

Abstract

The Chesapeake Bay is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the United States, increasingly impacted by sea level rise, saltwater intrusion, coastal flooding, species loss, and storm intensification. In this article, we argue that building effective climate resilience in the Bay requires meaningful federal-tribal-state collaboration centered on Tribal sovereignty and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Drawing on successful models from California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Great Lakes region, we examine how Indigenous environmental leadership can guide sustainable and equitable responses to coastal climate threats.

We explore the legal and institutional frameworks that have enabled co-management and consultation with Tribes in other coastal areas, including California's AB 52 and AB 1284, Washington State's Centennial Accord Millennium Agreement and State/Tribal Relations Act, and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative's Distinct Tribal Program. These case studies show how Indigenous communities are not only advocating for the protection of cultural and ecological resources, but also shaping and leading regional adaptation efforts through frameworks that support capacity building, funding access, and shared governance.

This article concludes by identifying legal and policy pathways to replicate these models in the Chesapeake Bay region. We emphasize the opportunity for regional and federal bodies to form formal partnerships with Tribal Nations that recognize their sovereign authority and environmental expertise. Integrating TEK into climate adaptation strategies not only addresses environmental degradation but also redresses longstanding exclusion of Indigenous voices from resource governance. As climate threats escalate, coastal resilience must evolve beyond state-centric management to reflect the pluralistic, intergovernmental nature of coastal communities and the shared responsibility to protect them.