



Teacher Guide—Salinity and Tides in York River



Featured NERRS Estuary:
[Chesapeake Bay Virginia National Estuarine Research Reserve](#)

Activity Summary

In this activity, students learn about tides and salinity in estuaries. They observe time-lapse models of tides and salinity distribution in the York River, part of the Chesapeake Bay, VA National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR). They will learn how salinity changes with an incoming and outgoing tide, observing the dynamics of the salt wedge at various sites along the river. Students also make predictions about the salinity changes at each site based upon their observations of the animation. They then use salinity data from monitoring stations along the river to see changes during a typical day. And, then they'll describe the patterns of each salinity graph and compare the graphs.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Analyze different forms of data and synthesize information to develop a hypothesis.
2. Explain how tides and the geology of the estuary affect water circulation in an estuary.
3. Describe daily patterns of salinity changes in the estuary.

Grade Levels

6-9

Teaching Time

3 (55 minute) class sessions + homework

Organization of the Activity

This activity consists of 3 parts which help deepen understanding of estuarine systems:

Tides in Chesapeake Bay

Interaction of Tides and River Flow

Salinity as Measured by Water Quality Stations in York

Background

York River is one of several rivers flowing into Chesapeake Bay. As the nation's largest estuary, Chesapeake Bay contains a diverse collection of habitats including oyster reefs, seagrass beds, tidal wetlands, sandy shoals and mudflats. Chesapeake Bay and York River illustrate the complexities of tidal variation that respond not just to the gravitational pull of the sun and the moon, but also to the underlying

topography of the bay and the dynamics of the estuarine river systems.

Chesapeake Bay Virginia NERR has four sites on the York River, enabling research and education about the estuary, including extensive data from water quality stations and other observations by reserve scientists. In this learning activity, students use this multi-site system to explore tides and salinity from tidal freshwater to high salinity conditions along the York River estuary. Reserve components include Sweet Hall Marsh, Taskinas Creek, and Catlett Island and Goodwin Island Rivers. Both rivers discharge into Chesapeake Bay.

Additional Resources

- For background on tides and estuaries, refer to *Student Reading — Estuarine Tides*.
- For a more thorough background on tides, see the NOS Tutorial on Tides and Water Levels: oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/tides/welcome.html

Preparation

Make copies of *Student Reading — Estuarine Tides-It's Not Just the Sun and Moon*, *Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides, in York River*, and if you will not be providing computer-access to the data, *Student Data Sheet — Salinity and Tides in York River*. (Note that the data on the *Student Data Sheet* are for a specific date: March 21, 2007.)

Arrange for students to work with the animation and data, either in a computer lab or with a computer and projector. Bookmark the following sites:

- <http://www.vims.edu/cbnerr/>
- https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ofs/ofs_animation.shtml?ofsregion=cb&subdomain=0&model_type=wl_nowcast
- <http://web2.vims.edu/vecos/>
- Animation Salinity in York River for 24 hours <https://coast.noaa.gov/estuaries/curriculum/salinity-and-tides-in-york-river.html>



Figure 1.

The location of York River with respect to Chesapeake Bay

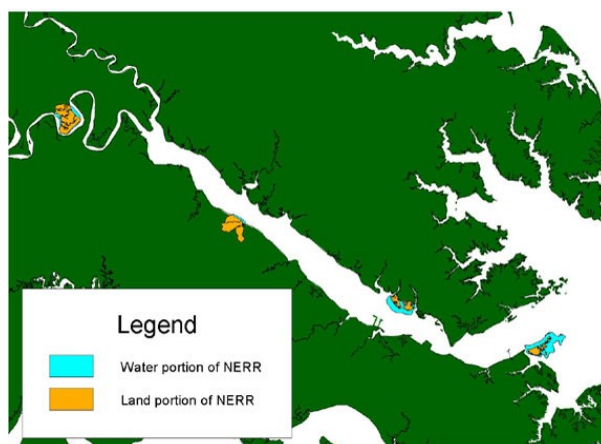


Figure 2.

Close-up Map of York River with NERR sites

Procedure

Part 1 — Tides in Chesapeake Bay

1. Introduce students to the Chesapeake Bay. If need be, use a U.S. Map to show students the location of Chesapeake Bay. Students can also learn more about the bay by reading more on the Chesapeake Bay Virginia NERR web site:
<http://www.vims.edu/cbnerr/>
3. Using a computer projector for the whole class or letting students work individually or in teams in the computer lab, demonstrate the Tides in Chesapeake Bay web site: *https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ofs/ofs_animation.shtml*
4. Have students complete Part 1 of the *Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides in York River*.

National Science Education Standards

Content Standard A: Science as Inquiry

- A3. Use technology and mathematics to improve investigations and communications.
- A4. Formulate and revise scientific explanations using logic and evidence.
- A6. Communicate and defend a scientific argument.

Content Standard B: Physical Science

- B4. Motions and forces
- B5. Conservation of energy and the increase in disorder
- B6. Interactions of energy and matter

Content Standard D - Earth and Space Science

- D1. Energy in the earth system 189
- D2. Geochemical cycles 189

Materials

Students

- Need to work in a computer lab or with a computer and projector
- Copy of the Student Reading — Estuarine Tides-It's Not Just the Sun and Moon.
- Copy of the Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides in York River
- Copy of the Student Data Sheet — Salinity and Tides in York River (if there is no computer-access to the data)

Teachers

Bookmark the following sites:

<http://www.vims.edu/cbnerr/>

https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ofs/ofs_animation.shtml?

[ofs-region=cb&subdomain=0&model_type=wl_nowcast](https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ofs/ofs_animation.shtml?region=cb&subdomain=0&model_type=wl_nowcast)

Animation Salinity in York River for 24 hours

<http://web2.vims.edu/vecos/>

SWMP Graphing Tutorial:

<http://coast.noaa.gov/swmp/tutorial/tutorial.html>

Equipment:

- Computer lab or
- Computer and Projector



Part 2— Interaction of Tides and River Flow

With this part, students deepen their understanding of estuarine systems, focusing on the interaction of tides and rivers and how this affects salinity in the estuary.

1. Using a computer projector for the whole class or letting students work individually or in teams in the computer lab, demonstrate the animation of tides and salinity in York River at this web site:

<https://coast.noaa.gov/estuaries/curriculum/salinity-and-tides-in-york-river.html>

Make sure students are aware that the animation shows the change in salinity over a tidal cycle of 24 hours. Explain that the animation is not a representation of salinity changes for a specific date, but rather a model of what salinity distribution might be like in the river on any given day.

Provide a general orientation about the animation for students:

- The bottom and larger part of the animation shows horizontal distribution—salinity changing from upstream to downstream.
- There are four reference points on the animation.
- The three images to the right show transverse slices of each of the three points—cut-away views of those locations—and show how saltier and fresher water is mixing from the surface of the water to the bottom.
- The scale on the left shows the amount of salinity in parts per thousand (ppt). Students should generally know that moving from blue to red on the scale represents fresh to increasingly saltier water.
- Students should also be aware that arrows on the image indicate the direction of water flow.
- The hour on the animation indicates the time of day on the 24-hour clock.

- The isohalines (lines on a chart connecting all points of equal salinity) help students determine levels of salinity.

2. Encourage students to play this animation several times, looking for general patterns first, then at specific phenomena, and distribution at specific places.

3. Have students answer the first set of questions in Part 2 of the *Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides in York River*.

4. Have students look at the cross-section views in the upper right of the animation, showing salinity with depth in the river, at the lines marked 1, 2 & 3, and answer the remaining questions.

Part 3— Salinity as Measured by Water Quality Stations in York River

Having seen what a theoretical salinity distribution can look like in the river, students now observe actual salinity data for a specific day at five different sites along the river. You can do this activity either using computer access to near-current data or using the prepared data graphs in the *Student Data Sheet — Salinity and Tides in York River*.

1. If you use the computer access to data, follow the instructions in the *Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides*. If you use the prepared graphs, hand them out to students.

Students will:

- Read information about the station including Salinity regime, Mean tidal range, Mean water depth, and Adjacent water (Data Sheet Only).
- Make predictions about how fresher and saltier water will mix, and how salinity changes throughout the day will differ from site to site.
- Select data for the same date at each station. Students may select a date of their own choosing,

but for the purposes of this initial activity, it will be best for the whole class to choose the same date for the sake of consistency when they are discussing results.

- Observe graphs of salinity data for that day at each site. It will be helpful for students to print out graphs for each site so they can compare changes from site to site, over time.

2. Encourage students to correlate the salinity graphs at the five sites with the generalized distribution shown in the animation. Students should pay particular attention to the graphs of Gloucester Point, Yorktown, and Clay Bank because this is the area marked by the three reference points in the animation.

3. Have students answer the question in Part 3 of the *Student Worksheet — Salinity and Tides*. Please note that the differences in salinity may be minimal at some of the sites. Students should pay attention to the salinity ranges and their relationship to tide in the graphs.

Check for Understanding

1. Discuss the following:
 - How do the changes at each monitoring station compare with changes at those same areas in the animation?
 - Name several factors that determine why salinity changes are different depending on your location within the estuary.

2. Ask small groups to use their handouts to answer this question. Collect this assignment and use it as a final assessment.

Imagine that an intense rainstorm dumps 3 inches of rain over the entire Chesapeake Bay region. Predict how the salinity would change at all five stations in the bay for a period of 24 hours after the storm ends. Supply a graph and an explanation of what you might expect to see at each station.

Optional Extension Inquiries

1. Have students access other data from the VIMS site to see how factors such as precipitation and temperature might have affected salinity on that date.
2. Have students investigate tides and salinity from other NERRS estuaries, using the Data Graphing Application on: <https://coast.noaa.gov/estuaries/science-data/graphing.html>
3. Other related activities include:

- NOS Tides Lesson Plans
oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/tides/supp_tides_lessons.html





Teacher Worksheet with Answers Salinity and Tides in York River

Part 1 — Tides in Chesapeake Bay

1a. At what time is the tide highest at the mouth of the bay near Norfolk? How high is the tide?

Answer: Student answers will vary since this model is constantly updated to show near real-time. To determine the answer, work through the animation to find when the color at the mouth is deepest orange (or even red). Then read the time. For height, read the height (2-3 feet is a likely answer).

1b. At what time did this tidal rise reach the northern tip of the bay near Baltimore? How high is the tide?

Answer: Student answers will vary since this model is constantly updated to show near-real-time. To determine the answer, work through the animation to find when the color at the tip of the bay is towards the red end of the scale. Then read the time. For height, read the height.

1c. How long did it take the tide to move this distance?

Answer: Student answers will vary. A typical answer is 12 hours.

1d. Which location has higher tides? Why?

Answer: Mouth of the bay because it is closer to the ocean where the tidal water enters the bay.

1e. Which location do you think has saltier water? Why?

Answer: Mouth of the bay because it is closer to the ocean where the salty ocean water enters the bay.

Part 2 — Interaction of Tides and River Flow

2a. At the mouth of the river (lower right), what are the highest and lowest salinity levels, in ppt, during this time frame?

Answer: High 22, low 20 ppt (approximately)

2b. Now look up river at the upper left of the animation. What are the highest and lowest salinity levels there?

Answer: High 13, low 6 ppt (approximately)

2c. Why is there such a difference between these two locations?

Answer: Fresh water enters up river, salt water enters from Chesapeake Bay.

2d. Play the animation and study the full extent of the river. How often do the arrows change direction? How does that affect salinity throughout the river?

Answer: *The arrows flow up (as the tide rises) for about 6 hours, then down (as the tide falls) for 6 hours. As tide rises, salinity increases and works it way up river, then vice-versa as tide falls.*

2e. At what point are there greatest changes in salinity throughout the day? Why do you think so?

Answer: *Saltier water moves up the river at high tide and fresher water moves seaward at low tide. Water with salinity of about 22 ppt moves from the mouth of the river to beyond Point 1 when the tide comes in. The area from Point 1 to Point 3 ranges from about 22 to 12 ppt. The area from Point 3 upriver ranges from about 16 to below 5 ppt.*

2f. Does the freshest water (the darkest blue) ever appear on the image? Where and for how long? Does the saltiest water (red) ever appear on the image? Where and for how long?

Answer: *The freshest water (less than 5 ppt) appears in the upper-most part of the river about every six hours when the arrows are moving seaward. Water of 25 ppt does not seem to appear on the map. The saltiest water is about 22 ppt and appears in the lower right-hand corner of the map. It does not go upriver much past station 1.*

2g. How does the water get mixed from top to bottom as the salinity changes from upstream to downstream?

Answer: *The water seems to get most thoroughly mixed from top to bottom in the area that is farthest upstream and especially where the river is shallow. The salinity in the areas most seaward, and especially the deeper parts of the river, does not change much at all.*

Part 3 — Salinity as Measured by Water Quality Stations in York River

- 3a. Describe the general pattern of salinity data for each site: Goodwin Island, Gloucester Point, Yorktown (this station is not included in the data sheets provided for March 21-22, 2007), Clay Bank, and Taskinas Creek.

Answer: Student answers for all the sites will vary depending on the dates they select.

