

Festival marks 40 years experience in its mission of funding wildlife, conservation

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One of the attractions for many visitors to the Waterfowl Festival is slurping down a freshly shucked oyster or savoring a delicious crab cake or cup of crab soup, while flocks of Canada Geese honk their way across the skies overhead. Easily forgotten in the enjoyment of these Eastern Shore moments is that for 40 years, proceeds from the Waterfowl Festival have been helping to preserve the habitat that supports all that Chesapeake Bay bounty, waterfowl and way of life.

Since its beginning, the purpose of the Waterfowl Festival has been both to share with others the unique Eastern Shore traditions and to raise funds for preserving the environment that gave rise to them. Over the past four decades, the event has raised more than \$5 million for conservation, education and research benefiting the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed and beyond. Proceeds from the Festival, art purchases and the VIP Donor Program all benefit the organization's conservation mission.

Habitat conservation is a major focus for the Waterfowl Festival's efforts. Over \$3.8 million has been invested in wetland restoration, preservation of farmland and numerous other projects in partnership with more than 15 different organizations.

In the past 10 years, the Festival has concentrated its efforts on the Eastern Shore and immediate Chesapeake Bay region. In that period alone, almost 26,000 acres have been preserved, restored or improved through support for organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and Eastern Shore Land Conservancy. An estimated quarter million wood ducks have been added to fall flights over the same period thanks in part to Festival support for the Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage Nesting Box Program.

A recent emphasis on active participation in the projects has allowed the Waterfowl Festival to enhance collaborative efforts to work on larger projects with bigger impact on the environment. Its recent partnership with Ducks Unlimited at Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge in Kent County and Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Dorchester County exemplifies the Festival's ability to help bring other organizations and agencies together on important projects.

Close to home, the Waterfowl Festival has taken on a project of its own in the restoration of Easton's Bay Street Ponds. Donated to the organization by the Grayce B. Kerr Fund in 2008, the ponds were in need of dredging and refurbishing to improve their function in storm water management within the Easton watershed.

Environmental Concern of St. Michaels donated its services in planning the restoration. For completion of the project, the Festival was able to leverage more than \$30,000 into a grant of \$332,000 through the Maryland Department of the Environment's Water Quality Financing Administration, using funding available under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Educating future generations to be responsible stewards of the environment is another important facet of the Festival's mission. The Waterfowl Festival has dedicated more than \$1.2 million over the years to educational initiatives with more than 25 organizations.

Since 2000 alone, Festival grants have allowed almost 30,000 school children to receive hands-on environmental learning. Support for some organizations, such as Talbot County Public Schools and Pickering Creek Environmental Center, has taken students to the wetlands for first-hand experience. Others, like Environmental Concern's Wetlands on Wheels, take the wetlands to the students.

Other research projects have also benefited from Festival funding through the years, enhancing the knowledge required to preserve habitat and wildlife more effectively.

With 40 years of experience behind it in selecting and investing in the programs and organizations with the greatest positive impact, the Waterfowl Festival is poised to move forward in coming years toward using its expertise for even more significant collaborative efforts. Festival visitors delighting in their Eastern Shore experience can know they are a part of that partnership, helping to preserve the environment and traditions they are enjoying.

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