

Aquatic Invasive Species

in the Chesapeake Bay

A M A R Y L A N D S E A G R A N T B R I E F

Nutria

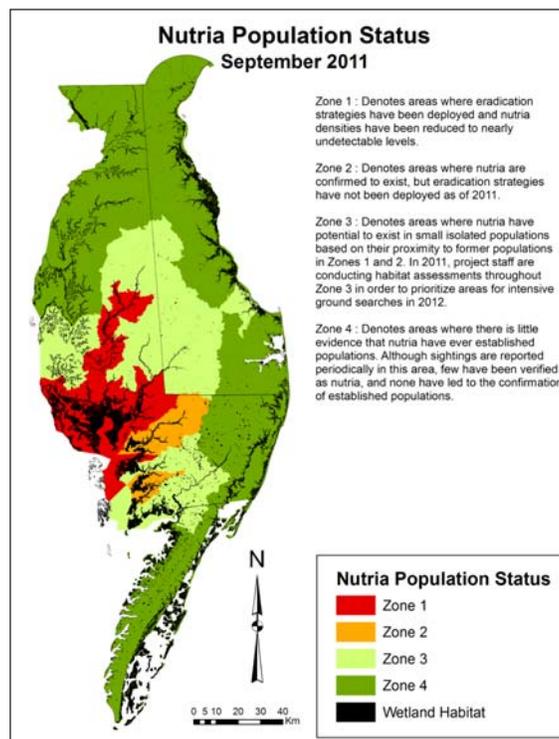
What Are Nutria?

Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) are prolific aquatic rodents native to South America. They were introduced into the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s to establish a fur farm industry. However, nutria farming was not successful, and nutria were intentionally released into the wild or translocated to the Southeast to serve as “weed cutters” to control undesirable vegetation.

The species was first introduced into Maryland’s Lower Eastern Shore in 1943 in order to establish an experimental fur station at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The nutria population in the wildlife refuge increased to approximately 50,000 by the early 1990s.

Why Are They Harmful to the Chesapeake Bay?

Feeding behaviors by nutria are extremely damaging to marsh ecosystems. Nutria can eat 25 percent of their body



weight in a single day. They consume plants by excavating the roots, creating circles of mudflats called “eat outs.” As a result, these areas become highly susceptible to erosion, and the wetlands are quickly converted to open water, removing valuable habitat for native species. Nutria also create deep swimming channels through marshes, fragmenting the area and preventing marsh-dependent species from using all of the available habitat. Over 7,000 acres of marshland in Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge have been destroyed since the introduction of nutria — almost half the refuge’s total acreage.

What Is Being Done to Control Them?

Management efforts to control or eradicate nutria in Maryland began in the late 1980s. They led to the development in 2000 of a three-year pilot program. It brought together state, federal, and private organizations to investigate

and apply the most successful methods. These include sending out teams to track and trap the animals.

In 2002 the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP), in partnership with Maryland Sea Grant, sponsored a workshop aimed at developing Baywide management strategies for problematic invasive species, including nutria. In 2003 President George W. Bush signed a law that provided \$20 million over five years for nutria eradication in Maryland. The CBP — the partnership of federal and state agencies that oversees Bay restoration efforts — concluded that the nutria populations needed to be eliminated throughout the Chesapeake Bay region, not just in Maryland. The CBP created a Chesapeake Bay Nutria Working Group in 2003 to develop a Baywide management plan, which set a target date of 2009 to eradicate the animals.

What is Their Status?

Management efforts have resulted in substantial progress in controlling the nutria population in the

Chesapeake region. As of 2004, nutria have been completely eradicated from Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Intensive surveys conducted throughout the Delmarva Peninsula from 2010 to 2012 indicate that the remaining nutria populations are confined to Maryland's Lower Shore in Wicomico and Somerset Counties, primarily in the Wicomico and Manokin rivers. Eradication efforts continue, and resource managers hope to remove the remaining populations within a few years.

For More Information

Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project
(U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)
<http://www.fws.gov/chesapeakenutriaproject/Index.html>

Nutria and Blackwater Refuge
(U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)
<http://www.fws.gov/blackwater/nutriafact.html>

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