

# CHAPTER 5: COASTAL EROSION

## INTRODUCTION

Standing on the pristine beach of Cobb Island in Northampton County, one would never know that the now-tranquil barrier island was a bustling recreational center in its prime where a harpist once entertained guests in the island's grand resort hotel (Figure 1: Advertisement for Cobb's Island Hotel).



**Figure 1: Advertisement for Cobb Island Hotel**

The Cobb's Island Hotel might have been lost in a single storm, but the setup came over the course of a couple of decades as the hotel went from being 500 yards from the surf to within 50 feet, according to authors of "A Short History of the Virginia Barrier Islands" (Barnes and Truitt, 1997). Erosion from a series of late century storms had made the hotel easy pickings for a nor'easter-hurricane double-punch in 1897.

Over the course of the subsequent 100 years, Tangier Island would see more than half of its land mass recede into the Chesapeake Bay, but officials are working to make sure that Cobb Island's history is not Tangier Island's future. The Town received a commitment from the Commonwealth and the Corps of Engineers in 2012 to build a seawall and jetty to protect the Town harbor. A contract to build the seawall and jetty was awarded to a Virginia-based firm in May 2020.

There are other factors that differentiate Cobb and Tangier Islands. For example, the conditions and energy to which they are subjected are vastly different. Cobb Island is part of a long chain of barrier islands subjected to a constant barrage of plunging ocean waves breaking onto the beach, while Tangier Island is within the Chesapeake Bay where wave energy is less intense and erosion is augmented primarily by sea-level rise and subsidence.

Erosion itself can be simply described as energy moving sediment.

It can happen so incrementally that it goes almost unnoticed in the short-term and is best measured in years, or so dramatically that what was there one day is gone the next. Erosion becomes problematic when it threatens lives or property. With sea-level rise, that threat has become more prevalent.

On a peninsula, water and waves come to mind as primary drivers of erosion, but wind is also a powerful sculptor of land. The rate of erosion is also greatly influenced by underlying geology, and sometimes by man-made interventions in those natural processes - like the seawall and jetty proposed for Tangier. Those interventions can also have negative effects, like accelerating erosion in other locations, or destruction of natural bottom in front of the structure from reflected wave energy.

## Coastal Erosion

FEMA's 2011 Coastal Construction Manual describes the following ways that erosion can threaten coastal buildings:

- Destroying dunes or other natural protective features,
- Destroying erosion control devices,
- Lowering ground elevations,
- Undermining shallow foundations and reducing penetration depth of pile foundations,
- Transporting beach and dune sediments landward, where they can bury roads, buildings, and marshes,
- Breaching low-lying coastal barrier islands exposing structures on the mainland to increased flood and wave effects, and
- Eroding coastal bluffs that provide support to buildings outside the floodplain itself.

This chapter succinctly reviews the forces at work that cause erosion, how erosion changes the coastline and adjacent landforms over time, and erosion control measures that have attempted to redirect—at least temporarily—water's capacity to reshape land.

The focus of this chapter is to review changes to portions of the Eastern Shore landscape over time. Risk assessment is not found in this chapter but may be found in each locality chapter beginning with Chapter 8.

## NATURAL FORCES AND CONDITIONS

### CAUSES OF EROSION

Large tropical and extratropical storms are associated with three of the major causes of erosion: Water, wind, and waves. A list of major storms affecting the region can be found in Chapter 1: Hazards on the Shore.

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#### WATER

Water picks up and transports sediments as it moves over land. Surface erosion by water will depend on the volume of water, the speed at which it is moving, the surface characteristics (vegetative cover, permeability, sediment grain size), and its slope. Coastal floods (discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6 – Coastal Flooding) can be sources of coastal erosion as they pick up and move large quantities of water-borne sediment to be deposited elsewhere. Erosion from water can degrade coastal bluffs and tidal marshes, causing them to slump into adjacent water bodies.

Localized scour—the removal of sediment from around a fixed structure—can result from water moving at high velocity. Scour can undermine slabs or other at-grade foundations, causing them to fail, or expose other structural elements (FEMA Coastal Construction Manual, 2011).

Regardless of the source, sediment transported by water is left somewhere, and even experienced boaters have been caught on shoals that were not there the previous fall. Shoaling in some stretches of the Virginia Inside Passage, once a continuous seaside water passage buffered from the sea by the mainland to the west and the barrier islands to the east, has now rendered sections impassable, and others passable only at high tide.

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#### WIND

Exposed soil is susceptible to wind erosion, and in coastal areas, sandy areas are prevalent. This same wind can remove sand around coastal buildings. This exposes buildings in velocity zones to higher-than-anticipated forces,

putting them at risk to these velocity flow hazards. Like water, wind can also scour sand from around structural supports (FEMA Coastal Construction Manual, 2011).

Wind contributes to wave height—another erosional force—through the interaction of three factors: wind speed, duration, and fetch - the distance over water that wind blows in a single direction. Slow wind speed will produce small waves, regardless of duration and fetch. Strong winds lasting only a few minutes will not produce large waves, and strong winds over a long period, but over a short stretch, will not result in large waves. All three factors must be present to produce significant wave height (NOAA, n.d.).

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## WAVES

Away from shore, waves do not have much forward motion. As they approach the shore, friction with the ocean bottom gives the top of the waves forward momentum, causing the waves to break. The mass of forward-moving water breaking into the shore gives waves their erosive power (Hyndman and Hyndman, 2011).

With perpendicular or near-perpendicular waves, sand is pushed onto the beach by breaking waves, and pulled back as the wave washes back into the ocean. Longshore drift is a phenomenon created by waves striking the shore at an angle and water being pulled back into the ocean perpendicular to the shore. This drift generally moves sand southward along the Atlantic coast of the Eastern Shore (Hyndman and Hyndman, 2011). This pattern moves sediment grain-by-grain to build long stretches of beach, a pattern that is repeated within zones along the entire Atlantic coastline. The general pattern of transport in the Eastern Shore area is southward along the Atlantic Coastline into the Chesapeake, and southward within the bay to the lower Chesapeake where it is deposited either in the bay or tributaries of lower bay rivers, as shown in Figure 2 (USACE, 2015).

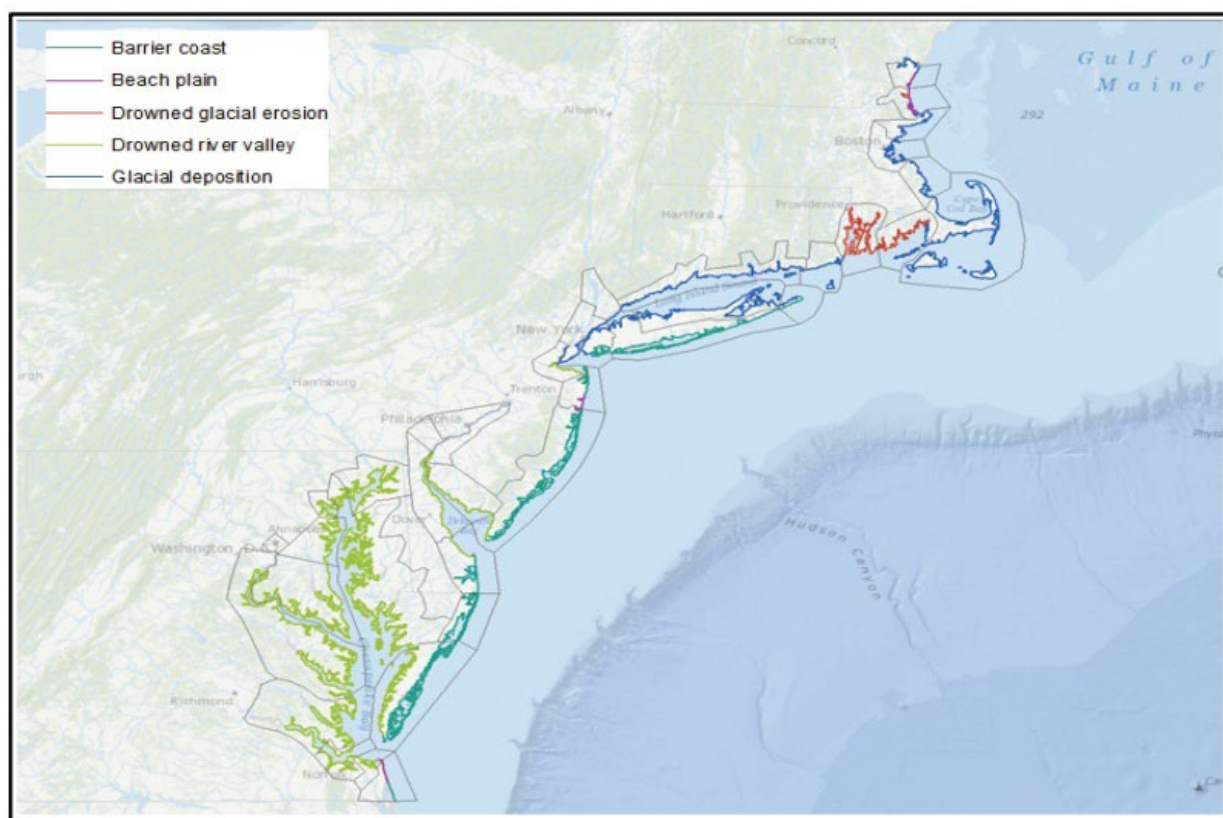


**Figure 2: Net sediment transport pathways for Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic area off the Virginia Coast. Source: "North Atlantic Coast Comprehensive Study Report (USACE, 2015).**

## EROSION AND UNDERLYING GEOLOGY

The rate of erosion of a given area is largely dependent on its underlying geology. Figure 3 depicts the mid- and northern Atlantic's coastal geology, with the Chesapeake Bay side of the Eastern Shore characterized as “drowned river valley” and the ocean side as “barrier coast.”

Drowned river valley coastlines are commonly characterized by low banks, marshes, and beaches fronting the mainland. Bayside dunes are extant in both counties, with 4.9 miles of dune shoreline in Accomack County and 10.2 miles of dune shoreline in Northampton County, including those reaching 20-50 feet at Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve. In addition to the dunes, natural resiliency features include submerged aquatic vegetation beds, oyster reefs, tidal marsh beds, and tidal creeks. Primary drivers of erosion are wave action, wave height, and wind strength and direction, which can direct water into normally dry shore areas.



**Figure 3: Atlantic Coastal Geology. Source: “North Atlantic Coast Comprehensive Study Report” (USACE, 2015).**

Atlantic barrier coastlines consist of long and narrow barrier islands, with beach on the seaward side and one or more bays on the land-facing side that support complex tidal marsh systems. Natural resiliency features include beaches, wash over fans, extensive tidal marshes with tidal flats and tidal creeks, mollusk reefs, and submerged aquatic vegetation beds.

The Eastern Shore’s seaside includes the longest expanse of coastal wilderness remaining on the Atlantic seaboard and is comprised of thousands of acres of pristine tidal marshes, vast tidal mudflats, shallow lagoons, and navigable

tidal channels that support thriving seafood and recreational tourism industries. This unique environment carries the designation of World Biosphere Reserve from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Biodiversity of the barrier island ecosystem may be globally recognized, but it is only one benefit the island chain affords. Barrier islands take the brunt of ocean energy, protecting the habitats and structures behind them. This makes barrier islands important in times of hurricanes, tropical storms, and destructive nor'easters. The low wave energy environments allow for thousands of acres of tidal marshes to thrive in the coastal bays behind the islands, increasing their flood mitigation benefits.

Sediment in this environment is moved by both longshore drift, which requires an adequate supply of sediment and "rollover," where high tides erode sand from the ocean side of the island and carry it toward the center or back side of the island as seen in Figures 4 and 5. Another factor of barrier island erosion is the interruption of the supply of sand by up-stream interventions such as jetties or groins. Storms are unable to remobilize this trapped sediment, and downstream islands erode as a result (USACE, 2015).

Sections of the barrier islands are changing rapidly, with segments of islands disappearing and moving into the back barrier channels and marshes. This is especially true for areas adjacent to active inlets and as shown in Figure 4. The home that is the subject of the photos no longer exists.

Tidal marshes are also subject to erosion. Some of the worst erosion occurs when winds pick up during mid-tide or from wake generated by motorized vessels. During low tide, the water is not high enough for waves to lap against the land edge, and during high tide, it is buried. However, at mid-tide the water is pushed against the marsh edge and wears away at the edge.

### SEA-LEVEL RISE AND EROSION

Sea-level rise threatens both seaside and bayside marshes, which afford the mainland with protection from both floods and erosion. As sea-level rises, barrier islands will respond by migrating landward, disintegrating if sediment supply is insufficient, or drowning in place (Moore, List, et al., 2011).

Changes to vegetation can also occur, as seen on Assateague Island, where "ghost forests" - stands of dead and dying loblolly pines - are succumbing to saltwater intrusion caused by a combination of sea-level rise and barrier island processes and have been impacted by the Southern Pine Beetle. Vegetation serves as a stabilizing force for shorelines and loss of vegetation increases a shoreline's vulnerability to erosion.

Changes in inundation levels can cause shifts in habitat types. For example, irregularly flooded marshes may become regularly flooded marshes, eventually turning from mud flats to open water. This change in habitat type is not only detrimental to the wildlife that resides there, but also increases coastal exposure to wind and wave action, most often leading to increases in erosion rates.



## Coastal Erosion



**Figure 4: Changes to the southern end of Cedar Island, 2006-2014. Source: Gordon Campbell, At Altitude Photograph. Copyright protected, used with permission.**

Because the Eastern Shore barrier islands are largely in their natural states and without erosion control mechanisms, the process of rollover is readily observed. In Figure 5, images of a section of Assateague Island, taken before and after Hurricane Sandy, illustrate how waves washing over the island carried sand toward the mainland. This phenomenon provides critical width for islands and establishes a back-barrier platform which the island can continue to roll onto, thereby increasing the long-term viability of the island.



**Figure 5: Aerial photographs of a section of Assateague Island before and after Hurricane Sandy. Photo Credit: USGS**

## HUMAN SYSTEMS

When natural processes threaten lives and investments, it is commonplace to look for ways to redirect nature's course or lessen its impacts. To slow coastal erosion and stabilize shorelines, structural interventions such as groins, jetties, and seawalls, are often employed. Other options include soft interventions, such as living shorelines or beach nourishment. These erosion control responses must be considered and selected based on conditions of the particular location and surrounding environs. Measures that are employed on the Eastern Shore are described in the following

sections. A complete listing, along with benefits, impacts, and costs, can be found in Appendix C of the 2015 USACE North Atlantic Coast Comprehensive Study.

## HUMAN INTERVENTIONS

### GROINS AND JETTIES

Groins and jetties are engineered structures placed perpendicular to the shoreline to interrupt longshore drift. Both kinds of structures extend out into the water, but jetties are generally used to protect inlets and harbor entrances (Figure 6), while groins can be used to protect any stretch of shoreline.

Groins and jetties interrupt the natural drift of sand, causing sediment to build, or accrete, on the up-drift side of the structures. These structures accelerate erosion on the immediate down-drift side because the area is robbed of the natural sediment it would have received from longshore drift (Barnard, T., VIMS Self-Taught Education Unit, Coastal Shoreline Defense Structures). The VIMS Self-Taught unit on Coastal Shoreline Defense Structures contains additional information on groins and jetties.



**Figure 6: Jetty at Cape Charles Harbor. Photo Credit: Jay Diem, Eastern Shore News. Used with permission.**

### PARALLEL STRUCTURES – SEAWALLS, BULKHEADS, AND REVETMENTS

Seawalls are built parallel to shorelines to inhibit erosion by intercepting waves. They are designed with sufficient height and heft to prevent being overrun by storm surge or undermined by powerful waves.

Seawalls are not perfect solutions. New sea wall prices can run into the tens of millions of dollars and they can also be undermined by scour, causing wall failure (Reuters, “Water’s Edge: The Crisis of Rising Sea Levels,” September 4, 2014). Seawalls can also obstruct scenic views and negatively impact wildlife (USACE, 2015).

Bulkheads, also built parallel to shorelines, are meant to keep land from eroding into the sea. They can be anchored or cantilevered sheet piles, or gravity structures; but they, too, can be undermined by scour.

## Coastal Erosion

Both seawalls and bulkheads can have detrimental effects on neighboring shorelines and nearshore environments. When these structures work as designed, they protect the property where they are installed, but the deflected wave energy has to go somewhere. Neighboring properties and the near-shore environment in front of parallel shoreline protection structure usually receive the brunt of that energy, which creates not only scour conditions for the structure, but scours the ocean bottom of marine life (Barnard, T., VIMS Self-Taught Education Unit, Coastal Shoreline Defense Structures).

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### REVETMENTS

Revetments are hardening or reinforcement of a surface exposed to waves or strong currents to prevent erosion. Typical construction consists of a filter layer overlain with stone or concrete (Figure 7). Revetments can be used alone or in combination with other structures. For example, a seawall can be capped with a revetment.

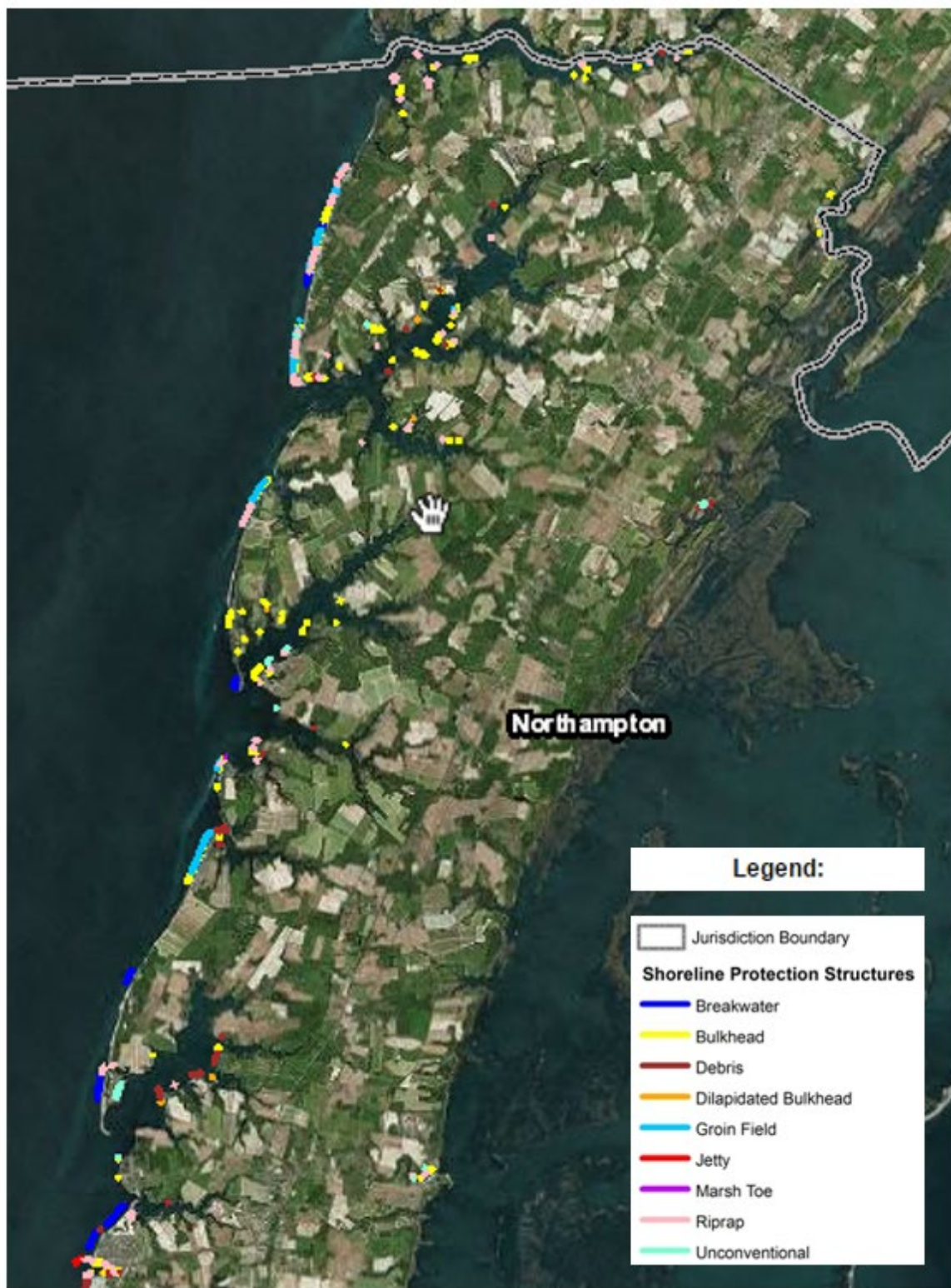
Revetments tend to reflect less wave energy because they are more sloped but are still subject to the same erosion impacts as other parallel structures. Accessibility to the shoreline can be a drawback of using revetments (USACE, 2015).



**Figure 7: Revetment at the beach of Wallops Flight Facility. Photo Credit: NASA**

Figure 8 below shows the locations of all type of shoreline erosion control structures for the northern two-thirds of Northampton County, including bulkheads. As increasing numbers of property owners install these structures, and with lifespans of 20-25 years, long-term financial commitments will be needed to maintain them (Barnard, Thomas, VIMS Self-Taught Education Unit, Coastal Shoreline Defense Structures).





**Figure 8: Northampton County Shoreline Protection Structures. Source: VIMS Center for Coastal Resource Management**

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### BEACH NOURISHMENT

The placement of sand on an eroded beach is known as beach nourishment. It can be used alone as a beach restoration tool or in combination with other tactics, such as breakwaters. Beach nourishment does not change the rate at which erosion is occurring, and in fact, can accelerate erosion under certain conditions (USACE, 2015).

Beach nourishment is not a long-term fix. It requires periodic renourishment, typically every four to five years on average, and following major storms. NASA found it had good news and bad news to report about its completed beach protection project at the Wallops Flight Facility in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The \$43 million investment in a revetment and beach nourishment – completed three months before the storm – had worked to protect \$1.2 billion in state and federal space program-related assets and launch infrastructure. The bad news was that another \$11 million would be needed to replace 650,000 cubic yards of sand taken from the beach by the storm (Figure 10).

In February 2020, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers awarded a \$23.7 million contract to a Florida-based company to conduct beach renourishment at Wallops Island, including “construction of breakwaters and placing 1.3 million cubic yards of sand along a four-mile stretch of the facility’s waterfront.” (US Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District Website, 2020).



***Figure 9: Beach Erosion at Wallops Flight Facility. Left: The completed beach nourishment project at WFF in August 2012. Right: The same stretch of beach is extensively eroded less than three months later, following Hurricane Sandy. Photo Credit: NASA***

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### INTERVENTIONS ON BARRIER ISLANDS

In their natural states, conventional wisdom holds that barrier islands are best left to manage themselves. Such conventional wisdom may offer little consolation to communities like Wachapreague and Chincoteague, which are closely watching the year-by-year changes to Cedar Island and Assateague Island – barrier islands that have long afforded storm protection to their communities.

The USACE North Atlantic Coast Comprehensive Study acknowledges that some barrier islands may require management and intervention if the islands are to continue to provide such protections, and in fact, the USACE did intervene at the Assateague Island National Seashore.



**Figure 10: Locations of Manually-Constructed Oyster Reefs in Waters off Virginia's Eastern Shore. Source: VCZMP**



**Figure 11: Oyster Reef under Construction  
Photo Credit: © Bowdoin Lusk/ The Nature Conservancy. Used with permission.**

## BREAKWATERS

Offshore structures placed parallel to the shoreline to soften the impact of waves are called breakwaters. Because wave energy is slowed by the structures, sand and sediment may settle in the area behind the breakwater, which can form an inviting environment for the growth of marsh grasses, an added protection against future erosion. Breakwaters can also disrupt supply of sand to down-drift beaches (USACE, 2015).

Oyster reefs can serve as natural breakwaters and once established, continue to grow vertically over time with sea-level rise, improving their ability to resist storms and mitigate erosion. Figure 11 shows the locations of oyster reefs that have been installed for long-term water quality and coastal resilience benefits, and Figure 12 is a photograph of an oyster reef under construction. Since oyster reefs are limited in elevation by the depth of the water column at a normal high tide, they provide excellent protection from relatively smaller waves and storm surge events; however, they can only provide minimal protection from wave action riding atop that is above average high tides or storm surge.

## LIVING SHORELINES

One approach that is being employed in low wave-energy areas on the Eastern Shore is the construction of living shorelines. These shorelines re-establish the natural vegetative, nutrient, and slope characteristics of healthy shorelines so that they naturally dissipate wave energy.

Large-scale living shorelines have been established in Oyster and at Camp Occohannock. In both locations, large granite rocks were brought in and piled parallel to the shore. Sand was added between the rock barriers and the shoreline to create salt marshes sloping upward to meet the previous shore edges. Marsh grasses were planted to stabilize the newly created areas between the open waters and the uplands.



### EROSION PREVENTION LAWS AND PROGRAMS

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#### COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT ACT

The federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) of 1972 put into statute the recognition of the “national interest in the effective management, beneficial use, protection, and development of the coastal zone.”

The CZMA established three national programs, the National Coastal Zone Management Program, the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, and the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP). The National Coastal Zone Management Program aims to balance competing land and water issues through state and territorial coastal management programs, the Reserves serve as field laboratories that provide a greater understanding of estuaries and how humans impact them, and the CELCP provides matching funds to state and local governments to purchase threatened coastal and estuarine lands or obtain conservation easements.

The CZMA connects with coastal erosion prevention through its many programs, including Coastal Zone Enhancement Grants, technical assistance grants, and research.

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#### VIRGINIA COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Coastal Zone Management Program, established through Executive Order, administers enforceable laws, regulations, and policies that protect coastal resources and foster sustainable development. Relevant laws, regulations, and policies on the Coastal Zone Management Program are described below.

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##### WETLANDS MANAGEMENT

The tidal wetlands program is administered by the Marine Resources Commission under Code of Virginia § 28.2-1301 thru § 28.2-1320. It is intended to preserve and protect tidal wetlands and accommodate economic development in a manner consistent with wetlands preservation. Oversight is provided by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and local wetlands boards.

The Virginia Water Protection Permit Program is administered by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and includes protection of tidal and non-tidal wetlands. This program is authorized by the Code of Virginia § 62.1-44.15:20 and the Water Quality Certification requirements of Section 401 of the Clean Water Act of 1972.

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##### DUNES AND BEACHES MANAGEMENT

Dune protection is carried out pursuant to the Coastal Primary Sand Dune Protection Act and is intended to prevent destruction or alteration of primary dunes. This program is administered by the Marine Resources Commission (Code of Virginia § 28.2-1301 thru 28.2-1320).

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##### COASTAL LANDS MANAGEMENT

Coastal Lands Management is a state-local cooperative program administered by DEQ’s Water Division and 84 localities that regulates activities in Chesapeake Bay Resource Management Areas and Resource Protection Areas in Tidewater, Virginia established pursuant to the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act (Virginia Code §§ 62.1-44.15:67 through 62.1-44.15:79) and Chesapeake Bay Preservation Area Designation and Management Regulations (Virginia Administrative Code 9 VAC 25-830-10 et seq.).



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## EROSION AND SEDIMENT CONTROL

Three state laws apply to land disturbance activities in Virginia: The Stormwater Management Act, Erosion and Sediment Control Law, and the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act. For more information on these three laws, see “Storm Water Flooding Prevention Laws and Programs” in Chapter 7 – Storm Water.