

Tidewater Day Tripping:
Exploring the World of Wetlands with
Environmental Concern

by
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*What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*
– Gerard Manley Hopkins

Living on the Eastern Shore we count our blessings. We are surrounded by water – the roaring Atlantic Ocean, the magnificent Chesapeake Bay, idyllic rivers including the Choptank, Tred Avon and Miles, as well as numerous creeks, coves, inlets, streams and wetlands. Living near the water is calming and soothing. They say it has something to do with the tranquility experienced in the watery womb. Maybe it takes us back to that feeling of warmth and security. Maybe it is our attraction to and need for the wilderness and wet.

We all know of the challenges to keep the waters that surround us healthy and clean. Years of human activity have taken their toll. But there is always the hope that with research, time, money and hard work we can reverse the damage that has been done, restore shorelines and water quality.

Living on the Shore we are also blessed to be home to an organization that brings hope for protecting our waters by working to reverse the damage that has been done to wetlands – locally, nationally and internationally. Environmental Concern, Inc. (EC), a nonprofit organization and our day tripping and lunch destination, has restored more than 35 miles of Chesapeake Bay shorelines since its founding in 1972. And, EC recently completed the restoration of over 5,000 ft. of shoreline on the Sassafras River, 2,550 linear feet of shoreline on Tilghman Island, and restored eroded banks on Lloyd's Creek at Wye House Farm.

Don boots and jeans, pack gloves, a pencil and notebook (to jot down answers to your wetlands gardening questions), a camera (to photograph the beautiful flora and visiting fauna) and lunch and you'll be ready for a day trip to EC's 13.5-acre Wetland Learning Campus located on the headwaters of San Domingo Creek in historic St. Michaels, MD.

Late last spring on my drive to EC for their annual Spring Open House, I passed by newly ploughed and planted fields. I thought with joy that soon the local farmers' produce stands would be open and selling fresh fruits and vegetables. Crossing the bridge over Oak Creek with the Miles River looming off to the right, I spied a few watermen's boats plying the waters for their catch. The wide open view of the river is always majestic.

When I travel west on St. Michaels Road, MD-33, I feel exhilarated because I know that I am heading toward the Bay and open waters with the sense of freedom and connection to nature that makes the Shore so special. And with spring in full bloom, snowy white and pale pink dogwoods bursting with blossoms, daffodils the color of the sun and purple tulips swaying in the gentle breeze and the grass turning greener each day, spring is a lovely time of the year to visit EC and to learn about how to protect the wetlands and the water that we treasure.

Like most people, I get the gardening urge in the spring, and I looked forward to purchasing native plants appropriate for my landscape conditions from the EC nursery specialists. I also wanted plants to help to restore and retain my shoreline naturally. I wanted to garden in a way that saves the Bay, not further pollutes it. The EC folks usually wholesale their plants but sell native plants, shrubs and trees to the public at their spring and

fall Open House. They also answer gardening questions and help with plant selection. EC prices are reasonable and the plants are healthy. And, natives require less maintenance than non-natives – a plus for me because I like to enjoy the fruits of my gardening labors but not really labor too much.

EC is located off Boundary Lane on the left side of MD-33 just before St. Michaels. The campus is comprised of 21 greenhouses, classroom buildings, maintenance buildings, rows upon rows of outdoor growing beds of plants, trees and shrubs and, parked near a field is EC's colorfully painted Wetlands on Wheels Mobile Classroom. EC has the capacity to grow more than 1 million plants annually.

After parking I walked first through the rows of plants and then down to the water. St. Michaels Town Dock, home to numerous watermen's vessels, is located next to the EC campus. If you bring a picnic lunch you will enjoy sitting at the picnic tables near the San Domingo, watching the herons and gulls fishing along the shoreline, ducks and geese feeding in the wetlands, a hawk or owl flying overhead, and the waterman unloading their catch.

EC was established by Dr. Edgar Garbisch, the guardian angel of wetlands. While others were destroying wetlands and converting them into usable land for McMansions and developments, Garbisch's pioneering mission was to build wetlands by establishing a nursery to propagate wetlands plants. Garbisch's nonprofit is now dedicated to saving and restoring wetlands, his vision of "vital ecosystems that provide a multitude of ecological and social functions...paramount to maintaining quality of life on this planet."

Wetlands are the shoreline areas between the land and water that contain special soils and plants that filter water runoff from the land. Maryland's tidal wetlands fringe the shorelines of the Chesapeake and Coastal Bays and their tidal tributaries. Wetlands are like sponges, absorbing and retaining water and filtering water like coffee filters filter coffee. Wetlands stabilize shorelines and limit water runoff of excess nitrogen and other pollutants, so harmful to the Bay and other waterways. They are a nursery for fish, crabs and other sea life.

The Bay wetland ecosystem begins when the marsh plants decay; bacteria eat the decaying plants; fiddler crabs, snails, insects and fish eat the bacteria; birds and mammals eat those critters; and humans eat the fish, seafood, birds and mammals. Thus the wetlands provide sustenance for the survival of many of earth's creatures and a full circle ecosystem.

Wetlands are also home to crayfish, yellow perch, muskrat, snapping turtles, and bullfrogs. In fact most of Maryland's water wildlife, including Bay seafood, depends on wetlands for food and protection during various life stages

EC's native plant nursery, considered the first of its kind in the nation, raises over 120 native wetlands plant species critical for wetlands restoration projects, including the one at Poplar Island, and for wholesale and twice-yearly retail sales. The working native plant nursery includes salt marsh, freshwater, forested wetland and nutrient management pond plants.

The organization's mission is to promote public understanding and stewardship of wetlands with the goal of improving water quality and enhancing nature's habitat through wetland outreach and education, native species horticulture and the restoration, construction and enhancement of wetlands. EC's Wetland Learning Campus is the first Green Center on the Eastern Shore to be certified by the Maryland Association for Environmental Outdoor Education.

A major focus of EC's work is teaching others how to be better wetland stewards. EC's Education Department trains resource professionals, teachers, students, decision makers and the general public. And EC's wetland education materials are used in over 40 countries and throughout the U.S.

The local community benefits from EC's community outreach education, with programs for children, youth and adults as well as poetry, writing and photography contests. I want to take the March 14th workshop on how to "bayscape" instead of landscape and how to create a rain barrel to collect roof water runoff for garden watering. The June 12th class on

creating rain gardens with EC plants to prevent runoff sounds good too. Kids might like the August 14th workshop on turtles with turtle talk, turtle crafts and live turtles!

EC President Suzanne Pittenger-Slear has said that EC is going global...one schoolyard, one country, one wetland at a time. EC has hosted groups from 20 countries, sharing with them the restored shoreline on San Domingo Creek and three constructed wetlands (forested, freshwater and storm water management) on campus.

Pittenger-Slear was recently elected chairman of the U.S. National Ramsar Committee, an international treaty dedicated to the conservation and wise use of wetlands, which will give EC the opportunity to influence wetlands policy globally. She and representatives from 158 other countries met recently in South Korea to discuss the 417 million acres of wetlands designated "wetlands of international importance."

After walking the EC campus, observing a great blue heron stalking its morning snack, lunching at the picnic tables by the San Domingo, and browsing through rows of nursery stock, I made my garden selections. I purchased some old favorites, Black-eyed Susans, Marsh Hibiscus and Swamp Milkweed. Then for my shoreline I found Broad-Leaved Cattails, Smooth Cordgrass and Switchgrass. I loaded up the car and headed home hoping that my husband would be available on the weekend to help me with the planting.

EC is open year-round for programs and tours for groups of all ages, schools, watershed groups, community groups, garden clubs and scouts, etc., by appointment. Call 410-745-9620 to plan a visit to Environmental Concern at 201 Boundary Lane, St. Michaels, MD. Or, visit during the 2009 Spring Open House scheduled for June 12-13. To volunteer, donate, or for more information about EC projects, programs and events, visit the extensive EC Website at www.wetland.org, a valuable source for information included in this article.