



After the Fact | Keeping Indigenous Culture on Maryland's Shores

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TRANSCRIPT

Brenda "Morning Marsh Woman" Abbott, member, Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians Inc: Oh gosh, come on. In all reality, I could have a rat. But I can tell I don't.

Donna "Wolf Mother" Abbott, chief, Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians Inc: Nothing there either.

Chief Donna Abbott: It's about time we get the paths beaten down so the frag isn't slapping us in the face the season's over.

Emily Chow, senior producer, "After the Fact" podcast: We're here, embedded in the reedy marshlands of Maryland's Eastern Shore. You're listening to Chief Donna "Wolf Mother" Abbot and her cousin, Brenda "Morning Marsh Woman" Abbott.

Brenda Abbott: Water is just full of musk. That's a good sign.

Emily Chow: And this morning, they're hunting muskrat. As descendants of the Nanticoke tribe, this tradition has been passed down through their family for generations.

Brenda Abbott: Hey Chief.

Chief Donna Abbott: Hey. Did you get a black one or a brown one?

Brenda Abbott: Might be a black. Want to smell the perfume? Actually, it smells good. Seriously.

Chief Donna Abbott: That's what all the high-dollar perfumes are made from, the musk from these. It's very emotional for us coming down here. This is all our ancestral land back here.

We've been trapping back here, I think, three years now, three winters now, and I've seen a change just in the three years that we've been back here.



Lot of this land back here that's now marsh used to be farmland. There was persimmon trees back here that the deer would feed off the persimmons. We were driving up the road, and now it's nothing, it's just all marsh, all the trees are dying.

We are all about trying to keep our culture and our traditions alive. And we're going to keep doing it as long as we can.

Emily Chow: Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Emily Chow.

Across the globe, climate change is causing sea levels to rise and making coastal flooding worse. And in the United States, some areas are feeling the effects at an alarming pace. In Maryland’s Chesapeake Bay, the sea level rose 1 foot in the past century. That's twice as fast as the global average.

Pew’s conserving coastal wetlands team works to support policymakers on how to protect wetlands like marsh the Nause-Waiwash call home. These ecosystems play a crucial role in mitigating climate change, as they store carbon at much greater amounts than they let out and reduce the amount of CO2 released into the atmosphere.

But this issue isn’t just changing the environment and ecosystems. For generations the Nause-Waiwash people have lived in balance with the marshes of Maryland's Eastern Shore. They raise families, work, and take part in cultural traditions like muskrat trapping. But as the waters rise, these lands are disappearing. And with them, a tradition is at risk.

Chief Donna Abbott: Mhmm. Did you break it? Last year's poles. We're in desperate need of trap poles.

Brenda Abbott: Yes, we are.

Chief Donna Abbott: We usually let the traps sit in the same lead two or three days, and if we don't catch anything, we'll pick them up and move them, go a different lead, find a better place for it. The muskrat is part of the ecosystem and plays a big role in keeping everything healthy and regenerating.

It's a very significant animal. It one of the Native American lores is that we believe that the Earth was created on the back of a turtle shell. To create the Earth, they needed an animal to dive in under the water to bring that mud up from off the bottom. And the only animal that could hold their breath long enough to do that was the muskrat.



Emily Chow: We're with Chief Abbott and her cousin Brenda as they take us through the marsh. We're on a wide, dirt-covered trail that is surrounded on both sides by tall, tan reeds of grass that stand at least 5 feet tall.

Chief Donna Abbott: Along there was the old road and we used to walk down that road to pick wild asparagus and they put this new road in. You're not going to find wild asparagus anywhere back here now. The women would sit down here and make pottery. Down here in this little gut in the water. And there's actually been jars of pottery bowls that have been found in this area. But it's all marsh now.

Emily Chow: Chief Abbot and her people have witnessed the landscape shift over the years. And these ecological changes have made it difficult for the Tribe to teach their traditions to the next generation. One practice that Chief Abbot is fighting to preserve is muskrat trapping.

Chief Donna Abbott: Mother Earth is upset. And everything is just so out of sync. So out of whack. The old timers would always say the earlier in the season that the rats build their houses, the longer, the colder the winter is going to be.

So, we saw them building houses first to mid of October and we're thinking yes, it's gonna be a long, cold winter and it really wasn't. Maybe the sea-level rise, maybe pollution, maybe a lot of things.

Emily Chow: Sea-level rise is causing more and more flooding on Nause-Waiwash land. When this happens, saltwater inundates the habitats where muskrats and other species build their homes. The high salt levels can also affect food sources, like cattails, that typically grow around freshwater. Eventually, these changes could cause the muskrats to die off or migrate elsewhere.

Chief Donna Abbott: The musk oils get released usually in the middle of February and it's just now starting, and a lot of times when all that starts to happen the muskrats will have tears in their fur where they're fighting over each other for fighting over the female. We haven't seen any of that. So it's getting a little late for that.

Forty, 50 years ago, they were so plentiful back then that the trappers did it for a living. That was their livelihood. But now it's, it's just done for fun because there's so few of them left. We come down here and we often feel people walking with us. Walking by us. Guiding us. And doing the right thing.

Emily Chow: The climate challenges that the Nause-Waiwash deal with are not limited to their neck of the woods. Flooding is the most common, and costly, weather-related disaster in the United States. More than 8.6 million Americans live in areas susceptible to coastal flooding—that's about the population of New York City.



Chief Donna Abbott: Oh, we got the prize today. How about that?

Emily Chow: Success! Chief Donna caught the second muskrat of the day.

Chief Donna Abbott: This method is very humane.

They're called conibear traps. Her father, my uncle, was very instrumental in getting the patent for these traps.

Chief Donna Abbott: Pop and Uncle Elu walked around with dozens of these at one time walking through the marsh just over your shoulder like this and got it all strung together and kept right on going. My father would come home with four or five hundred piled up in the bed of a pickup truck.

My grandmother, my mother, they always just potted them down with carrots and potatoes and a little bit of sage and some good eating. They'd use the pelts for blankets. The bones were used for tools, fishhooks, needles. I think the highest I ever remember the pelts, the black pelts went for 16, 17 dollars.

Brenda Abbott: I was born on the last day of muskrat season, March 15th.

Emily Chow: You're hearing Brenda, "Morning Marsh Woman" Abbot, again.

Brenda Abbott: My dad left, took my mom into Cambridge Hospital. Left her there, come all the way back down here, went up the attic because he had his pelts up there hanging, drying. And sold the pelts and went back to the hospital and paid for me. I was like \$75, so that's how I got Morning Marsh Woman. He always taught me, you come at a good time.

Emily Chow: As we walk further into the marsh, Chief Abbott points out more landmarks.

Chief Donna Abbott: This area back here was what was known as Abbott Town. That's, that was our ancestral community. We are a part of the Nanticoke.

Emily Chow: The homeland of the Nanticoke people spans what we call today, the Chesapeake Bay and Delaware.

Chief Donna Abbott: Our people were here first and for many generations, for thousands of years. We've been here.



It's, a lot of people are under the misconception that, that there are no longer any Indigenous bloodlines left here and that is further from the truth. It's so far from the truth and there's a lot of people, if your family has been in Dorchester County for longer than three or four generations, chances are you got an Indigenous bloodline there.

Emily Chow: In the mid-1600s, the Maryland governor ordered militias to destroy Nanticoke villages to force them out of the area. Many Native people were murdered. Land was seized and never returned.

Chief Donna Abbott: Part of the Nanticoke went north and east, into what is now Delaware. And the rest of us stayed behind here in Dorchester County. And moved out into the marshes and there's no documentation of any of that.

Emily Chow: For decades, the descendants of the Nanticoke in this area downplayed or suppressed their heritage to outsiders to avoid persecution. But by the late 1980s, attitudes had changed.

Chief Donna Abbott: A couple of our elders decided that we needed to start preserving some of our culture. The name Nassau and Waiwash are names of two Indian villages, that were in Dorchester County. We became a nonprofit organization and picked those two names.

Emily Chow: The Nause-Waiwash led by Chief Abbott are working to preserve their history and culture but are facing challenges due to the changing environment. For example, the tradition of muskrat trapping. The once-abundant muskrat population is now dwindling.

Chief Donna Abbott: In the last three years I'm gonna say we caught maybe 50 at the most in one season, maybe a little more. I don't really believe it's, that they're being overtrapped because there's not many trappers anymore. I think if we don't do something soon, we're going to be at a point where we can't reverse any of it.

Then all of this will be gone. We won't be able to get out here and trap and have fun and pass the tradition on to our next generation. And my son has an interest in it. He's 30. She's got a nephew that just loves it coming out here. We're trying to keep the tradition alive and passing it forward.

Back in the '70s, every day, my father. And he would put the tailgate down and just start skinning muskrats on the tailgate and outside cold teeth, nothing on but a t-shirt and his pants, no long sleeves or anything. And my sister and I would help gut them and prep them to be sold. And we had to have our homework done first though.



Yeah, this knife is dull. Sorry. That's all right. I'll get it. Make you slow down. In competition, you don't want to put your knife down, because then you lose time.

Emily Chow: We're back with Chef Abbott at her home in Dorchester Country. She's prepping the muskrat she caught earlier outside in her backyard.

Chief Donna Abbott: We will skin him out. We plan to harvest the pelt and the meat. I use a yellow-handled queen.

Emily Chow: It looks like a small paring knife.

Chief Donna Abbott: My father used this type of knife. My grandfather used this type of knife. Keeping it real. So I'm going to go in by this hindquarter here, pull the fur up, and my attempt is to cut all the way across. Those are the musk glands. That's what gets removed and used for perfume.

A lot has changed in such a short period of time. I guess it's more noticeable to me because I've seen the progression of the change. Like my son right now, this is all he knows. He's, he doesn't ever remember 500 muskrats in a day.

It's very moving to come back here and know that I'm walking in the same footsteps as my ancestors. I think they probably did it a little more efficiently than I can right now.

(Sound of walking)

Chief Donna Abbott: It's like walking on your mattress at home because you're, you gotta get your sea legs about you and get your balance. That's why we have walking sticks to make sure the ground is solid enough that we can step on it, because some of this marsh has no bottom to it.

Emily Chow: Estimates show that flooding in the United States causes between \$170 and \$490 billion in damages every year. It's about 1-2% of the total U.S. GDP. And in Maryland and many other places, people are facing displacement from their homes.

Chief Donna Abbott: People are having to move out. If you're a new homeowner, it's hard to get the homeowner's insurance because of all the flooding.

The septic in the wells are threatened, by the salt water. When you do a test, to see if you can put your well and septic in, you have to have a certain amount of drainage. They pour stones in a hole and pour water in it and see how quick it drains. And that's almost impossible to do now.



So, people just don't wanna fight all of that, and they will move away from the area. It's very hard for a lot of people to make that adjustment. This is all they've ever known. They do not want to leave. My aunt, as a prime example, her kids have tried to get her to higher ground and she'll go for a day or two, but she's OK, let's go. I'm ready to go home. Home is home. That's where the heart is.

I got the title of chief; it was an election process. Our previous chief, Chief Winter Hawk, suddenly passed. Chief Winter Hawk had spent a lot of time with his grandmother and practiced the old ways in his day-to-day life. So, he knew a lot of the history. And I had worked with him very closely on preserving some of our land and our history. And when he passed, I was hesitant to run in the election to become chief.

Our blood women came out for the election, and of course I ran unopposed. I knew in my heart that if I didn't step up and at least try, that all the hard work that our elders had put into thus far on preserving our history would have been for nothing.

Emily Chow: Now, Chief Abbot and her community also lead public events to raise awareness about their culture and traditions. They're also making connections with other Indigenous communities across the country.

Chief Donna Abbott: The Nassau Way Wash has one big fundraising event, and it's a Native American festival. We celebrate Mother Earth. We celebrate a change in the seasons. It's open to the public. We have all different Tribal Nations come in. There's Native dancing, Native drums, Native cultural stories. Bringing all these people together once a year, it's all about preservation.

Emily Chow: Like the Nause-Waiwash, other Indigenous communities are working to preserve their ancestral homelands. And many are making great strides, like the Northern Chumash Tribe. After more than a decade of advocacy, the Biden administration created the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary in California. This sanctuary, which is managed in partnership with the Chumash Tribe and others in the area, protects 4,500 square miles of ocean and shoreline off the central California coast.

Chief Donna Abbott: When I'm out on the ancestral land, it's very, it's at a very emotional. To be able to walk the paths that they walked, do what they did, and try to make the best of it. I've done a lot of healing out here.

If we listen to our surroundings, we could probably get Mother Earth back into balance. I think that she will even herself out with a little nudge from us. And I think we'll get our four seasons back. And if I think each one of us can step up and do one thing, get it all back into balance, it'd be better for everybody.



And I want my grandchildren to be able to walk trails and be able to go to a park and see eagles and even come down here and trap if they want to. I want to have that available for my grandchildren.

Emily Chow: Thanks for listening. To hear more stories like this, visit us at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. And if you have questions or feedback that you'd like to share, let us know what you want to hear about, you can write us at podcasts@pewtrusts.org. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Emily Chow, and this is "After the Fact."