Q: Why did you decide to write this book?

A: Because I have a passion for clean water and the Chesapeake Bay, and recognized that there are few books that systematically analyze the environmental history of the bay and what has and has not worked to clean it up.

Q: What were some of the most surprising things you learned while writing/researching the book?

A: A few things stand out.

1) A lack of progress in Pennsylvania is a primary obstacle in cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay, mainly because at least 40 percent of farmers in the bay watershed of the commonwealth still do not have manure runoff control plans that were required by law more than three decades ago. Many more do not follow the pollution control plans, which are very weak. This is both a law enforcement and political problem. Elected officials in Pennsylvania simply do not want environmental regulations that interfere with the profits of farmers, and they do not want to enforce the laws they already have on the books. For this reason, federal intervention is necessary save the bay.

2) Reductions in air pollution from Republican President George H. W. Bush’s Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 and other federal and state air regulations -- not reductions in runoff pollution from land -- are primary drivers of the improvements in water quality that the bay has enjoyed in recent years.

3) Dozens of cities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, including Baltimore and Harrisburg, still intentionally discharge millions of gallons of raw sewage into their local waterways, even though this has been illegal since the federal Clean Water Act of 1972. This is fundamentally a law enforcement problem – as well as a failure by state and federal governments to invest in urban infrastructure.

4) The EPA Bay Program’s primary yardstick for measuring progress in the bay cleanup is not water quality monitoring, but computer modeling. These computer simulations are overly optimistic and not based on reality.

Q: What is new about your book/research that sets it a part from other books in the field?

A: This book is more expansive and sweeping than previous books about the Chesapeake Bay. It covers not only the history and ecology of the bay and its tributaries, but also provides profiles of important (as well as little-known) players in the cleanup, and analyzes the success and failure of pollution control and fisheries management policies.

Q: Did you encounter any eye opening statistics while writing your book?

A: Yes, at least 40 percent of the livestock farms in the Chesapeake Bay watershed of Pennsylvania do not have or follow manure runoff pollution control plans that were covered by law more than three decades ago. Pennsylvania is the biggest laggard among the bay region states, and it could easily reduce its farm runoff pollution by enforcing its Clean Streams Law by making farmers follow these manure management plans. But the commonwealth chooses not to because of the political power of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau – which lobbies against any and all regulations. There is also a hostility of rural lawmakers to the bay cleanup and a drive to cut funding for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

Q: Does your book uncover and/or debunk any longstanding myths?

A: Absolutely. There is a popular notion that we can “save the bay” if all collaborate in a voluntary effort to individually reduce pollution, buy “Treasure the Chesapeake” license plates, and support other non-regulatory actions. In fact, most of these trendy, voluntary methods are a distraction. My book describes
them as a “desperate environmentalism” that is a poor substitute for the enforcement of old-school pollution control laws that have a track record of success.

Q: What is the single most important fact revealed in your book and why is it significant?

A: The bay’s biggest problem is not poultry manure or even human waste -- it’s hogwash like voluntary partnerships with polluters and pollution trading. These feel-good approaches are increasingly popular among elected officials and the environmental policy elite but are not as effective as laws and regulations that limit destructive human behavior. This is a significant conclusion because the bay cleanup effort of the last three decades has been a murky river of hype as well as hope, of broken promises as much as environmental leadership. My book reminds readers of the unpleasant and unpopular necessity of environmental regulation and assertive federal leadership from EPA, which is currently under political assault.

Q: How do you envision the lasting impact of your book?

A: I hope that readers are inspired to take personal action by the profiles of bay cleanup heroes that I present. Some of these activists are performing amazing work to protect our natural world despite great personal hardship and without any financial support.

Q: What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

A: The Chesapeake Bay cleanup is, at bottom, not an environmental problem but a social problem--really, an almost religious crisis--and in the end what we need is more trust and more faith. These days, we are up against not just water pollution, but a radical anti-government ideology that worships the acquisition of money and power over all else, and is fundamentally selfish and destructive not only to nature, but to humanity itself. This is an issue far more grave than simply the Chesapeake and “saving the bay.” We need to save ourselves. In the face of a cynical anti-regulatory political wave, we need to rebuild a basic confidence in the ability of people to work together through democratic government to make the world a better place. The problem is, nobody wants to sacrifice for the good of others. The only way to cross that river is by loving your neighbor, and that requires a cleanup of the soul.