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CENTERPIECE

Black watermen share about challenges, changes on the Chesapeake

ANNIE HASSELGREN Special to the Star Democrat Feb 20, 2024 0

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James "Captain Buck" Lynch, left, speaks at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum on Saturday, Feb. 17, for "Troubled Waters: Black Watermen." Edzel Turner

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The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Van Lennep Auditorium was packed on Saturday, Feb. 17, for "Troubled Waters: Black Watermen," co-hosted by the St. Michaels Community Conversations on Race, the St. Michaels Community Center and the American Association of University Women.

Panelists included Captain Lamont Wright, Reverend Dr. William Wallace, Edzel Turner and James "Captain Buck" Lynch, all of whom have been longtime watermen in varying capacities.

The men came together to engage in a dialogue about the successes and challenges of being African American watermen in honor of Black History Month.

They shared their diverse experiences on the waterways of the Chesapeake Bay with a crowd eager to learn more about the history of Black watermen on the Eastern Shore. Though the men shared similar perspectives, their roles on the water ran the gamut, but all agreed that conditions in the waters have changed drastically during their careers spanning many decades.

"My family owned a seafood factory in Bellevue," said Edzel Turner. "Back then, we'd catch so many crabs that my arms would hurt."

All of the panelists agreed that government regulations have drastically shifted the profession in many ways.

"Regulations and sanctuaries will eventually drive away most watermen," Lynch said, "and disease and the Conowingo Dam are decimating populations. We keep having to go further south (to catch anything)."

Panelists concurred that Black watermen in particular are an aging population that can't be replaced quickly enough.

"The youngest Black waterman is 60," Lynch said, "and there won't be any left in 10 years."

Many of the men are actively advocating for programs for young people to learn about life on the water so they can take the mantle for future generations.

Present in the audience was Vince Leggett, named "Admiral of the Chesapeake Bay" in 2003 by then Governor Parris N. Glendening. This is the highest honor a Maryland Governor can bestow on a private individual in the environmental arena ,and Leggett has been working for more than 30 years on preserving Black Americans' contributions to the maritime and seafood processing industries, and the Chesapeake Bay's rich culture and heritage.

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Maritime History," which provides a photographic history of African Americans at work as ship captains, sail makers, watermen and seafood processing plant employees.

Leggett joined the panel to echo the sentiments of his fellow watermen about the challenges facing the industry and to continue to support their common desire to honor the legacy of Black Americans who have contributed so much to it.

"African Americans have spent their lives feeding the state of Maryland," said Wright.

Conversation also included experiences shared by many of the men having been targeted by racially-motivated repercussions.

"It wasn't uncommon for the marine police to check the oysters of Black watermen and fine them, but didn't check those of the white watermen," Wright said.

Turner had a similar experience: "I've seen police come to an area with 10 to 12 boats and ticket only the Black watermen."

Lynch has been on the water for 53 years and articulated the challenges for Black watermen to success in the industry. "Blacks were unable to borrow money," he said. This meant that "white watermen had better boats and better rigs."

Although receiving loans for their businesses and inequitable fines have been a challenge, Wallace stated that watermen on the whole are a supportive group.

"There is a camaraderie among Black and white watermen. That isn't what perpetuated the division," he said. Instead, he says, unfairly targeting Blacks occurred mainly by the marine police and those charged with seafood counts.

"When I was a kid, my dad was a waterman, and I noticed that he was always the lowest on the leaderboard. He always had the lowest numbers," Wallace said. "There was a white man who I figured out was throwing a lot of his catch into an uncounted float."

Black representation in the watermen industry remains stunted. Of the 30 members of the Queen Anne's County Watermen's Association, for example, there are three Black members and 27 white, Lynch said.

But there is an active group of Black watermen and their supporters who continue to advocate for acknowledgement of the tireless efforts of their community. Also present in the audience were Drs. Dennis and Mary DeShields, founders of the Bellevue Passage Museum.

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For some of the panelists, being out on the water daily is a collection of fond memories, but Captain Buck still ventures out most days — and wouldn't have it any other way.

"If you're a waterman, you get up with the sun," he said. "And I'm my own boss."

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