



How a national designation could change Charles County tourism, economy

By: Samantha J. Subin July 14, 2019



Aerial view of Mallows Bay. (Don Shomette)

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A historic Maryland ship graveyard could become one of the latest tourism hubs.

A 18-square-mile stretch along the Potomac River in Charles County, which features more than 100 decaying World War I steamships, was designated a marine sanctuary by NOAA on July 8. The designation is part of continuing efforts to preserve, research and monitor marine resources nationwide.

NOAA, which currently oversees 13 marine sanctuaries enveloping more than 600,000 square miles, will partner with the state of Maryland and Charles County to manage the Mallows Bay-Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary, approximately 40 miles south of Washington.

Involved parties and local organizations believe the designation will bring national recognition and economic benefits to an area that's home to a naval testing base, and various outdoor activities and historic sites.

"We can expect to cap out at a consistent annual visitor number of 300,000 additional people," said Kellie Hinkle, chief of the tourism division for the Charles County Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism.

Based on statistics from nationally recognized attractions throughout the Washington area, the destination could see around a 20% increase in tourism visitors, Hinkle said. The growth could take several years but the area will likely see a spike in hotel occupancy and local restaurant traffic, she added.

The new designation brings some new regulations to protect the area's shipwrecks and maritime cultural heritage resources. Moving, removing, recovering, altering, destroying, possessing sanctuary resources or otherwise attempting to do so would violate the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. Violators will likely face higher penalties than state law, Brady Phillips, a public affairs specialist with NOAA said.

"We want to make sure that people aren't going out there and peeling off huge portions of the shipwreck or spray painting the sides of it," said Sammy Orlando, Chesapeake Bay regional coordinator with NOAA.

Regulating the area will include the implementation of education and public awareness programs aimed to inform visitors of the sites' history and the importance of preservation. The agency is already partnering with local high schools to teach about diving and geocaching, Orlando added.

The state initially nominated the area back in 2014 for sanctuary designation, amid strong support from community members and others to conserve the decaying vestiges and increase tourism in the area.

Mark Belton watched the project develop at the state level when he worked as secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources under Gov. Larry Hogan. Now, the current Charles County administrator expects to see a tourism draw that mimics the progress seen in Alpena, Michigan, home to the most recent NOAA designated sanctuary known as Thunder Bay in 2000.

A 2013 economic impact analysis report conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan concluded that the site was a "significant contributor to the economic activity of the region." An overwhelming majority of survey respondents also said the Sanctuary had a "positive" or "very positive" impact on the local economy.

"It's a super attraction and it has become quite the tourist draw and economic generator for that little town," Belton said. "We hope that a similar thing would happen with Indian Head," one of the closest municipalities to the area.

There are early talks now about creating a visitor center as well as a job training site for marine biology and environmental science near the sanctuary, though there are no definite plans for these yet, Belton said. Those could bring additional jobs and economic activity, he said.

In 2017, Maryland tourism spending supported 6.1% of all jobs statewide, according to an economic report from Tourism Economics. The Oxford Economics company also reported more than \$17.7 billion in visitor spending statewide and \$2.4 billion in tourism-generated state and local taxes.

"Maryland is certainly one of the states in the country that has a strong ecotourism center," said Martha Honey, executive director at the Center for Responsible Travel.

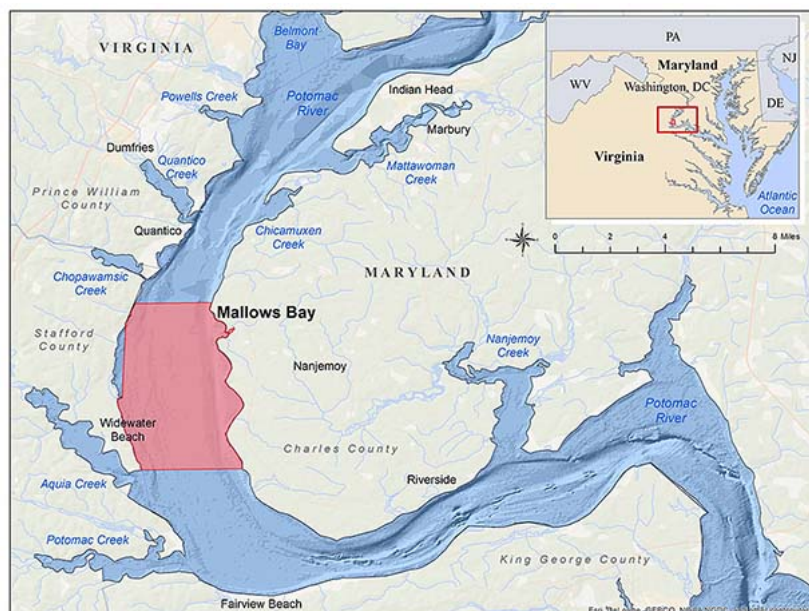
Although the industry is difficult to classify — because it's categorized under a wide variety of names — the state has a large network of national, state and county parks and activities, said Honey, who also served on a NOAA marine sanctuaries committee.

Some of Maryland's nationally recognized sites include parts of Assateague Island, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historic Park and the Appalachian National Scenic trail.

"There is evidence that shows ecotourism positively impacts the state," said Matthew Scales, a public relations specialist with the Maryland Office of Tourism Development.

Visitors to Mallows Bay will likely include those looking to take a break from Washington or enjoy the outdoors through birdwatching, hiking and biking.

"They're going to want to immerse themselves in the local flavor," Hinkle said.



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Map of boundaries for Mallow's Bay-Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary
(NOAA)

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