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November 13-14, 2018

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Editors: Nora Mitchell, Archer St. Clair, Jessica Brown, Brenda Barrett, and Anabelle Rodríguez

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**2018 US/ICOMOS Symposium**

*Forward Together: A Culture-Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World*  
13-14 November 2018, The Presidio, San Francisco, California

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**Stewarding Places and Stories:**

**Maryland Heritage Areas Program as a Framework for Conservation**

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**Abstract**

Heritage area programs, at both state and federal levels, have implemented practical, place-based strategies for landscape-scale conservation and preservation. These programs offer financial incentives and technical assistance to partners working to steward a myriad of interconnected cultural and natural resources: the built environment, archeological resources, cultural and natural landscapes, and intangible cultural heritage. Heritage area programs also seek to share these resources by supporting the creation of place-based educational and recreational opportunities for visitors and residents. By encouraging investment in and preservation of regionally and nationally significant places, building partnerships between organizations, and fostering heritage and nature tourism as economic drivers, heritage area programs represent models for holistic, community-led stewardship of places—models that have been successfully adapted for both urban and rural settings. This paper, written by the staff of the Maryland Heritage Areas Program, explains the framework and strategies of the program, including the community-driven process for creating heritage areas and the programmatic incentives that provide both technical and monetary support to heritage areas and their stakeholders. The paper also examines the program’s successes, reflects on how impacts have been measured and will be measured going forward, and explores the program’s challenges.

**Keywords**

heritage areas, cultural landscapes, conservation, tourism, economic development, historic preservation

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**Stewarding Places and Stories:  
Maryland Heritage Areas Program as a Framework for Conservation**

***Introduction***

Maryland is often referred to as “America in Miniature” because of its wide regional variation, from urban Baltimore and the Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland, to the vibrant cultural traditions surrounding the Chesapeake Bay region. Recognizing this geographic, ecological, and cultural diversity, thirteen heritage areas have been established across the state, ranging in size from portions of one municipality to multi-county regions. Each heritage area constitutes a locally designated and State-certified region where public and private partners have committed to preserving historical, cultural, and natural resources for sustainable economic development through heritage tourism. In practice, heritage areas provide technical and financial assistance that supports the conservation and celebration of often under-appreciated aspects of history, living culture, and distinctive natural areas, thus fostering a stronger sense of pride in the places where Marylanders live and work.

The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) program’s policy framework and strategies support the conservation of both natural and cultural resources at a landscape-scale in both urban and rural settings. The program’s primary heritage conservation strategy is to distribute financial resources—in the form of grants—to locally-based organizations for the creation of place-based experiences, which can be marketed to tourists and enjoyed by local residents. These locally-driven place-based experiences—also referred to as heritage tourism experiences—serve as mechanisms for economic development, for landscape conservation, and for the transmission of cultural and ecological knowledge to the next generation. In this paper, the authors describe how the MHAA program operates, briefly explore related literature, present case studies that illustrate the program’s outcomes, and identify lessons learned.

## ***Program Overview***

The Maryland Heritage Areas Program’s policy framework and strategies use regional heritage tourism as an organizing element to encourage landscape-scale conservation, encompassing cultural, historical, and natural resources. These resources are managed locally and leveraged as tools to create economic opportunities. Dating to the early days of the preservation and conservation movements, regional heritage-tourism-focused policy approaches have taken various forms, including heritage parks, heritage corridors, and heritage areas. Some of the earliest programs to embrace this strategy were the New York Urban Cultural Parks program, which began with the creation of the Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Urban Cultural Park in 1972, and the Massachusetts Heritage State Parks program, which created its first Heritage State Park in Lowell in 1976 (Mahoney 2014). Both efforts focused on industries that were vanishing in each respective region and the associated cultural and economic impacts of these changes. In both cases, the parks were meant to serve as alternative economic drivers (Mahoney 2014).

At the national level, the Illinois and Michigan Canal Heritage Area was created in 1984 as what President Reagan called “a new kind of national park” to protect “large, lived-in landscapes” (National Park Service, n.d.). The National Heritage Area Program seeks to encourage “community-led conservation and development” by combining recreation, conservation and economic development efforts focused on nationally significant landscapes.

In 1993—following the successes of these national and state programs—the Maryland General Assembly created the Canal Place Preservation and Development Authority, an independent state agency tasked with creating a C&O Canal preservation district in Cumberland, Maryland. The effort grew out of several local initiatives, including a desire to improve the economic prospects for the City of Cumberland and local interest in re-watering and interpreting the C&O Canal, a man-made waterway that played a significant role in transportation and economic history.

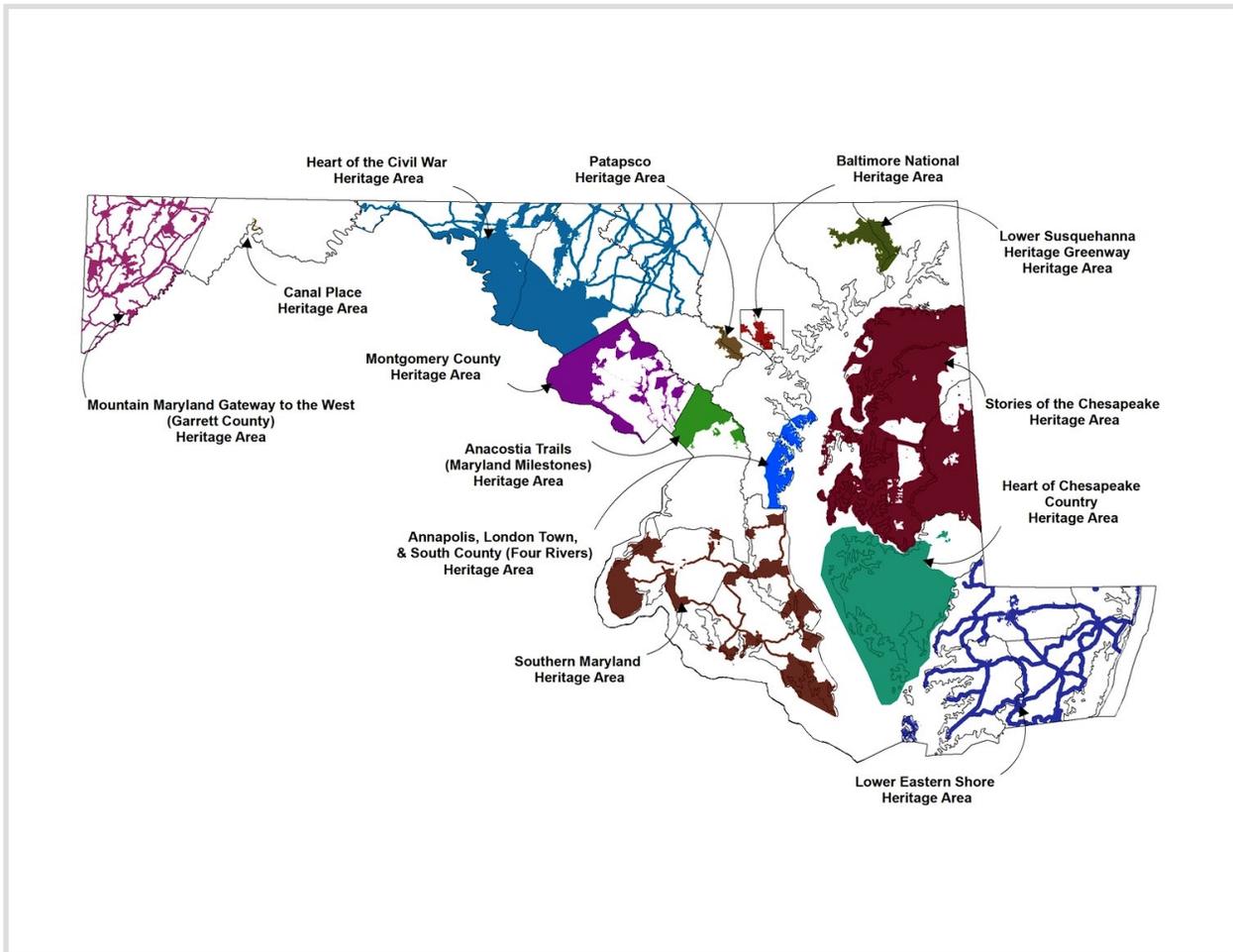
According to its establishing legislation, Chapter 544 of the 1993 Laws of Maryland, Canal Place was to serve as “the advocate for preservation and development... for the purpose of enhancing heritage tourism in Western Maryland.” The program proved to be a successful model to help local governments build economic development through heritage tourism, and there was soon interest in expanding it statewide.

In 1996, the Maryland legislature created the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA), an independent state entity with an interagency and interdisciplinary governing board tasked with the oversight of the Maryland Heritage Areas Program. As specified when it was established in Chapter 601 of the 1996 Laws of Maryland, the MHAA program oversees the recognition and certification of heritage areas across the state and provides financial incentives in the form of grants, loans and tax credits. Each heritage area is conceived and organized by local jurisdictions and stakeholders, who create a proposal for the heritage area which is reviewed by MHAA. Once MHAA recognizes the heritage area, the local organizations create a management plan that lays out the boundaries, themes, goals, and management structure for the heritage area. MHAA reviews the heritage area management plan, and if approved, certifies the heritage area. Certification allows stakeholders within the boundaries of the heritage area to take advantage of the benefits of the program, including technical and financial assistance.

Established simultaneously with the MHAA program, the MHAA Financing Fund was created with an appropriation of funds from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources' Program Open Space. These funds, which derive from real estate transfer taxes, directly link the costs of development with the protection of open spaces and recreational facilities, including landscapes, parks, forests, and historical resources. MHAA, in turn, uses the funding to support concentrations of interrelated cultural, historical and natural resources that make heritage areas unique. Each year, MHAA grants are awarded to designated heritage area management entities for the development and ongoing management of the heritage areas. Grants are also awarded to non-profit organizations and government agencies for projects proposed and carried out by local partners. Only projects taking place within a certified heritage area's boundary and supporting the locally-determined goals of that heritage area are eligible for MHAA grants.

While each heritage area's management plan serves as a strategic plan for the individual heritage area, the MHAA program itself had no such planning document. To remedy this in 2010, MHAA undertook a strategic planning process to review the work that the program had undertaken to date and set a course for the future. During this process, the stakeholders refined the seven goals

MHAA had established upon its creation into three main areas of work or strategies: “Developing Heritage Tourism Product,” “Building Partnerships,” and “Sustaining Regional Identity” (Maryland Heritage Areas Authority 2009, 5-6). These three areas of work guide the MHAA’s policy decisions, the projects that MHAA supports through financial incentives, and efforts to evaluate the program on an ongoing basis.



**Figure 1.** This 2018 map shows the current boundaries of the thirteen different certified heritage areas across the state of Maryland. *Image provided courtesy of Maryland Historical Trust.*

### ***Context: A Brief Literature Review***

The strategies for landscape and heritage conservation presented in this paper build on three key concepts identified and discussed in recent years in the social and geographical sciences: 1) questioning the hard-and-fast distinction between cultural and natural heritage resources; 2)

using the concept of cultural landscapes; and 3) thinking in terms of *cultural conservation*—as distinct from *historic preservation*.

The MHAA program deviates from many other government-run financial and technical assistance programs in that it provides opportunities for the conservation of both natural and cultural resources under the same programmatic umbrella, recognizing that the boundary between these often-siloed resource types is a blurry one at best. Folklorist Mary Hufford explains why a strict division between natural and cultural heritage resources does not support conservation of complex heritage resources: “...natural landforms and wildlife species could serve as touchstones to community life and values as readily as structures of the built environment could...” (Hufford 1994, 2).

Michael Conzen points out that at a landscape scale, few (if any) landscapes exist that have *not* been shaped by human civilizations (Conzen 1990). The natural and cultural are necessarily intermingled. Conzen’s point brings us to the idea of cultural landscapes, which is important in this paper’s analysis of how the MHAA program’s framework and strategies function to conserve large landscapes.

Carl Sauer is credited with coining the term “cultural landscape,” which he defined as “all the works of man that characterize the landscape” (Sauer 1963, 342). In recent years, the term has gained nuance and layers, with heritage scholars recognizing that human cultural practices not only *shape* landscapes but—in turn—are *shaped by* landscapes, and that the ways in which landscapes are made meaningful by human cultural traditions form another important aspect of landscape analysis (Buggey 1998, Cowley 2011, Korr 2002, Lewis 1983, Taylor 2012). The MHAA program directly supports the conservation of heritage at a cultural-landscape-scale through the definition of regional heritage area boundaries and through project grants, including regional trail initiatives, for example, that span large areas, highlighting the interconnectedness of historical events and evocative ecological settings across municipal boundaries.

*Cultural conservation* is another term that is implicit in the legislative framework and operational strategies of the MHAA program. As Hufford explains, the term cultural conservation—as an alternative to preservation—was widely introduced in 1983 in a policy study authored by the Department of the Interior and the American Folklife Center (Hufford 1994, 3). The most significant difference between the concepts of conservation and preservation in the realm of heritage resources is that conservation allows for a more dynamic and holistic approach to managing and interpreting heritage that includes both tangible and intangible heritage resources. As an example of how the MHAA program supports holistic conservation of heritage, the program funded a series of grants for Historic Sotterley Plantation’s reinterpretation of a slave cabin that combined archeological investigation, historic preservation of the structure, and collection of the oral traditions of descendants of the enslaved population to create an interpretive whole.

### ***Maryland Heritage Areas in Action***

The most direct and measurable impact of the MHAA program is the use of state grant funds to support locally-driven, landscape-scale conservation, recognizing that cultural resources, natural resources, and everything in-between are most sustainable in the long-term when they are allowed to adapt to changing economic and cultural circumstances.

### ***Case Study: Shifting Industries and Landscapes in Watermen’s Communities***

Just as the earliest examples of heritage area programs across the country focused on regions experiencing industrial decline, many projects supported by the MHAA program seek to leverage existing cultural and natural resources in places where the predominant industries are shifting.

Nowhere in Maryland is this more evident than on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, where the lives of the watermen who earn a living from the natural abundance of the Bay are increasingly impacted by diminishing resources and a changing landscape altered by climate change and sea level rise.

Tilghman Island was, at the height of the seafood industry in the Chesapeake region, a busy hub, with the Tilghman Packing Company employing hundreds of workers and many more residents earning a living building boats or catering to tourists visiting the small (less than 3 miles long) island. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the seafood industry was in decline and the packing plant had closed. Tilghman's economy declined, and it became a quiet bedroom community, home to the remaining watermen, as well as "come here's" from the mainland looking for a quiet escape (Tilghman Waterman's Museum, n.d.).

Financial support from the MHAA program has allowed organizations like the Phillips Wharf Environmental Center, located on Tilghman Island, to develop alternative strategies that simultaneously conserve the culture of those who work on the water, educate the public on the rich natural resources of the Bay, and provide new opportunities for local residents to support themselves. From a modest start with a traveling school bus to educate local school children, the nonprofit Phillips Wharf has begun the process of converting a commercial oyster-shucking house on Tilghman Island into an environmental education center, funded in part by MHAA.

The facility will host educational programs, while continuing to serve as a working oyster house, with a fresh seafood store where visitors can purchase directly from the watermen. This also serves as a mechanism for watermen to pass down traditional seafood harvesting practices to the next generation. MHAA funding has allowed the bulkhead surrounding the property to be updated and improved with a kayak launch, providing better access to the water for tourists as well as the working watermen.



**Figure 2.** Phillips Wharf Environmental Center’s Oyster House, which serves as a working oyster house, a site for environmental education, and a fresh seafood store.

*Photo provided courtesy of Phillips Wharf Environmental Center.*

The Tilghman Watermen’s Museum, located just down the road from the Oyster House, has utilized funds from MHAA to expand and enhance their museum, which documents the history and lived experiences of Tilghman Island through exhibits, oral histories, and films. The memories and artifacts of the watermen, boat-builders, and artists who lived and worked on Tilghman Island, paired with the working waterfront at the Oyster House, help to create a cohesive experience for visitors who inject much-needed investment into the local economy. By supporting a diverse array of project types that includes natural resource conservation, land and water trails, new construction, historic building preservation, oral history research, exhibits, and films, the MHAA program helps to conserve the cultural landscape of this island, and indeed the Chesapeake Bay region in Maryland as a whole. From the conversion of the Phillips Packing House in Cambridge--a deteriorating former food-packing warehouse--into a mixed-use food

incubator space, with the adjacent railway converted into a trail and park, to the development of programs like the “Kids and Kayaks” program in Baltimore City that gets local public school students onto the water and learning about the Chesapeake Bay, the MHAA program supports locally-driven strategies that are right-sized for the landscape and cultural conservation efforts of the area.

### ***Case Study: Art and Landscape-Scale Projects***

Projects that creatively embed art and cultural symbols in landscapes form an increasingly popular strategy to encourage visitors and residents to explore the landscapes around them, and MHAA has funded a number of grant projects that employ this strategy. These efforts toe the fuzzy line between cultural and natural heritage resources, creating culturally meaningful visual interest in already stunning and ecologically significant places.

In Western Maryland, a grant from the MHAA program allowed the Barn Quilt Association of Garrett County to expand their Barn Quilt Trail, which consists of a series of painted quilt squares, designed and created by volunteers, including local students. These student-artists use both their artistic skills and math skills to create the geometric shapes and patterns that harken back to the designs that previous generations used for traditional quilts. The squares are installed on local barns and farm buildings throughout Garrett County, and a mobile app that guides visitors on step by step tours of the Barn Quilt Trail has been developed (Barn Quilt Association of Garrett County, n.d.). While not unique to Maryland, the barn quilt squares are a visual reminder of the artistic quilting traditions of the Appalachian region, providing a point of access to the rural landscape and culture of Western Maryland. In a quick drive-by glance, the quilt squares seem to call to passersby and residents alike: “There are cultural traditions here to explore, against this backdrop of agricultural fields and rolling hills.”



**Figure 3.** One of the iconic barn quilts in Garrett County, Maryland. *Photo by Timothy Jacobsen and provided courtesy of the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce.*

In a more urban setting, the Hyattsville Community Development Corporation has also used the arts as an access point to the landscape, with the development of the Rhode Island Avenue Trolley Trail. Rather than using traditional signage for their newly developed bicycle and pedestrian trail following the path of the former trolley system, the group, with financial support from MHAA, asked artists to submit designs for a series of sculptural kiosks that would provide information about the area's history and visitor amenities, in a creative design that would evoke the history of the trolley system itself. The resulting kiosks embrace the industrial feel of the trolleys in their design and provide connectivity to the landscape surrounding the trail, as well as linkages to other resources within the heritage area. As in the case of the Barn Quilt Trail, art is used as a mechanism to foster discovery within the landscape and encourage visitors to explore, spend more time and money in the heritage area, appreciate the interconnected heritage resources of the area, and perhaps even to steward those resources for future generations.



**Figure 4.** Newly fabricated signage kiosk along the Hyattsville Community Development Corporations' Rhode Island Avenue Trolley Trail.

*Photo provided courtesy of the Hyattsville Community Development Corporation.*

### ***Lessons Learned and Moving Forward***

Since the program was established in 1996, the MHAA members, staff, and local heritage area directors have learned lessons and are addressing challenges in the following areas: the

protection of resources within heritage areas from encroaching development and the development of consistent, holistic program evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

The case studies explored in this paper have detailed projects that the MHAA program has supported through grant funding. As the program looks to the future, heritage area staff and stakeholders are increasingly faced with decisions about how heritage areas can or should weigh in when development that seems to threaten landscape-scale heritage resources is proposed within a heritage area's boundaries. A recent Maryland Public Service Commission decision in a case relating to the placement of a solar field in the rural landscape of the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area cited the adverse impact on the heritage area's viewshed (as well as the viewshed of a designated Scenic Byway), and potentially resulting economic damage to the tourism industry, as key reasons the permit for the solar field was denied. This decision was made despite the absence of standing historic structures that would be impacted, illustrating the power of the heritage area designation to demonstrate the value of cultural landscapes, beyond the built environment alone (Public Service Commission of Maryland 2017).

One lesson the MHAA program has learned over time is that accomplishing program goals is not enough; the program also needs to *measure* how and to what extent these goals are accomplished. Consistently measuring and communicating the program's impacts will demonstrate its economic, cultural, and conservation value to stakeholders, elected officials and taxpayers. To-date, the program has focused primarily on measuring economic impact. Two studies detailing outcomes like return on investment for Maryland taxpayers and estimated number of jobs created have been undertaken. One study was published in 2003 and the other is in the final stages of publication in 2018.

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<sup>2</sup> These are two of the primary challenges the program is facing. Additionally, we recognize the importance of encouraging a more diverse set of applicants and participants. We are actively working to identify the barriers that prevent under-represented groups from participating fully in the MHAA program and to remove those barriers or create alternative routes to ensure equitable access to all the program has to offer. Due to the complexity of the issue, we have not addressed this aspect of the program's challenges in the scope of our paper.

While these economic impact studies have been essential in making the argument that the program is valuable and deserving of continued and expanded financial support from the State, there is recognition among the MHAA members, MHAA staff, and local heritage areas that a framework for ongoing measurement of the program's broad quantitative and qualitative impacts is needed in order to understand what the MHAA program means in the lives of residents and visitors. To this end, funding has been allocated for a program impact study, which will include the design and implementation of a framework for ongoing data collection, so that MHAA staff and stakeholders will be able to continue tracking the program's impacts consistently even after the formal study concludes.

The program impact study raises questions about how to measure the outcomes that make the MHAA program unique and valuable. How does a program measure cultural conservation, expressed differently in each region? What metrics will meaningfully capture the impacts of landscape-scale projects that produce outcomes for economic development, cultural resources, and natural resources that go beyond traditional boundaries? These questions represent challenges but also opportunities for innovative methodologies.

Moving forward, the MHAA program will be focusing on the development of a system to better track the impact of the program, not only to demonstrate the value to the decision makers at both the local and state levels, but to better understand where the program is most effective, allowing stakeholders to focus their efforts on those areas. It is critical that the program examine how to encourage the strongest applications from stakeholders, particularly those projects that span the divide between the cultural and natural resources. By continuing to take an interdisciplinary approach, the MHAA program can help build a richer experience for residents and visitors alike.

### ***Conclusion***

Since its inception in 1996, the MHAA program has certified 13 distinct heritage areas, including portions of every county in the state. Each heritage area provides a framework around which local preservation, conservation, and economic development efforts are brought together to build

a stronger case for landscape-scale heritage conservation. The success of the MHAA program is one that can be (and has been) translated to other states and nations as a locally-driven and government-supported mechanism for preserving the distinct and holistic cultural landscapes of a region. As the MHAA program, with its emphasis on heritage tourism demonstrates, cultural landscapes—when successfully stewarded at the local level, supported financially, and marketed to tourists—have the potential to serve as a bridge between a region’s economic past and present, allowing future generations to conserve meaningful landscapes, find work, and even continue traditional cultural practices in a heritage tourism context.

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### Biographical Notes

**Jennifer Ruffner** serves as the Administrator of the Maryland Heritage Areas Program at the Maryland Historical Trust. She joined the Trust in 2009. Previously, Ms. Ruffner held management and curatorial positions with museums and historic sites across Pennsylvania, Maryland and Washington, D.C., including the B&O Railroad Museum, the Maryland Historical

Society, and the Queen Anne's County Historic Sites Consortium. Ms. Ruffner holds a MA in Museum Studies from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and a MLS in Archives and Information Management from the University of Maryland, College Park. She also earned a Certificate in Historic Preservation from Goucher College.

**Ennis Barbery Smith** has been serving as the Assistant Administrator of the Maryland Heritage Areas Program since 2017. Before taking on this role, she held leadership roles in several small museums in Maryland and Virginia. She has also served as a researcher for the Chesapeake Conservancy and the National Park Service, focusing on indigenous cultural landscapes in the Chesapeake Bay region. Ms. Smith holds a Master of Applied Anthropology (MAA) degree and a Graduate Certificate in Museum Scholarship and Material Culture, both from the University of Maryland, College Park.