Shoreline Evolution:
King George County, Virginia
Potomac River and Rappahannock River Shorelines

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January 2012
Shoreline Evolution:  
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Data Summary Report  

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This project was funded by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program at the Department of Environmental Quality through Grant #NA10NOS4190205 of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA, or any of its subagencies.

February 2012
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1 Introduction

King George County is situated along the Potomac and the Rappahannock Rivers (Figure 1). Through time, the County’s shoreline has evolved, and determining the rates and patterns of shore change provides the basis to know how a particular coast has changed through time and how it might proceed in the future. Along Chesapeake Bay’s estuarine shores, winds, waves, tides, and currents shape and modify coastlines by eroding, transporting and depositing sediments.

The purpose of this report is to document how the shore zone of King George County has evolved since 1937. Aerial imagery was taken for most of the Bay region beginning that year and can be used to assess the geomorphic nature of shore change. Aerial photos show how the coast has changed, how beaches, dunes, bars, and spits have grown or decayed, how barriers have breached, how inlets have changed course, and how one shore type has displaced another or has not changed at all. Shore change is a natural process, but, quite often, the impacts of man, through shore hardening or inlet stabilization, come to dominate a given shore reach. In addition to documenting historical shorelines, the change in shore positions along the rivers and larger creeks in King George County will be quantified in this report. The shorelines of very irregular coasts, small creeks around inlets, and other complicated areas will be shown but not quantified.

2 Methods

2.1 Photo Rectification and Shoreline Digitizing

An analysis of aerial photographs provides the historical data necessary to understand the suite of processes that work to alter a shoreline. Images of the King George County Shoreline from 1937, 1953, 1967, 1981, 1994, 2002, 2006 and 2009 were used in the analysis. The 1994, 2002, 2006 and 2009 images were available from other sources. The 1994 imagery was orthorectified by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the 2002, 2006 and 2009 imagery was orthorectified by the Virginia Base Mapping Program (VBMP). The 1937, 1953, 1967, and 1981 photos were a part of the VIMS Shoreline Studies Program archives. The historical aerial images needed to cover the entire County shoreline were not always flown on the same day. The dates for each year are:

1937 - March 3, March 4, April 1, and May 31;
1953 - September 30, October 3, 16, November 29, and December 2;
1967 - October 11 and 20;

The 2002, 2006, and 2009 were all flown in February, March, and April of their respective years. We could not ascertain the dates the 1994 images were flown.

Figure 1. Location of King George County within the Chesapeake Bay estuarine system.
The 1937, 1953, 1967, and 1981 images were scanned as tiffs at 600 dpi and converted to ERDAS IMAGINE (.img) format. The aerials for 1953 were geo-rectified in ArcMap due to damaged fiducials on each aerial. The 1937, 1967 and 1981 aerial photographs were orthographically corrected to produce a seamless series of aerial mosaics following a set of standard procedures. The 1994 Digital Orthophoto Quarter Quads (DOQQ) from USGS were used as the reference images. The 1994 photos are used rather than higher quality, more recent aerials because of the difficulty in finding control points that match the earliest 1937 images.

ERDAS Orthobase image processing software was used to orthographically correct the individual flight lines using a bundle block solution. Camera lens calibration data were matched to the image location of fiducial points to define the interior camera model. Control points from 1994 USGS DOQQ images provide the exterior control, which is enhanced by a large number of image-matching tie points produced automatically by the software. The exterior and interior models were combined with a digital elevation model (DEM) from the USGS National Elevation Dataset to produce an orthophoto for each aerial photograph. The orthophotographs were adjusted to approximately uniform brightness and contrast and were mosaicked together using the ERDAS Imagine mosaic tool to produce a one-meter resolution mosaic .img format. To maintain an accurate match with the reference images, it is necessary to distribute the control points evenly, when possible. This can be challenging in areas given the lack of ground features and poor photo quality on the earliest photos. Good examples of control points were manmade features such as road intersections and stable natural landmarks such as ponds and creeks that have not changed much over time. The base of tall features such as buildings, poles, or trees can be used, but the base can be obscured by other features or shadows making these locations difficult to use accurately. Most areas of the County were particularly difficult to rectify, either due to the lack of development when compared to the reference images or due to no development in the historical and the reference images.

Once the aerial photos were orthorectified and mosaicked, the shorelines were digitized in ArcMap with the mosaics in the background. The morphologic toe of the beach or edge of marsh was used to determine the shoreline position. High water or the limit of runup can be difficult to determine on the shoreline in this locality due to narrow or non-existent beaches against upland banks or vegetated cover. The poor quality of the earlier aerial photographs resulted in some known errors along the Potomac River shoreline. In areas where the shoreline was not clearly identifiable on the aerial photography, the location was estimated based on the experience of the digitizer. The displayed shorelines are in shapefile format. One shapefile was produced for each year that was mosaicked.

Horizontal positional accuracy is based upon orthorectification of scanned aerial photography against the USGS digital orthophoto quadrangles. To get vertical control, the USGS 30m DEM data was used. The 1994 USGS reference images were developed in accordance with National Map Accuracy Standards (NMAS) for Spatial Data Accuracy at the 1:12,000 scale. The 2002, 2006, and 2009 Virginia Base Mapping Program’s orthophotography were developed in accordance with the National Standard for Spatial Data Accuracy (NSSDA). Horizontal root mean square error (RMSE) for historical mosaics was held to less than 20 ft.

2.2 Rate of Change Analysis

The Digital Shoreline Analysis System (DSAS) was used to determine the rate of change for the County’s shoreline (Himmelstoss, 2009). All DSAS input data must be managed within a personal geodatabase, which includes all the baselines created for King George County and the digitized shorelines for 1937, 1953, 1967, 1981, 1994, 2002, 2006, and 2009. Baselines were digitized about 200 feet, more or less, depending on features and space, seaward of the 1937 shoreline and encompassed most of the County’s main shorelines but generally did not include the smaller creeks. It also did not include areas that have unique shoreline morphology such as creek mouths and spits. DSAS generated transects perpendicular to the baseline about 33 ft apart, which were manually checked and cleaned up. For King George County, this method represented about 57 miles of shoreline along 9226 transects.

The End Point Rate (EPR) is calculated by determining the distance between the oldest and most recent shoreline in the data and dividing it by the number of years between them. This method provides an accurate net rate of change over the long term and is relatively easy to apply to most shorelines since it only requires two dates. This method does not use the intervening shorelines so it may not account for changes in accretion or erosion rates that occur through time. However, Milligan et al. (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d) found that in several localities within the bay, EPR is a reliable indicator of shore change even when intermediate dates exist. Average rates were calculated along selected areas of the shore; segments are labeled in Appendix A and shown in Table 1.

Using methodology reported in Morton et al. (2004) and National Spatial Data Infrastructure (1998), estimates of error in orthorectification, control source, DEM and digitizing were combined to provide an estimate of total maximum shoreline position error. The data sets that were rectified (1937, 1953, 1967, and 1981) have an estimated total maximum shoreline position error of 20.0 ft, while the total maximum shoreline error for the four existing datasets are estimated at 18.3ft for USGS and 10.2 ft for VBMP. The maximum annualized error for the shoreline data is +0.7 ft/yr. The smaller rivers and creeks are more prone to error due to their lack of good control points for photo rectification, narrower shore features, tree and ground cover and overall smaller rates of change. These areas are digitized but, due to the higher potential for error, rates of change analysis are not calculated. Many areas of King George County have shore
change rates that fall within the calculated error. Some of the areas that show very low accretion can be due to errors within the method described above.

The King George County shoreline was divided into 29 plates (Figure 2) in order to display that data in Appendices A and B. In Appendix A, all of the digitized shorelines are shown, and the 2009 image is shown with only the 1937 and 2009 shorelines to show the long-term trends. In Appendix B, two photo dates and their associated shoreline are shown on each plate. These include the photos taken in 1937, 1953, 1967, 1981, 1994, 2002, 2006, and 2009.

3 Summary

The rates of change shown in Table 1 are averaged across large sections of shoreline and may not be indicative of rates at specific sites within the reach. Some areas of the County, where the shoreline change rates are categorized as accretion, have structures along the shoreline which results in a positive rate of change. However, some of the areas with very low accretion may be the result of error with the method. Segment E on the Potomac River along Mathias Point Neck has the highest rate of erosion. Most of Segment E has low to very low erosion except for a section of shoreline approximately 0.75 miles long near Persimmon Point that has medium erosion. Generally, the County’s Potomac River shoreline has higher rates of change than the Rappahannock River shorelines.

Table 1. Average end point rate of change (ft/yr) between 1937 and 2009 for segments along King George County’s shoreline. Segment locations are shown on maps in Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment Name</th>
<th>Location Description</th>
<th>Average Rate of Change (ft/yr)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Potomac Creek</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Potomac River, east of Bull Bluff</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Potomac River, Somerset Beach to Metomkin Point</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Potomac River, Metomkin Point to Mathias Point</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Potomac River, Mathias Point Neck</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Potomac River, Persimmon Point to Upper Machodoc Creek</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Upper Machodoc Creek</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Potomac River, Baber Point to Stony Point</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Rosier Creek</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Rappahannock River, County Line to James Madison Memorial Bridge</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Rappahannock River, James Madison Memorial Bridge to Skinkers Neck</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 References


Figure 2. Index of shoreline plates