What Makes a Marsh?

By: Alex Sahi

Drive on Deal Island Road heading towards Arby's General Store at the end of the Deal Island Peninsula and you cannot help but notice the unique sights and sounds of this part of the Maryland Eastern Shore. There are old churches, Bay vistas, and a pervasive quietness. As you make your way through the pine trees, there are sudden expanses where the scenery gives way to wide open marsh stretching as far as the eye can see. For miles there is low lying wetland vegetation and a network of creeks and tributaries that make up the marshes of Deal Island Peninsula. While driving through this area, it is impossible to miss their visual presence. Sometimes though it is easy to overlook the underlying complexity that this area has ecologically, and more important culturally. There are few clues apparent to the average visitor of the cultural importance of these marshes: no buildings are left standing in the marshes, it is rare to see people wading through them when you drive through, yet the ethnographic vantage point provided through this study of the history of marsh management on the Deal Island Peninsula highlights a pervasive amount of interactions between the marshes and the wide range of people who live and work on the Deal Island Peninsula.

The salt marshes of the Deal Island Peninsula continuously migrate and change, so the marshes today are not in the same place as they were in the past. There are stories of such change told by local residents, and this change is mirrored in the archaeological record. Before colonial settlers adopted the Eastern Shore for residence, Native Americans were also in the marshes utilizing it for trapping and hunting, which is still a common practice today. This area of the land is not one that has traditionally received a lot of recognition, but as the ecological importance of the marshes gain traction with environmental organizations and agencies, so too must their

cultural significance. It is important to recognize how the community has utilized, adapted, and managed the marshes and how this has helped shape the communities here. From Native American use to now, the marshes have been important. Interviews with members of the community, scientists, and those that manage the marshes help illuminate the intricate web of cultural importance that is not readily seen. It is clear that the cultural dynamics of the marsh are significant and adds far more to the story of this landscape than what is apparent as one drives by it on Deal Island Road. So, what is it that makes a marsh?

The Deal Island marshes are more than just plants and animals that they are comprised of; they are the people that associate and are associated with it. Deal Island has a long history of settlement, and this is inherently entangled with the marshes as a formidable feature of the landscape. Local Deal Island Peninsula residents explain that when "tramping" through the marsh, old building foundations, abandoned bridges, stone arrowheads, and submerged tree stumps are found throughout it. This is a clear example that marsh migration is not a new phenomenon, it is one that locals of the area have been dealing with since the first settlement. As one resident said, "Nothing can stay the same, it's gotta change." As the marshes continue to change though, so too does the management of the marshes change. Another stakeholder noted, "I think of how what I saw in the marshes of my early years… versus what I see today, it's just a phenomenal change."

Change can be quite dramatic in the marshes, and this can clearly happen within a lifetime. Community members of the Deal Island Peninsula can tell stories of how tractors use to go out to collect salt hay, and cattle used to graze in areas that are now inaccessible unless you want to be knee deep in water. One story about the how the marshes have become wetter comes from the grandfather of one of the residents of Deal Island. This individual describes how his

grandfather used to own a boat that he occasionally used to transport fertilizer to Deal Island. On one of these trips, he was unloading his cargo in the marsh with the help of one of his crewmen, Sam, who was strong enough to carry the heavy hundred-pound bags of fertilizer a great distance across the marsh to an awaiting wagon on land. Sam was carrying two of these bags of fertilizer with ease, one on each shoulder. The captain took note of this and said to him, "you're doing pretty good, let me put another bag on ya." So, he added a third hundred-pound bag of fertilizer on Sam's load, and Sam went back across the marsh to drop the new bags of fertilizer at the wagon. He came back and said, "Captain, you better just make it two," the captain replied, "What, it's too heavy for you?" Sam relied, "No, but the ground just ain't holding up."

As the marshes continue to get wetter and move inland, management of the marshes has also changed. It is important to keep in mind that there are varying perspectives regarding the marsh and what to do with it. Residents in the early 1900's burned the marshes near Dame's Quarter to allow for better cattle feed. In 1930, the Civilian Conservation Corps created ditches to alleviate mosquitos, even though we know now that the mosquitos come from the highland area where there is still freshwater. Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) used open-water marsh management to also try and control the mosquito population in the 1970's. Around this time, Maryland DNR also built a 2,800-acre impoundment to attract more migratory waterfowl, which was appreciated by both resident and management folk at the time, but may not be the case anymore. There are residents who prefer to hunt and trap in the marsh, while other residents appreciate it for its history and contribution to local identity. There are so many perspectives regarding the marsh, and these perspectives have inevitably help define the marshes on the Deal Island Peninsula. Each lens through which the marsh is viewed adds to the complexity of this seemingly untamed natural landscape. It is in fact the combination of these

perspectives that has influenced how the marshes have been managed and shaped over the generations.

So why are the marshes important? There is a lot of history associated with them and this, combined with the important cultural benefits contribute to the value of marshes on the Deal Island Peninsula. Local communities have a strong tradition of hunting, trapping, and fishing in the marshes because they are so biodiverse. There would not be such a strong tradition if the marshes were not healthy ecological landscapes, but there is a cultural history as well that needs to be accounted for. When the marshes were more solid, they were where a number of homes and cemeteries were located, places that remain important sites of ancestral roots for a number of local residents, even though the old house foundations and burial sites have long been covered by the marsh. One such community was Pigeon House, a community abandoned in the 1930's because of marsh encroachment. One resident interviewed for this study shared that his great great-grandfather still rests at Pigeon House. Taking such stories into consideration, the marsh then is a place that represents part of the heritage of the communities of Deal Island Peninsula, while also remaining a place valued for its resources and recreational benefits. This marsh heritage in combination with the local and more regional management practices of those who live, work, and study the marshes of the Deal Island Peninsula has transformed these ecosystems into something far more complex than their ecological dimensions suggest. They are shaped by the collection of ideas, beliefs, and values of the Deal Island Peninsula area stakeholders that make them as much social and cultural as they are ecological spaces. What makes the marshes of Deal Island important are the people and the history surrounding the marshes, and the existence of a place that brings so many different groups of people together.