

Disappearing Island

When Captain John Smith sailed the bay in the early 1600's he was able to visit Barren, Cows, Punch, Herring, and Powell Islands. If you tried to find these islands on today's maps, they could not be found. Where are they today?

Many scientists believe that these islands were lost due to human impact. People have caused the shoreline to erode and the land to subside because of groundwater removal. Scientists also believe that humans are responsible for the acceleration of shoreline change in the Bay with the affects of global climate change. Poplar Island is another such island that demonstrate the changes occurring on a lot of Chesapeake Bay Islands.

Poplar Island, located off the shores of Talbot County, was first settled in the early 1600's as a trading post and also for farming. By the early 1900's this 1,000 acre island contained a post office, schools, and sawmills. In the 1930's, part of the island became a retreat for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, President Harry S. Truman, and many prominent Democrats and businessmen. As the island's populace increased, the locals became concerned with the loss of their island as the bay waters had separated their one island into 3 smaller islands. As the years went on more of the island disappeared. By 1990, there were only 10 acres left. Today, a variety of environmental groups are cooperating to restore the 1,000 acre island using materials dredged from the Port of Baltimore. The hope is that, by 2016, the island will be back to its original size.

Today the only inhabited island in Maryland is Smith Island. This island is home to approximately 400 people who depend upon the water for their livelihood. Along with fishing and crabbing, this island has become a local tourist attraction entertaining more than 5,000 visitors annually who come to relax and get away from the stresses of the mainland. It's marshes and submerged aquatic vegetation provide habitat for migratory birds, juvenile fish, crabs and other Chesapeake bay flora and fauna.

What will happen to the last inhabited islands if global warming and human use continue as they are today?

Your job is to assess if Smith Island will be susceptible to the same forces of nature as Poplar Island. Without a plan of action, how long will it be before the island is erased from the bay? If it did disappear, what would be the economic, social, environmental, and political affects of losing this last island inhabited by people? You will also prepare a plan to preserve the island's natural state and it's unique cultural position on the Chesapeake Bay.