

Attraction

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[About Us](#)

[Business Page](#)

[Calendar](#)

[Volunteer](#)

[In This Issue](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Home](#)

[Home](#) > [In This Issue](#) > Celebrating American Wetlands Month

Celebrating American Wetlands Month

Environmental Concern's (EC) tagline, "wetlands work for us, we need to work for wetlands!" encapsulates the importance that this natural resource plays in improving the health of our local, national and international waterways. According to Suzanne Pittenger-Slear, President of Environmental Concern, "Wetland stewardship has been Environmental Concern's focus since 1972 – long before it was the cool thing to do. At EC, stewardship includes native species horticulture, wetland restoration/creation and enhancement, as well as educating youth, teachers, professionals, and our community to be better wetland stewards. We're practitioners – out in the field getting wet and muddy."

Read on, and experience a day with EC – working for wetlands and bringing the importance of wetlands to citizens across the region.



The Environmental Concern crew planted more than 550,000 wetland plants on Poplar Island in 2005 as part of the largest planting project ever sent out for bid by the Baltimore District Army Corp of Engineers. EC's native plant nursery grew more than 70 percent of the wetland plants used for the project.

* On a brisk Monday morning at 6 a.m., working at low tide, Environmental Concern's restoration crew are already on site at Wye Farm in Talbot County ready to re-establish the wetland shoreline that since the 1700s has eroded into the Bay. When completed, the living shoreline will provide vital wildlife habitat, help filter agricultural run-off, and protect the shoreline against further erosion. Living shorelines are the responsible alternative to traditional rip-rap and bulkheads.

* At 7:30 a.m., an EC educator carefully sets up microscopes and water quality testing kits at 15 learning stations in a very unique classroom at Federalsburg Elementary School in Caroline County. The Wetlands on Wheels Mobile Classroom is a 35-foot long trailer that has been converted into a mobile nature center. Wetlands on Wheels brings the field trip experience directly to the school. During the course of the day, 150 students will conduct experiments designed to excite them about the natural world.

* Before 8 a.m., an EC delivery truck full of more than 500 native trees and shrubs departs the facility, heading to Assateague Island. In two hours, the wetland plants will be unloaded and planted in a wetland ecosystem.

* At 9 a.m., a class of fourth graders dash out of their classroom and run to what used to be a grassy part of the schoolyard. A few days ago, the grass was removed and the land graded as part of a very special transformation – from turf to wetland habitat. The class slows down enough to receive a quick lesson on correct planting techniques (green side up). With shovels and plants in hand, the students work in pairs to complete the transformation. Now, when learning about plants, soils, wetland habitats, metamorphosis, water quality and more, the students have a living textbook right in their own schoolyard.

* At 11:30 a.m., a two-person team is carefully spraying a liquid onto the EC nursery stock. At first glance, one would assume that this is some sort of harmful pesticide. However, EC practices Integrated Pest Management and chemicals are the choice of last resort. Instead, the spray is a natural soap that discourages pests.

* At 2 p.m., the Assistant Nursery Manager is calculating germination rates of the *Spartina Alterniflora* (cordgrass) seeds collected last fall. Propagation is a science. Seeds collected from the wild cannot be instantly planted and expected to grow. They must be processed in a way that mimics what they would have experienced in nature. For cordgrass, this means rotting, freezing, and dehulling. Germination rates are calculated to determine how many seeds per batch will be expected to grow. EC grows hundreds of thousands of cordgrass plants annually to be used in wetland restoration projects.

* At 3 p.m., a group of students from St. Michaels Elementary School walk over to Environmental Concern's

Wetland Learning Center to spend time exploring wetlands as part of the MarshFellows afterschool program. During the 1.5 hours, the students will dipnet for tadpoles, baby leeches, and other macroinvertebrates, write in their nature journals, and create a wetland inspired craft.

* At 4 p.m., the Maryland General Assembly is debating the addition of a living shoreline act. With more than 35 years of experience, EC has been invited to speak as living shoreline experts. Gene Slear, EC's Vice President, will join a panel of speakers – the hearing will last for several hours.

As environmental advocates, Environmental Concern strives each day to make a difference in the number of wetlands working for us each day. There is no better time than the present to address the urgent issue of wetlands disappearing at an alarming rate. According to EC, there has been a 73 percent loss of wetlands in Maryland since the 1700s. Wetlands are often referred to as the "kidneys" of the landscape for their ability to remove excess nutrients, toxic substances, and sediment from water that flows through them, helping to improve downstream water quality. Because many of the tributaries on the Eastern Shore flow into the Chesapeake Bay, wetlands are an important filter for the nitrogen and phosphorous pollution from heavy spring rains, agriculture, and urban development – all contributors to the Bay's poor report card.



Environmental Concern's Native Wetland Plant Nursery is the first of its kind in the nation. The nursery grows more than 120 species of native plants, and sells about 500,000 plants annually to the wholesale and retail trade.

In addition to advocating locally, EC is also reaching out to the global community in regard to wetlands. Suzanne adds, "In the 70s, 80s, and 90s the majority of wetland work at EC was local. In response to global warming, the continued loss of wetlands worldwide and increased awareness of the 'green' movement, our approach has taken on a much broader focus. We promote wetlands one schoolyard, one country, one wetland at a time."

Most recently, Suzanne was elected Chairman of the U.S. National Ramsar Committee (USNRC), formed to support the goals and objectives of the International Convention on Wetlands, an intergovernmental treaty adopted in 1971 to designate wetlands of international importance. Environmental Concern is a member of the USNRC, and the Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) Focal Point for the U.S.

You can work for wetlands during the month of May, American Wetlands Month, and make a difference in your community. To learn more about getting involved, contact Environmental Concern at 410-745-9620 or visit www.wetland.org.

DID YOU KNOW?

- An acre of wetlands can hold up to 1.5 million gallons of water.
- Some wetland types, such as vernal pools, may be dry for up to 97% of the year.
- Non-native species of plants and animals and global climate change contribute to wetland loss and degradation.
- 75% of commercial fish and shellfish depend on wetlands during their life cycle.
- 50% of the 800 species of protected migratory birds rely on wetlands.
- 80% of America's breeding bird populations rely on wetlands.
- If bottomland hardwood swamps are protected, Bald Cypress trees can grow for more than 2,000 years.
- Bird watching is an \$80 billion a year industry.
- Wetlands can be found on every continent except Antarctica.
- Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to rain forests and coral reefs.
- Wetlands can be thought of as "biological supermarkets." They provide great volumes of food that attract many animal species.