

# With Chesapeake Bay waters rising, Tangier Island's future is sinking



The sun sets on Tangier, Va., where religion and the waterman's way of life are strong traditions. At just four feet above sea level, the island is threatened by rising waters. (Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images)

By

**Steven Ginsberg**

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*Steven Ginsberg is the national editor of The Washington Post and a native of Onancock, Va. He first visited Tangier on a frigid November boat ride for a high school*

*basketball game in the late 1980s. His most recent visit was with his family last summer.*

For at least the past 100 years, reporters from across the world have visited the island of Tangier to try to figure out why people live on this tiny dot of land in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. It's not that much of a mystery, really: Most descend from families that have always lived there, and they, too, want to live the waterman's life. And yet, for at least the past 100 years, outsiders have usually gotten it wrong.

The mischaracterizations generally cut in one of two ways — either islanders are dismissed as inbred half-wits, or they are overly romanticized as vestiges of man's innate desire to survive on his own, unmoved by the temptations and conveniences of modernity. An early version of the genre came in 1914 in Harper's Magazine, which set out to explore the "queer goin's-on over yonder on Tangier," expecting to find "a community morally and mentally weakened by inbreeding."

Along with those misperceptions come the standard, seductive myths of Tangier: The people are fiercely religious (mostly true); they are so pious that alcohol is banned (technically true, but not really); and their unusual accents are America's last remaining link to original Elizabethan English (not remotely close to true).

At long last, someone has finally gotten it right. In "[Chesapeake Requiem](#)," author Earl Swift masterfully reveals Tangier as it is — a proud but struggling community of fewer than 500 people trying to hold on to what they can amid unending hardship and isolation.

The challenges, as Swift captures in his sweeping historical narrative, range from the merely annoying — black flies abound — to the deadly: When the bay's notorious, fierce winds kick up, not even the expert captains of Tangier can find safe passage home.

Though "[Chesapeake Requiem](#)" is cast as something of a "[Hillbilly Elegy](#)" for this seaside attraction, Swift makes a compelling case that the story of Tangier is far more consequential: It is probably the first community in America that will be entirely wiped away by climate change. The island, which is nearly 16 miles from the mainland town of Onancock and no more than four feet above sea level at its highest point, is disappearing at an alarming rate. What America decides to do about it will set a precedent for what the country chooses to do elsewhere.



A grave marker rests on a beach near the site of a cemetery that was washed away by erosion in Tangier, Va. (Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images)

Swift's understanding of Tangier is hard-earned. He spent the better part of two years living there, after having visited multiple times over many years on his own and as a reporter for the *Virginian-Pilot*. The result is an intimate, meticulously reported and captivating account of life on the island.

At the center of it is a core group of watermen that includes Mayor James "Ooker" Eskridge, who garnered international attention last year when he said on CNN that he loved President Trump "as much as any family member I got," prompting [a call from the president](#).

Flattery aside, what Eskridge wanted from Trump was help. The president was strongly backed by nearly every man, woman and child on Tangier, and they are counting on him to do something to save their disappearing island. As Swift details, various proposals to protect Tangier from storms and rising waters have been studied for years, but little has been done, thanks to indecision and red tape. A main stumbling block is that there really is no bureaucratic rationale to save Tangier. By any government formula, it has too few people who produce too little to qualify for limited funding — its famous soft-shell crabs notwithstanding.

Another obstacle has been that few, if any, on Tangier believe in climate change, choosing instead to believe that their island is shrinking because of erosion. Swift deals

with this like the newspaperman he once was — loyal to the facts, while giving the islanders space to speak for themselves.

But he doesn't excuse them. He observes that while they are individually resourceful and self-sufficient, they are collectively unproductive. Regarding their predicament, they tend to bemoan the lack of action by others rather than doing much of anything on their own.

At times, you can see where they're coming from. Islanders are resentful of a decades-long federal project in the Maryland part of the bay to restore Poplar Island. When the project is completed in 2040, at a cost of \$1.4 billion, the island will be returned to the rough shape and size it was in 1847. But there will be no direct benefit to humans, as the island's inhabitants have long since moved on. Rather, it will serve as a habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Summing up the view on Tangier, one longtime resident says: "They can build islands but they can't save an island? I don't go for that much."

Rising seas are not the only imminent threat to Tangier. Many of those who remain are elderly, and there are ever fewer young people to replace them. Many parents encourage their children to leave after finishing high school rather than pursue a life on the water, where days are long, success is fleeting and rewards are few. The school itself, which counts about 60 students from first through 12th grade, could close because of a lack of funds or a lack of teachers — a number of them are beyond retirement age, and it's hard to imagine who would replace them.

Swift is careful not to romanticize life on the island. This is not Nantucket. Charm is not Tangier's thing; its appeal is that it does not try to be appealing.

Islanders welcome summer tourists with something between ambivalence and indifference, wary of their intentions, weary of their curiosity. If there is anything distinctive about the homes, it is that many are surrounded by chain-link fences. Others are left to rot, shaking off debris that can go untended for years. In one memorable passage, Swift walks the island, cataloguing the empty homes. He counts 52, plus 12 trailers — 20 percent of the island's total housing stock.

Tangier is not just small, it is tiny.

A walk from the beach on one end to the dock on the other can be made in about a half-hour. There is a landing strip, but the only way in and out for most is a long, often choppy ride across open waters. There is no shade to escape to in the summer, and winter can be so brutal that islanders often retreat into their homes, unable to navigate the icy bay. Though alcohol is banned, some take to drinking anyway, while others are addicted to drugs.

“Folks will come here and have their island experience,” church board member Jean Crockett told Swift. “They’ll be attracted by this idea that it’s an idyllic place. And the truth is that it is not an idyllic place, and they won’t stay.”

But what of Crockett and the few hundred others who call it home? Will they get to stay?

If Tangier is to be saved from the very waters that have provided its identity and sustenance for the past 240 years, action will have to come fast. Scientists estimate that the island could be completely submerged in as few as 25 years.

If there were ever political will to do something, the moment is now. The Republican president has taken a personal interest (though he, too, dismisses the fact of climate change). Virginia’s two Democratic senators, Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, have visited and focused on the island’s plight. And Virginia’s new Democratic governor, Ralph Northam, happens to be from Onancock, where he grew up across the water from Tangier. In his inaugural address this year, Northam noted that he had once been the captain of a ferry to the island. It will largely be up to these politicians to determine whether Tangier is worth saving.

If they decide it is not, “Chesapeake Requiem” will have arrived just in time to provide the definitive account of what once was and of what will soon be no more.

*Earl Swift will be signing books on Saturday, Aug. 18, from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. at the Book Bin, 25304 Lankford Hwy., Onley, Va. 757-787-7866.*

Chesapeake Requiem

A Year With the Watermen of Vanishing Tangier Island

By Earl Swift

Dey Street. 434 pp. \$28.99