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Nanticoke Watershed Alliance to study value of Nanticoke River

By Terry Carson, Executive Director
Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce

The Nanticoke River and its tributaries are an integral part of western Sussex County. The river is part of our history, culture, recreation and economy. The Nanticoke Watershed Alliance commissioned a study through the University of Delaware Water Resources Center to put a monetary value on this treasured resource. Below is an interesting and enlightening summary of the report as presented by the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance. The Western Sussex Chamber considers the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance an important partner.

River contributes over \$3.7 billion to local economy

By Evan Deckers, Education Coordinator
Nanticoke Watershed Alliance

While the novel COVID-19 virus is taking its toll on our national economy, the Nanticoke River keeps money flowing into Maryland and Delaware in more ways than you might think! HINT: The natural beauty of the Nanticoke, which brings in big recreation dollars, can also help you cope with the stress of the pandemic. Getting outdoors and exercising has proven mental and physical health benefits. Just be sure to stay socially distanced from anyone you might meet outside.

The Nanticoke River watershed stretches 88.5 miles from Delaware into Maryland and is home to over 90,000 people (US Census Bureau, 2010). By conducting one of the first economic studies in the region, researchers from the University of Delaware Water Resources Center were able to conclude that the water, natural resources, and ecosystems of the Nanticoke River watershed contribute over \$3.7 billion annually to the region's economy. Read the report online at www.NanticokeRiver.org.

To put an economic value on the Nan-

ticoke River, university researchers examined the river and its tributaries in three distinct ways:

- **Economic Activity:** The Nanticoke River contributes \$2.6 billion annually through the direct economic value of recreation, water quality and supply, hunting and fishing, forests, agriculture, and parks.
- **Ecosystems:** The Nanticoke provides \$3.73 billion annually in the form of ecosystem goods and services (i.e. flood control, water filtration, carbon storage, pollination, and oxygen production).
- **Employment:** The natural resources within the Nanticoke watershed, directly and indirectly, support over 19,800 jobs totaling over \$461 million in annual wages.

The estimates in these categories, which researchers say are "in the low range," were not added together because there is some "overlap between certain values" within each category that could result in double counting. For example, the jobs of fishermen that contribute to employment and wages are also a factor in the economic activity generated from fishing. Nonetheless, the study "clearly indicates that the Nanticoke watershed is an economic engine that contributes between \$461 million and \$3.7 billion annually to the Delaware and Maryland economies."

Some 90,000 people share the Nanticoke watershed with the largest bald eagle population in the Eastern United States. The watershed is also home to a \$4.4 million Blue Crab industry and more than \$1 billion in annual agricultural assets.

"Keeping the Nanticoke River healthy has been one of the driving factors behind our local river economies," explains Terry Carson of the Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce. "These studies show us how much our natural resources are worth. When we know this we can prioritize investments to conserve the areas that benefit us the most."

The Nanticoke River has a long economic history of trade and agriculture. While the nation was young, bustling

port towns sprung up along the river. As maritime travel gave way to trains and the automobile, port towns of old gave way to friendly farming communities with strong ties to their heritage and the river.

Today, the Nanticoke supports over 20 percent of the jobs in the region, including 2,195 farming jobs and 3,744 fishing and hunting jobs that rely on a healthy river. Many programs offer funding to support the Nanticoke River, yet there has been little research as to where these funds would be the most cost-effective, that is until now.

"We encourage businesses and municipalities to reap the benefits of untouched natural resources all the time; it's a cost-effective investment to protect our natural capital," says Martha C. Narvaez of UD Water Resources Center. "Investments in our natural resources spur the economy and pay off in jobs, boost land values and property taxes, attract residents and businesses, protect property, filter drinking water and clean the air. Both the public and private sectors could benefit from including the natural value of the river as part of their next cost-benefit analysis."

Narvaez is a Policy Scientist with the University of Delaware Water Resources Center. Her specialty is policy assistance related to water quality and water supply, though she also conducts water resources research and public education in Delaware. Her research team included: Kelly Jacobs, Graduate Research Assistant; Gerald Kauffman, Center Director; and Andrew Homsey, GIS Services Manager.

Martha and her team hope that this new analysis will offer an incentive to protect some of the fragile wetland and forest ecosystems that naturally maintain healthy waterways.

"We don't think about it, but we can

save a lot of money by letting nature do what it's supposed to do," points out Lisa Wool of the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance. "Think of wetlands as a sponge, absorbing pollution and sediment before it can enter our rivers. This means wetlands can reduce flooding in urban areas, make our drinking water cleaner, and can even and decrease our need to dredge. We call these 'ecosystem services'; they are things ecosystems do already that provide a service to humans."

According to the economic study, the Nanticoke River has cut costs to local economies by nearly \$121.5 billion over the past 100 years. These cost savings come in the form of ecosystem services, like water treatment by forest and wetlands, pollination on local farms, and flood protection. To sum it all up, Wool clarifies, "All of these resources are here naturally and all we have to do is decide to protect them. Invest now or pay later."

This economic study was commissioned by the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, the foremost non-profit doing non-advocacy, conservation work within the Nanticoke River region. The Nanticoke Watershed Alliance is celebrating 28 years of service to local communities like Federalsburg, Sharptown, Mardela Springs, and Nanticoke (Maryland), and Seaford, Laurel, Bridgeville, and Greenville (Delaware). You can read the economic study at www.NanticokeRiver.org/Economy.

Our partnerships have helped maintain the Nanticoke as one of the cleanest rivers that flows into the Chesapeake Bay. Follow us on Facebook @NanticokeRiver or join us online at www.NanticokeRiver.org.

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