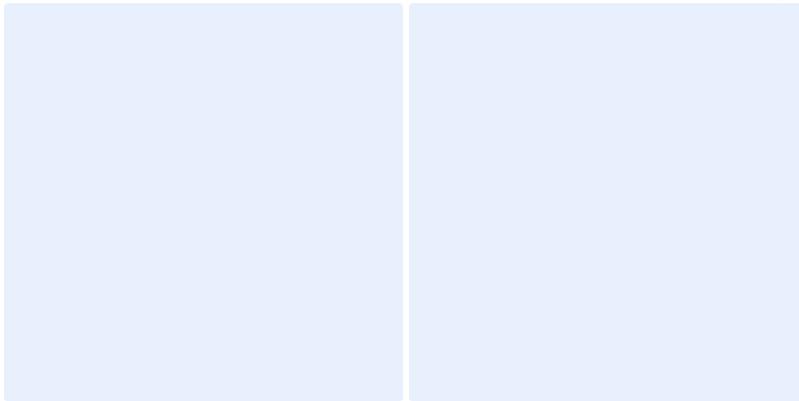




AAPA Lighthouse Award Project Highlight Terrapin Education & Research Partnership Program



Maryland Port Administration
401 E. Pratt Street, Baltimore, MD 21202

Project Overview

Maryland Port Administration Terrapin Education & Research Partnership Program

Award Category: Excellence in Community/Educational Outreach

Completion Date: 9/29/2025

Description: Provide a description of the project, including its goals, key features, and impact.

The Terrapin Education and Research Partnership (TERP) Program is an impactful community stakeholder collaboration sponsored by the Maryland Port Administration. Since 2005, local schools have partnered with MPA to raise and release diamondback terrapin hatchlings collected from Poplar Island, a beneficial use site and environmental restoration project located in the mid-Chesapeake Bay. Students care for and monitor these turtles, giving them a chance for maximum growth during a life stage when they are especially vulnerable. Students contribute valuable citizen science data while gaining a strong connection to their local environment and learning about the Port of Baltimore's environmental restoration work. Well over 69,000 students have participated in classroom outreach programs and field experiences over the life of the program. Goals of the TERP Program include:

- Establish a long-term monitoring effort of the diamondback terrapin population in and around Poplar Island.
- Create a meaningful, hands-on experience for students and teachers to foster a lasting understanding of the ecological significance of diamondback terrapins.
- Leverage this connection to terrapins as an outreach tool to engage the local community with restoration work being done by the MPA in order to increase stakeholder understanding and support of Poplar Island, beneficial use projects, and the overall Dredged Material Management Program.

Inspiration

Explain what inspired your team to undertake this project

Our team was inspired to undertake this project by the Maryland Port Administration's commitment to increasing public awareness about the Port of Baltimore and its environmental initiatives. Recognizing that the success of both the Port and the Dredged Material Management Program depend on public understanding and support, we were motivated to create a project that would engage local communities in a meaningful way. The TERP Program stood out as an ideal platform—offering an

accessible, educational, and hands-on opportunity to showcase environmental restoration efforts. By involving students and community members directly, we aimed to reflect on the diverse communities the MPA serves and to promote outcomes that equitably benefit all Marylanders, while also enhancing quality of life and environmental stewardship across the region.

Challenges

Describe the main challenges faced during the planning and execution of this project, and how did the port overcome them

One of the main challenges during the restoration project on Poplar Island was ensuring that construction activities did not negatively impact the local diamondback terrapin population. To address this, terrapin monitoring began in 2002 under the leadership of Dr. Willem Roosenburg from Ohio University, who has tracked terrapins and their offspring each summer since. Shortly after monitoring began, the Maryland Port Administration partnered with a local school district to support conservation efforts through a unique educational program. This initiative not only raised awareness but also contributed valuable data to long-term research. Each year, about 1,000 hatchlings are tagged, with some sent to classrooms across Maryland, where students raise them in a safer environment, allowing the young terrapins to grow stronger before being released.

Lessons Learned

Describe any valuable lessons your team learned from this project to share with other ports

One key lesson from this project is the importance of reaching a broader and more representative audience. Engaging learners across diverse demographics, accommodating different learning styles, and ensuring access for underserved communities strengthens both the impact and inclusivity of the program. At the same time, the popularity of such programs can create challenges, as high demand sometimes makes it difficult to accommodate all requests. Balancing accessibility with capacity has been an ongoing area of learning and growth for the team.

Value

Explain why or what about this project makes your port proud

What began in 2004–2005 with just 12 terrapin hatchlings in a few schools has grown into a statewide effort, with over 3,400 terrapins reaching Maryland classrooms and nearly 70,000 students engaged. The TERP program, now a collaboration among MPA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Environmental Service, the Smithsonian, the National Aquarium, the University of Maryland, Ohio University, and local schools, emphasizes hands-on learning that fosters stewardship and advocacy. Terrapins serve as the “vehicle” for understanding Chesapeake Bay restoration, making TERP the world’s longest-running student-led terrapin head start program and a hallmark of MPA’s outreach success.

Quotes

“Insert inspirational quote or testimonial from a key stakeholder about the project.”

"I, along with my students, have participated in the TERP's Program for the past 12 years. Through my participation alone, over 240 students have had the opportunity to raise a terrapin with me in the classroom, learning about their critical impact on the environment. Students love getting an up close and personal experience with the terrapin, holding, feeding, and measuring it. They learn about the importance of the terrapin to Maryland and our uniquely designed ecosystem with brackish water and marshlands that terrapins need to survive. They learn about the impact that humans have on the environment and wildlife and how they can be good stewards of the land, habitat, and animals that live around them. We use kid friendly terms to easily remember information about the terrapin, such as how it is about the size of a quarter when it hatches and grows to the size of a cheeseburger once it's ready to be released. One of the experiences that students enjoy the most is visiting Poplar Island to release our terrapin. Students are fascinated by the process of using dredge material to rebuild Poplar Island, while simultaneously giving ships better access to the Port of Baltimore. They find it amazing, and it truly is, that the island was almost washed away and now is larger than 1,100 acres or "football fields". Parents always comment that they learn so much about terrapins and Poplar Island from their child coming home, so excited to share what they have learned from the program. As a teacher, this is one of the most engaging and rewarding programs that I am proud to be a part of. I love sharing this powerful experience with students and seeing their excitement grow as they actively engage in the conservation of this beautiful reptile and island. I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to continue the legacy of this project every year with my students."

– Katie Cole, Dorchester County Public Schools, Vienna Elementary School

Additional Information

[Include any additional information, acknowledgments, or future plans related to the project.]

The Partnership has recently expanded to higher education through the University of Maryland, where faculty in the College of Education use Poplar Head Start terrapins as teaching tools in undergraduate classes. Pre-service teachers study the species while exploring links between climate change, conservation practices, and effective teaching strategies.

Through this collaboration, MPA is also engaged in the **13 Moons Partnership**, which will bring together university scholars, tribal members, educators, and conservation leaders. Supported by NOAA's **B-WET** grant, the group is developing and piloting a curriculum model that integrates Indigenous knowledge into science education. Using the diamondback terrapin as a "proof of concept," the initiative promotes environmental literacy and prepares students to address the causes, impacts, and solutions of climate change.

Future plans include expanding these collaborations to create replicable, interdisciplinary models that blend science, Indigenous perspectives, and hands-on learning to inspire climate resilience and stewardship.

Contact

Contact Person: Katrina Y Jones

Title: Program Manager, Education & Stakeholder Engagement

Email: kjones1@marylandports.com

Phone: 410-385-4438

Resources

Add any Links to videos or additional resources

Click [here](#) to see photographs, videos, examples of student work, and other glimpses of our outreach program in action.

A comprehensive resource library has been developed to accompany this educational initiative. Such resources include:

[A Teacher's Guide and Terrapin Care Manual](#) which was compiled as a reference manual for participants to provide guidance in terrapin husbandry, tank set up, background information, lesson plans, and other needs.

[TERP Homeroom](#) was created as an online platform for informational exchange. Partners can communicate instructions to participants, teachers share lesson plans, and everyone can share successes and challenges.

The [Roosenburg Lab at Ohio University](#) Facebook page was established so that teachers may track their turtles for months, or even years after they've been released. Every head start terrapin receives a trackable ID tag and the field team posts pictures here when they've recaptured any head start turtle.