



### Profile of a Conservationist

#### Michelle Canick

There's a somewhat mysterious tradition at The Nature Conservancy. A tradition involving a chair. According to tradition, when an employee reaches her 25th work anniversary, a secret committee delivers a beautiful wooden arm-chair to their doorstep, engraved with the TNC logo. This month, Michelle Canick will receive her chair.

Michelle is a member of the MD/DC chapter's coastal resilience and science teams. In 2015 she co-led a project with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to conduct a landscape-level spatial analysis and modeling effort that identifies where natural habitats have the greatest potential to provide risk reduction for coastal communities. This analysis continues to drive both TNC's and the state's conservation efforts.

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Joseph Fehrer prepares to measure the distance between the southernmost headstone of the Robson family burial plot and the edge of the encroaching marsh. Photo © Matt Kane/TNC

## Documenting A Sinking Cemetery

### On The Nature Conservancy's Robinson Neck Preserve

**“There will come a day when these headstones become oyster substrate. That’s just the reality of this place.”**

*Joseph Fehrer, Lower Shore Conservationist, The Nature Conservancy Maryland/DC Chapter*

On a cold and clear February day, Joe Fehrer, lower shore conservationist for The Nature Conservancy's Maryland/DC chapter, lies on his stomach and delicately sweeps away a pile of pine needles lying at the base of a half-sunken headstone so that he can read the last few lines of text. Joe is documenting the Robson family burial plot, located on the TNC's Robinson Neck Preserve, for the Maryland Historical Trust before the cemetery is lost to the rising waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

Many of the headstones are cracked or broken from years of exposure to the elements and the salty Bay air. Many have already sunk so deep into the ground that only the carved tops are left peeking out over the pine needles. On the intact headstones, the inscriptions are brief. As humble farmers, the Robsons weren't inclined to embellish.

After brushing away the pine needles, Joe squints to study the obscured text, then reads aloud, “In memory of Sarah Keene, who departed this life October 10th, 1851.” Then, looking up and smiling, Joe continues reading the final few lines he had just exposed from under the pine needles: “who was a loving wife and mother.’ What a wonderful tribute,” Joe concludes before transcribing the text into his field journal.

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WATCH THE VIDEO: [nature.org/sinkingcemetery](http://nature.org/sinkingcemetery)



Staff from The Nature Conservancy's MD/DC and Virginia chapters work alongside U.S. National Park Service staff at Assateague National Seashore to plant a test plot of eelgrass to determine whether the water conditions are right for a large-scale restoration. Photo © Severn Smith/TNC

## Restoring Eelgrass in Maryland's coastal bays

In the early 1930s, a noxious slime mold followed by a powerful hurricane combined to devastate seagrass meadows in the coastal bays on the seaside of the Delmarva Peninsula. While eelgrass did regenerate in the Chesapeake it has been slow to return to the coastal bays, and as these eelgrass meadows have declined, it has created a ripple effect. With the loss of this critical nursery habitat, numerous populations of fish, shellfish and crustacean species have also declined.

Since 2008, The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Virginia chapter, the Virginia Institute for Marine Science (VIMS), and hundreds of volunteers have broadcast more than 72 million seeds into 536 acres to help accelerate the natural spread of eelgrass, which now covers almost 7,200 acres in South, Spider Crab, Hog Island and Cobb Island bays.

In the spring of 2018, TNC's Maryland/DC chapter took up the banner of eelgrass restoration from the Virginia chapter by planting two eelgrass bed test plots in Sinepuxent Bay off the coast of Assateague Island National Seashore. We are monitoring the success of the two test plots to determine whether or not water conditions in Maryland's coastal bays are suitable for a much larger restoration of this important habitat.

Seagrass beds also have a role to play in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Five acres of eelgrass can soak up enough carbon dioxide to offset driving a car 15,000 miles a year. According to a 2012 study by Florida International University, coastal seagrass can store more than twice as much carbon per square kilometer as terrestrial forests.

## Sinking Cemeteries

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Photo © Matt Kane/TNC

Unfortunately, the sinking cemetery on TNC's Robinson Neck Preserve is not an anomaly on the Eastern Shore. Several historical cemeteries in low-lying communities across Delmarva face a similar fate, and cemeteries aren't the only sites that will be lost.

We understand that the time to act is now. The challenges faced by our vulnerable communities present issues that are incredibly complex: Taxpayer-funded property buyouts, community relocations, infrastructure repairs, and historical preservation—just to name a few. We know that the solutions to these problems must start with dialogue, and we are beginning to foster those conversations so that we can accelerate the implementation of climate adaptation solutions for people and nature.