

House Committee on Natural Resources
Impacts of Climate Change on the Chesapeake Bay

Proposed Testimony of:

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I am not a scientist. I admit that I don't lie awake at night worrying about TMDL's or dead zones. I cannot enlighten any of you to the true causes of climate change nor the remedy for the impacts likely to be felt along the Chesapeake Bay.

Of the 3600 species of plants and animals that live together in and around the Bay, I most concerned about just one. I am a humanist. I worry about the Bay's people, and the endangered communities in which they live. I worry about the survival of the rich human cultures that for centuries have defined what and who we are. These cultures, which still survive along the Bay's edges and islands are threatened with inundation, and if they disappear, our sense of place may disappear with them. We may still be part of Maryland and part of America, but both Maryland and America will have been diminished, having lost some of the folkways, traditions, culture and knowledge that has been rooted in these waters for generations.

For nearly 40 years, I have been involved with history museums in this country and abroad. For most of that time, the institutions were focused on the collection and preservation of works of art or artifacts of historic significance. We were the keepers of ancient treasures, lost civilizations, forgotten cultures, abandoned technologies.

I am currently the President of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, and in 2009 I see our mission in significantly different terms. We are a museum about an extraordinary place; a place of outstanding natural and cultural vitality, beauty, and significance. Our Museum tells the story of the Chesapeake Bay and her people—a story of the interconnectedness of water and land, of nature and communities. Of course we preserve and celebrate the rich heritage of the Bay's past, but we are attempting to do much more. Our goal is to strengthen the link between the Bay's past and its future. Our mission is to inspire stewardship of the bays cultural and natural resources. I actually believe that looking into the rear-view mirror from time to time can help us navigate the road that lies ahead.

I believe that museums like ours can offer unique educational experiences by sharing the perspectives that centuries of living in a place provides. I believe that by sharing our knowledge of the past, we can help our communities recognize how much this region's

culture has been shaped by the Bay, and how much of our regional identity will be lost if we allow this culture to be washed away. The health and vitality of this region's culture is now more than ever dependent on human decisions and actions, and educational institutions like ours must help inform those decisions. This is no time for nostalgia or romance. We need to take lessons from the generations that have come before us, both how to live and how NOT to live.

Man-made pressures—population explosion, accelerating development, increasing pollution, declining water quality, and the shift from a primarily agricultural and seafood harvesting economy to one based on recreation, tourism, and suburbanization—are already threatening to change beyond recognition this place we all love. Now climate change and sea level rise have been added to the list.

The Bay's islands and waters have always been in flux. The natural processes of erosion and subsidence are not new, nor is their impact on the Bay's people. For at least three centuries, Holland Island supported dozens of homes, today, there is one left. Residents of Smith Island have gradually moved from the southern end of the Island as their properties have become slowly inundated. The crisis we face today is due the accelerating PACE of this change. As climate changes cause the waters to rise more quickly, we are at real risk of sudden loss of not only marshlands and meadows, not only low-lying buildings and roads, not only peninsulas and islands. We are at risk of losing important chapters of our history, our culture, our identity. If, 50 or 100 years from now, our great grandchildren have to visit places like the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum to see the surviving relics of what was once a rich and varied coastal culture born out of and nourished by the waters of the Bay, then we all will have failed.

Your attention to these issues is hugely encouraging to all of us who live and work along the Chesapeake Bay. All I ask is that you please do not overlook the impact of climate change on the traditional communities that define the character of this extraordinary place.

Respectfully,

Stuart Parnes