

# Shaping the next generation of Chesapeake Bay report cards

Meeting Summary ✦ April 1, 2025

Organizations in the Chesapeake Bay region have long used report cards to assess and communicate waterway health, varying in form, scale, goals, and audiences. Two of the longest-running Bay-wide report cards are the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) State of the Bay report and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science (UMCES) Chesapeake Bay & Watershed Report Card.

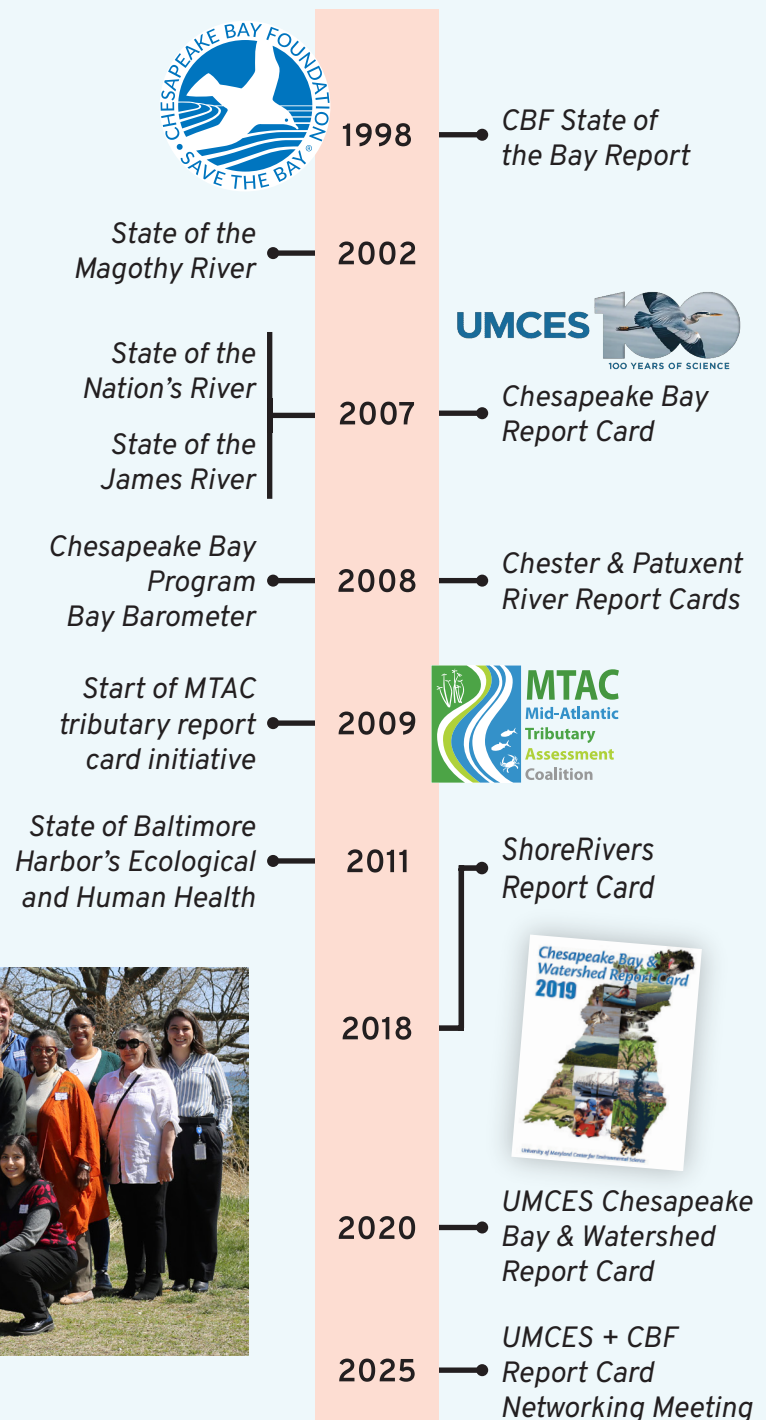
On April 1, 2025, CBF and UMCES co-hosted the first joint Chesapeake Bay Report Card Networking Meeting at CBF's Annapolis headquarters. Over 30 stakeholders from nonprofits, government, academia, and community groups gathered to advance a shared vision for more inclusive, responsive, transparent, and collaborative socio-environmental reporting across the watershed. The meeting centered on three main goals:

- Understand the landscape of existing Chesapeake report cards and their users.
- Align report cards more closely with practitioner and community needs.
- Design a plan for deeper stakeholder engagement and communication.



Participants of the April 1, 2025 Chesapeake Bay Report Card Networking Meeting in Annapolis, MD.

## Representative report card initiatives in the Chesapeake Bay over the years



## Shared values, common threats

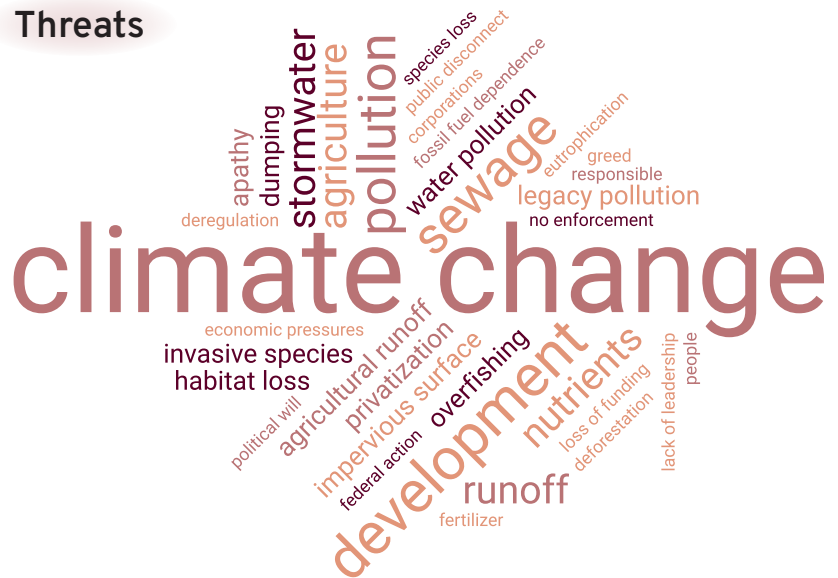
Participants reflected on what they value most about the Bay and what they see as the greatest threats to its health. These reflections revealed a shared vision and deep connection to the region, even as individual perspectives varied.

Top values included recreation, community, clean water, food source, and biodiversity. People value their ties to the Bay, its role in local identity, and ensuring it remains swimmable, fishable, and a source of health and well-being. However, threats such as climate change, development, urban and agricultural runoff, sewage, and other sources of pollution stood out.

### Values



### Threats



Word clouds generated from meeting participants' answers to the following: What do you value? (left), What are the major threats to your values? (right).

## The value of report cards

Aside from CBF and UMCES, many other organizations and stakeholders publish local watershed report cards that use the Bay-wide reports as blueprints, allowing them to prioritize their community's needs. Participants reflected on the value of these different report cards as an effective communication and decision-making tool. They help bridge scientific data with community awareness and support behavior change and stewardship. Participants said report cards help:

- Educate the public using visuals, maps, and simple messages.
- Influence policy by tracking progress and highlighting gaps.
- Support community outreach, fundraising, and behavior change.

The diversity of report cards enables tailored messaging, although alignment is needed to reduce confusion. Some felt that existing report cards don't always resonate with certain audiences or fail to reflect social, economic, and cultural values. There's an opportunity to better connect science to how people live, work, worship, and recreate around the Bay. Despite differences in organizational priorities, report cards can help establish common ground among stakeholders by translating data into a shared understanding and guiding collaborative efforts towards a more resilient and equitable future. It can show how different values and threats are interconnected and emphasize where change is most necessary.

# Examining the current report card landscape

The Chesapeake Bay watershed has multiple report cards developed by various groups, ranging from science-focused assessments to locally-driven communication products. These reflect stakeholders' diverse needs and priorities across the vast Chesapeake Bay watershed. The table below summarizes the key differences and strengths across the three primary report card types.

## UMCES Chesapeake Bay & Watershed Report Card

- Bay and watershed-wide scientific overview and trend tracking
- Geographically-explicit reporting
- Policy support and scientific credibility



*Longevity, good visuals, trend analysis*



*Needs more human/cultural relevance, can get too complicated*

## CBF State of the Bay Report

- Data analysis for public education and advocacy
- Used for member engagement and building awareness
- Broad appeal to general audiences



*Emotional resonance, outreach power*



*Less technical, limited data transparency*

## Local or Tributary Report Cards

- Reflect local conditions and community priorities
- Used for planning, stewardship, and education
- Tailored to grant, regulatory, or local needs



*Locally relevant, links local waters to the Bay*



*Inconsistent format/data, limited reach*

## Suggestions for future Bay-wide report cards

Future improvements should address both content and communication strategies. Expanded metrics are needed to capture human health, resilience, equity, governance, and emerging issues. Storytelling elements, participatory processes, and social equity indicators can make the report card more relatable and actionable for communities.

Stakeholders also recommended incorporating qualitative data and personal stories to complement traditional indicators. There is growing interest in metrics that reflect community experiences, such as empowering stories, access to recreation, and economic and cultural relationships.

There was interest in interactive, customizable, easy-to-explore tools like dashboards or layered maps. People also called for clearer grading systems, methods, and local and Bay-wide data connections.



Hilary Falk, CBF President and CEO, and Dr. Bill Dennison, UMCES VP for Science Application, providing opening remarks (top). Meeting participants brainstorming in break-out groups (bottom).



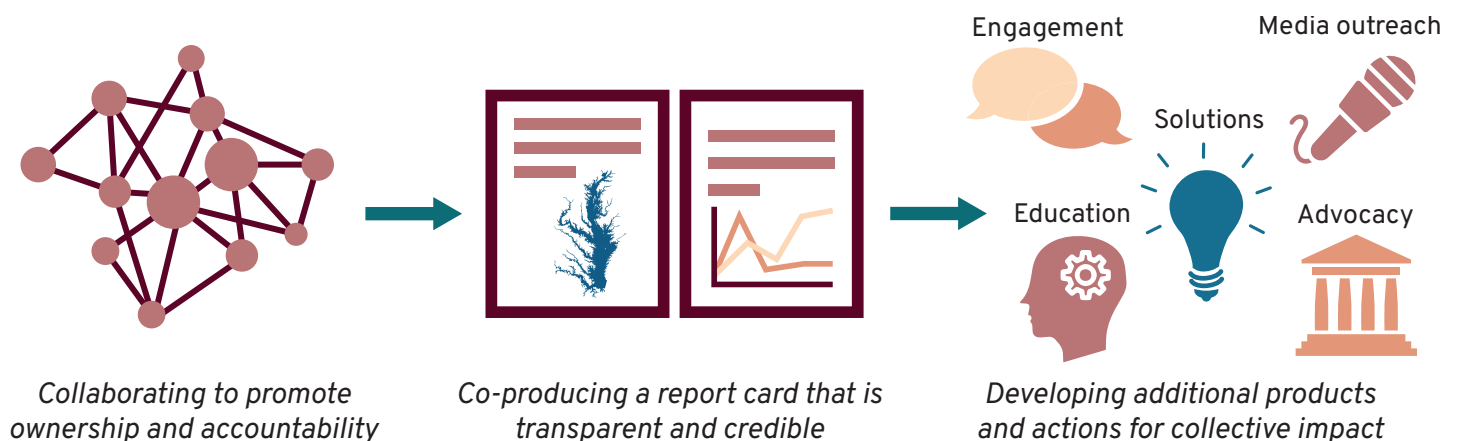
# Moving forward with a joint vision

CBF and UMCES have each been doing their report card in parallel for years. While CBF's State of the Bay compiles data on key indicators to educate the public on the health of the Bay, UMCES offers a more technical, science-based synthesis. Bringing these approaches together and hearing from people using both was a needed step forward. The energy in the room reflected that people are ready for more coordination, clarity, and collaboration.

Participants believe the Chesapeake Bay & Watershed Report Card can be a dynamic tool that should adapt to changing conditions and community needs. To do this, they suggest:

- Creating a shared framework that balances regional detail with Bay-wide synthesis.
- Building capacity for regional partners to shape and share their own stories.
- Offering different formats for different users, from quick summaries to technical reports.
- Using the report card as the basis for derivative products that can support collaborative efforts, engagement, outreach, advocacy, policy action, and fund-raising/grant application.

Importantly, the report card must center on people, not just data. It should reflect the lived experiences, concerns, and aspirations of those who call the Chesapeake Bay home. Report cards are not just assessments; they are narratives that reflect how different groups frame what matters, how success is measured, and who is meant to act. When done well, they can help build trust, support stewardship, and drive meaningful change.



## Acknowledgments

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- Participants: Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (Marisa Baldine); Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation, Inc. (Dee Dee Strum, Carolyn Mitchell); Blue Water Baltimore (Alice Volpitta, Sarah Holter); Chesapeake Bay Foundation (Vanessa Moses, Codi Yeager, Jenna Schueler); Environment Center at Anne Arundel Community College (Tammy Domanski); Environmental Justice Journalism Initiative (Veronica Malaban Lucchese); Frostburg State University (Vanessa Mukendi, Lina Goetz, M.J. Parsons); ShoreRivers (Matt Pluta, Zack Kelleher); Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (Tara Sill, Ray Terracina); Sustainable Chesapeake (Natasha Rathlev); University of Maryland College Park (Sabine Malik); UMCES-Appalachian Laboratory (David Nelson, Sarah Garvey, Xin Zhang); UMCES-Integration and Application Network (Heath Kelsey, Alexandra Fries, Conor Keitzer); University of Maryland Eastern Shore (Wyatt Palenchar); Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore (Adam Lindquist, Allison Blood)
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