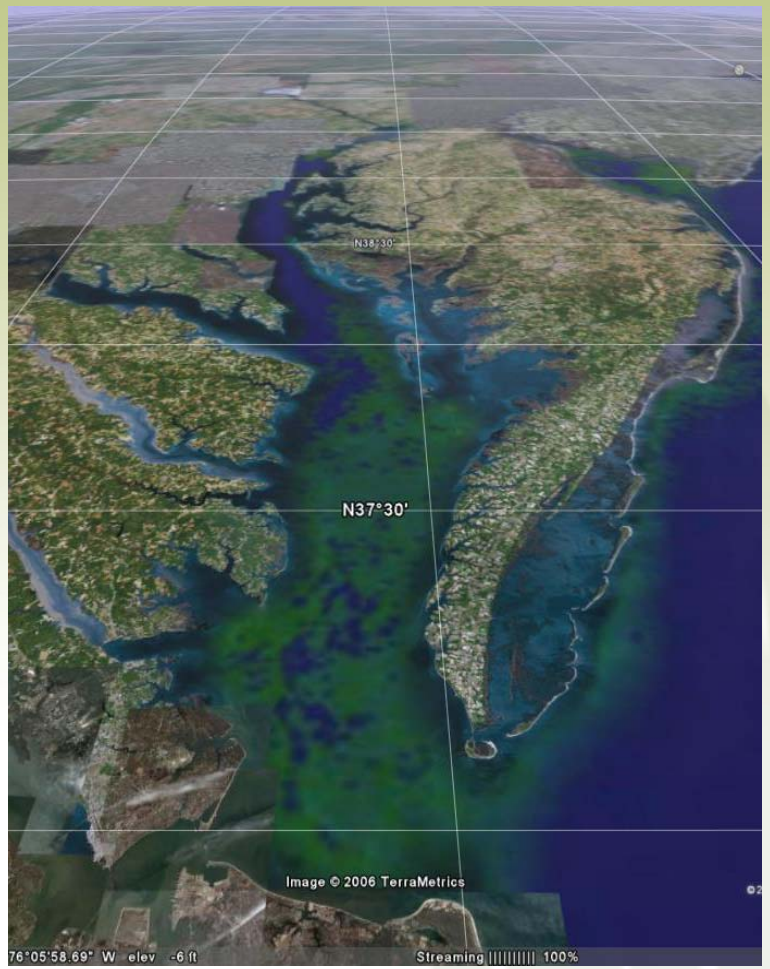
NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE SYSTEM

Estuaries

What is an estuary?

An estuary is a partially enclosed body of water along the coast where freshwater from rivers and streams meet and mix with salt water from the ocean. Estuaries and the lands surrounding them are places of transition from land to sea, and although influenced by the tides, they are protected from the full force of ocean waves, winds, and storms by such landforms as barrier islands or peninsulas. Estuaries are often known as bays, lagoons, harbors, inlets, or sounds.



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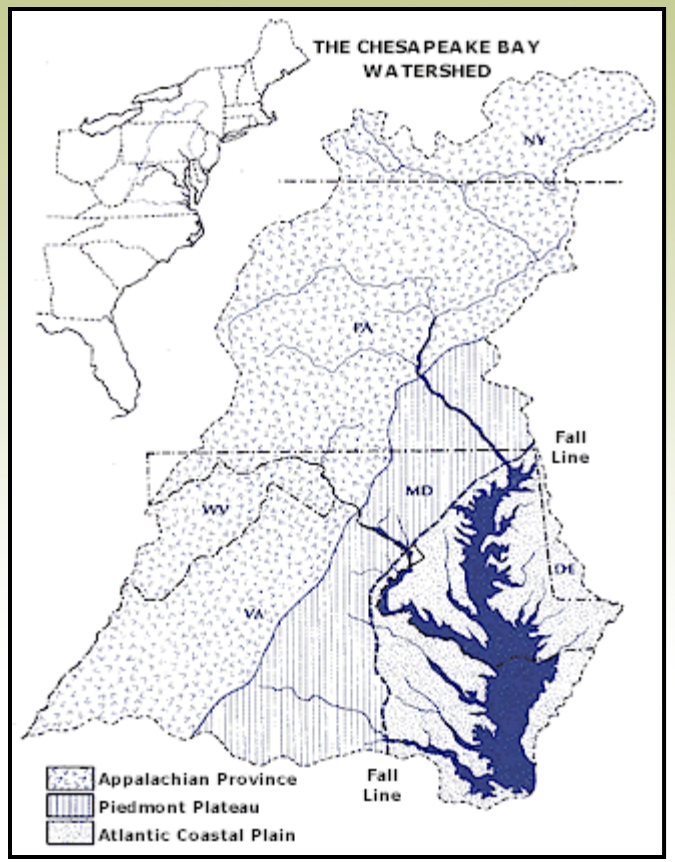

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States

❖Watershed encompasses ~64,000 square miles and includes parts of NY, PA, DE, MD,VA, WV, and all of District of Columbia

❖ 200 miles long from Havre de Grace, MD to Norfolk, VA

❖ 11,600 miles of shoreline (Bay & Tribs) which is more then the US West coast

❖ 15 million people live in the watershed with an estimated population of 18 million by 2020

Why are estuaries important?

• Estuaries serve as sponges. As water flows from the land to the ocean, the water is filtered by the vegetation, and silt is trapped. Estuaries can also filter small amounts of pollution out of the water before it reaches the ocean.

• Estuaries serve as important natural buffers, protecting upland areas from erosion and natural storm surge.

•Estuaries provide a safe haven and protective nursery for small fish, shellfish, migrating birds, and coastal shore animals. In the U.S., estuaries are nurseries to over 75% of all fish and shellfish harvested.

Photos courtesy: CBNERRVA

Want to learn more?

Visit www.estuaries.gov for more information about estuaries and how you can get involved with your local Estuarine Research Reserve!