

USA: Poplar Island Restoration Makes Progress

The Chesapeake Bay area has some of the highest rates of sea-level rise on the East Coast due to a combination of rising sea and sinking ground. At least three islands in the Chesapeake Bay have completely disappeared, and many more are on their way out. But at least one is actually making a comeback: Poplar Island, Md.

Island-disappearance in the Bay has dramatically increased since about 1850.

Well, it was gone. The island is coming back. **Kevin Brennan** is the project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' restoration project. He's standing on a dike made of sand, geotextile fabric and armor stone. It forms a protective barrier all around the new Poplar Island.

"It's all been constructed since the middle-'90s," he says.

Poplar Island will eventually cover 1,700 acres: half wetland and half upland forest — increasingly rare remote-island habitat.

But there is another reason why the state of Maryland and the federal government are spending \$670 million on this island.

"There are channels that lead to the Port of Baltimore that need to be dredged on an annual basis. And the challenge is what do you do with all this dredge material," Brennan says.

It's used as fill material for Poplar.

"It's mixing the needs of the environment with commerce," he says.

The island is rising by a few feet a year, and the Corps is building it extra high to account for expected sea-level rise. It's about one-third of the way done and should be finished by 2027.

In the first wetland cell, golden marsh grasses stretch for hundreds of feet, egrets, bald eagles and herons soar across the landscape. In a few years, much of the island will look like this.

But Poplar Island is the exception in the Bay — not for disappearing, but for coming back.

“Poplar Island is a good example of what is destined to happen to the islands of the Chesapeake Bay. It’s been saved, but I don’t think that’s going to happen on most of our islands,” says **Kate Livie**, with the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

The museum currently has an exhibit on the Bay’s sinking islands.

“Like Holland Island, which has lost its last house, to Smith Island and Tangier that suffer the effects of very high tides...you see the real tangible effects of sea-level rise on a lot of these islands,” she says.

Back in her armchair, **Mary Jane Fairbank** (resident) knows just how lucky she is.

“My home town disappeared,” she says. *“Now it’s coming back.”*

By Sabri Ben-Achour ([wamu](#))