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Has the Chesapeake Bay Tide Turned?

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BOOK REVIEW

HAS THE CHESAPEAKE BAY TIDE TURNED?

TURNING THE TIDE: SAVING THE CHESAPEAKE BAY.

BY TOM HORTON, WASHINGTON, D.C.: ISLAND PRESS, 2003.

*Reviewed by Carl W. Tobias **

Nearly a quarter century ago, the states of the Chesapeake Bay region entered a compact by which they meant to improve the declining environmental quality of this national treasure. Concerned about the Bay's accelerating degradation, these jurisdictions hoped that the agreement would enhance the situation or at least stop the deterioration. Ten years after that accord's consummation, Tom Horton evaluated whether progress had been achieved in improving the Bay's environmental health. The writer determined that the answer was inconclusive. When a second decade had passed since the compact's adoption, Horton decided that he would conduct another examination to determine what had occurred in the ensuing ten-year period. This exploration led to the publication of *Turning the Tide: Saving the Chesapeake Bay*. Because the agreement has now been in effect for more than two decades and because questions regarding the Bay's environmental quality remain even more pressing today, Horton's volume warrants review. This piece undertakes that effort.

The first section of my review affords a descriptive evaluation of *Turning the Tide*. The second part recounts Tom Horton's numerous valuable contributions to understanding the Chesapeake

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Bay, especially why the environmental quality of the Bay has improved only somewhat, if at all, despite substantial clean-up attempts by the states. The third section proffers recommendations for the future.

I. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The first chapter, named "The Chesapeake Ecosystem," sets the stage for fundamentally reconsidering the Chesapeake Bay as an ecosystem in which the Atlantic Ocean and rivers, humans and creatures interact throughout six jurisdictions and 64,000 square miles to affect the quality of life in the water and on the land. Horton scrutinizes why the Bay is at once highly productive and vulnerable to environmental stress. Chapter one also examines the notion of resilience, the capacity of the Bay's animals and plants to resist pollution and maintain themselves.

The second chapter, titled "Pollution," chapter three, named "Harvests," and the fourth chapter, called "Resilience," comprise the volume's essence because they document the Bay's present condition. The three chapters elaborate the ecosystem idea, applying the evaluation from the mountains, across the piedmont and tidewater to the marshes and ultimately the water, itself. The second chapter assesses the clear and less obvious ways in which the Chesapeake is polluted. Chapter three demonstrates how harvesting the Bay's resources more quickly than finfish, crustaceans, and mollusks can reproduce creates difficulties. The fourth chapter assesses how well humans are preserving the natural habitats which assist the ecosystem combat the stresses of pollution and overharvesting.

Chapter five, titled "The Ultimate Issue: People," addresses the number of individuals who can live near and on the Bay and the impact which each one can have on the ecosystem. Horton explores the need for modifications in the consumptive activities of humans, such as energy use and housing. For instance, he emphasizes sprawl development, its destruction of the natural landscape and responses to sprawl.

The sixth chapter, named "Recommendations," proffers a group of objectives and suggestions for restoring the Chesapeake Bay to good health. Horton scrutinizes and applies a rigorous litmus test for every recommendation which he affords: can the proposal

work sufficiently well to improve the Chesapeake's environmental health, even as millions of additional individuals live in the region?

II. CONTRIBUTIONS

Turning the Tide makes a substantial number of instructive contributions to appreciation of the modern Chesapeake Bay. First, and perhaps foremost, Tom Horton clearly documents, and presents an enormous quantity of relevant information about, the contemporary state of the Chesapeake Bay. *Turning the Tide* is a virtual compendium of applicable material about many important features regarding the Bay today. The book thoroughly surveys applicable environmental, scientific, technological, legal and public policy ideas that affect the Bay. Horton also explores the importance of the private sector and the public sector, at all levels of government, to the Bay's health. The writer correspondingly traces the relevant historical background, descriptively analyzes the current situation and affords informed projections into the future.

Horton initially evaluates distinctive aspects of the Chesapeake, such as the Bay's extraordinary length, the shallow nature of the estuary and its incredible productivity. The monograph then surveys in considerable detail the various sources that pollute the Chesapeake, examining thoroughly a multitude of pollutant parameters, including agriculture, sewage, air, sediment, oil spills, and recreational contributions.

The author next examines the concept of harvesting Chesapeake Bay resources, while he recounts what has occurred to the finfish, especially rockfish, the crustaceans, in particular blue claw crabs, and the mollusks, especially oysters. Horton specifically canvasses how the taking of various species has affected them and has generally tracked, and occasionally forecasted, the Bay's declining environmental quality.

Turning the Tide concomitantly gauges how effectively human beings are protecting and preserving the natural habitats that are so essential to revitalization of the Chesapeake's environmental quality. Horton canvasses those habitats by evaluating forests, nontidal wetlands, the edges and bottom of the Bay as well as areas upstream and down.

The volume trenchantly demonstrates how the issue which is critical to the Chesapeake's revival ultimately implicates human beings. Horton asks how many individuals can live on the Bay, although he eventually demonstrates that the most important question is how people affect the Chesapeake. Indeed, the book's central thesis, and one of its finest insights, is that Bay degradation is essentially a "people problem."

Turning the Tide affords numerous additional contributions. Tom Horton writes in lucid, understandable ways about issues that are rather unclear. One of the book's great virtues is its accessibility, in particular to neophytes or others who may be rather unfamiliar with the Bay. However, even seasoned Chesapeake aficionados and Bay experts will derive much of value from *Turning the Tide*. This monograph also seems to be a rather balanced account of issues that are quite complex and very controversial.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The numerous perceptive contributions offered by *Turning the Tide* complicate efforts to afford suggestions for the future. Expanding on some issues might facilitate comprehension of the modern dispute over the Bay's revival. For example, the finest solutions for the Bay's current ills are sharply contested. More specifically, it remains unclear whether pollution, overharvesting or other phenomena are the primary culprits and, if so, what are the best measures for addressing these factors. Illustrative are caps and moratoria on taking various species, regulatory controls and dramatically increased spending on Bay clean up. The preferable approach may be case-by-case decisionmaking in terms of species or pollutant parameters, while some mix of alternatives may prove most effective.

The exceedingly fast pace at which developments involving the Chesapeake Bay seem to be moving also suggests that certain features of the volume may already be obsolete or at least dated. This is not intended as a criticism of the author, who has meticulously updated and modernized his earlier account in this recent edition. It may simply be that rapid change and fast-growing comprehension of the Bay's state have overtaken quite thorough, recent efforts.

CONCLUSION

Turning the Tide substantially enhances understanding of the Chesapeake Bay, in particular by thoroughly describing its modern circumstances. Tom Horton illuminates appreciation of this valuable national treasure, designates the current problems which the Bay confronts and elaborates promising responses to the difficulties presently faced by the Chesapeake.