



Indigenous Perspectives on Water Quality in the Nansemond River

Cameron Bruce

Environmental Program Coordinator

Nansemond Indian Nation

Tuesday, September 12th





History

- Indigenous people of the Nansemond River
- Independent Chiefdom South of the James River
- “Nansemond” translates to “fishing point” in Coastal Algonquian
- Originally a centralized four Chief hierarchy with approximately 1,000-1,500 people
- Part of the Tsenacomoco (Powhatan paramount chiefdom) of roughly 30 other Powhatan Tribes
- The Anglo-Powhatan Wars from 1610-1646 displaced the Nansemond from their ancestral land around the River to the surrounding area near the Great Dismal Swamp
 - Decreased to about 250-500 people
- Migration and colonization divided the Nansemond into those who elected to assimilate to English lifestyle and those who wished to remain traditional
- Despite political differences, all people with Indian ancestry experienced social and legal prejudice and many moved away from the Norfolk region altogether out west and into North Carolina

Environmental & Ecological History

- The Nansemond River channel is approximately 20 miles long
- The watershed is approximately 160,000 acres
- Prominent plant species include river birch, groundsel trees, and marsh elders
 - Rare grove of southern sugar maples at Mattanock Town, the Nation's government seat in Suffolk, VA
- Prominent animal species include deer, red-winged blackbird, blue heron, fiddler crab, mussels, oysters, channel catfish, striped bass, and the occasional river otter





Environmental & Ecological History

- Oysters are one of the most environmentally significant species for the Nansemond River ecosystem and the Nansemond Indian Nation
 - “Cauwaih” is Coastal Algonquian for “oyster”
- Oysters are considered a keystone species because of their versatility
 - Filter “suckquohana” or “water”
 - Shoreline stabilization
 - Aquatic habitat
- Part of daily diet
- Shells used as tools to shave hair, scrape hides, and hollow out canoes





Nansemond River Water Quality

- VDEQ classifies the Nansemond River and several of its tributaries as impaired
- Source is considered non-point source pollution
- 60% of the River is condemned or conditionally condemned for shellfish harvesting
- Despite the lack of public beaches around the River, VDH still issues the following warnings:
 - Avoid swimming in the days following heavy rain
 - Avoid swimming in shallow water
 - Avoid getting water in your nose and mouth, especially in shallow/warm water
 - Avoid swimming with open wounds



Nansemond River Water Quality

- Increased sedimentation from run-off
- Phosphorous levels exceed VDEQ standards
- The River DOES meet standards for nitrates and dissolved oxygen



The Nansemond River & The Nansemond People

- The Nansemond River is the ancestral homeland of the Nansemond People
- Following federal recognition, there has been a consistent effort to reconnect with heritage
 - Land re-acquisition
 - Environmental stewardship
 - Member outreach and inclusion
- Pollution and poor water quality in the Nansemond River acts as a barrier to this cultural connection
- It also offers a chance for cultural connection through sustainable methods aimed at including past indigenous practices for water quality improvement





Main Environmental Priorities



Water Quality Improvement



Invasive Plant Removal



Native Plant Restoration



Other Environmental Priorities



Shoreline Stabilization



Oyster Aquaculture & Restoration



Solid Waste Management



Climate Adaptation



Hazard Mitigation/Preparedness



Capacity Building

Current Projects

- Oyster Gardening
- Oyster Shell Recycling Program
- Solid Waste Management
- Outreach, Education, & Awareness





Questions?

cameron.bruce@nansemond.gov

(757) 325-9001 x1011

nansemond.gov

