is supposed to save us time, appears to be having the opposite effect. Regardless, we need to let the public know about all of the great resources that are available to them. It's time to put down our smart phones and get excited about the outdoors!"

Ergo, part of the Plan addresses the need to more widely promote these opportunities and the vast economic, health and environmental benefits.

Economic Benefits

According to the Outdoor Industry Association, recreational activity generates $9.5 billion in consumer spending, 85,000 jobs and $686 million in State and local revenue in Maryland. This information is substantiated by a Maryland State Parks study, which reports that with nearly 10 million day users and one million overnight users the economic impact of the State's extensive Park network is $650 million annually.

"Our parks and public lands must be seen to be as much of our infrastructure as our water and sewer lines," says Wilson. "These resources benefit not just our health, the environment and help create the next generation of stewards, they also contribute big money to the State."

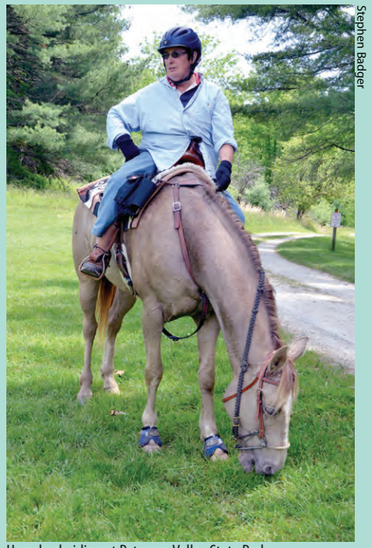
"Every federal, State and local government has a finite budget that must be balanced," continues Wilson. "Each government leader has to make hard choices on where to spend the funding. While historically, outdoor recreation and land protection has been seen

Tammy McCorkle

A section of the Appalachian Trail at Gathland State Park

Stephen Badger

Visitors enjoy the view at Washington Monument State Park.


Stephen Badger

Horseback riding at Patapsco Valley State Park

as an accessory, I think the O'Malley-Brown administration has done a nice job of categorizing it as it deserves: as a necessity."

Health & Well-being Benefits

With physical and mental health issues all over the news these days it makes sense that the Plan incorporates a focus on the health benefits of outdoor recreation. Obesity rates are climbing among both children and adults, which can increase the risk of developing chronic diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancer. Many studies have confirmed that spending time outside can combat these risks and lead to enhanced physical, social and mental well-being.

One program making its way through the national medical community even prescribes nature and parks to patients: Park RX. The goal of this movement is to create a healthier population by strengthening the connection between the healthcare system and public lands across the nation.

Environmental Benefits

Beyond the many obvious environmental benefits of outdoor recreation and natural resource protection, DNR is kicking it up a notch to advance "green" efforts through interagency planning. In conjunction with Maryland Departments of Transportation, Economic Development, Planning, and Environment, DNR is also working to revitalize communities in a sustainable manner.

This may include communities that conserve resources, provide green spaces and parks for recreation and agriculture, offer many options for transportation and use natural and cultural resources wisely for future generations.

Accessibility for all

DNR is committed to improving public access to land and water-based recreation for everyone. With close to 500 public water access sites — places where boats, kayaks, canoes can be launched or retrieved — Maryland has more public access than any other jurisdiction in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Still the public need is ever-expanding and DNR is working to add water access sites at several State Parks.

"We want to ensure that all public access is planned and developed responsibly and with consideration for the welfare of natural and cultural resources," says Lisa Gutierrez, Director of Maryland's Public Access/Water Trails and Recreation Planning Program, who wrote the Water Trails section of the plan. "Currently, Maryland has over 700 miles of designated water trails and we want to create new ones. These trails and water access sites can introduce people to water recreation and highlight the importance of environmental stewardship to protect these areas."

Park RX Robert Zarr, MD, MPH, FAAP is a board-certified pediatrician in Washington, D.C. for Unity Health Care, Inc — the second largest federally qualified health center in the U.S. He leads the D.C. Park Prescription Program (DC Park Rx), which prescribes nature to prevent and treat chronic disease. Since July 1, 2013, more than 550 patients have been prescribed a park. Park Rx has recently been expanded to all of Unity's health centers, which collectively serve more than 100,000 patients with over 500,000 visits per year.

"We are using Park RX to combat chronic disease," says Dr. Zarr. "This program has been well received by both patients and doctors alike. Our research has already shown that every child prescribed a park will spend 22 more minutes being physically active, and six more days per year in a park for at least thirty minutes. We are literally turning people inside out — that is inside people into outdoors folks, and we're the healthier for it."

It's all about connecting

From the Avalon Super Loop in Patapsco Valley State Park to Maryland's portion of the Appalachian Trail to the C & O Canal Towpath trail, Maryland trails come in all shapes and sizes and meet the needs of a wide range of users. Our diverse visitors include equestrians, hikers and the physically challenged, who all contribute millions of dollars to the State economy.

A connected trail network and a desire for more trails were identified as high priorities for Marylanders in the public outreach process. Over the next five years, DNR will work to better connect our public lands and trails to the places where the people of Maryland live, work and play. By ensuring they have trails nearby, DNR hopes to also address the number one challenge of survey respondents in participating in outdoor recreation — a lack of time.

With this priority in mind, the Plan contains a separate trails section for the first time — written by a committee of 15 people representing a broad range of trails-related perspectives, priorities and expertise — that will provide guidance and investment strategies to support the many needs of trail users.

Kerry Wixted

Birding at Chapman State Park

"Maryland has more than 1,000 miles of trails that meet the recreational needs of many different users and showcase the rich variety of landscapes that make our State a miniature United States," says Steve Carr, Land Trails Planner at DNR who led the Committee. "From ocean to mountain, we have it all. I look forward to the work that DNR will accomplish over the next several years to improve our trails system."

Results on the ground

By assessing the State's resources, taking into account issues and trends, and incorporating extensive public input, DNR has produced a document that will serve as an invaluable tool in planning for public outdoor recreation and land preservation. Our land — rich in forests and farms, wildlife habitat, recreation and tourism, culture and history — is the foundation of our State's economic and social prosperity.

By taking informed action today, we can ensure tomorrow's Maryland maintains this balance of richness and prosperity. ■

dnr.maryland.gov/land

Kristen Peterson is the Senior Manager of Strategic Communications in DNR's Office of Communications.

DNR

More and more State Parks host *First Day Hikes* on January 1, providing families guided access to trails even on what can be cold winter days.

Renee Salisbury

Obsering nature in Baltimore

Paula Mansfield

Hiking at Greenbrier