

# The Washington Post

## Cliff residents might lose homes to save endangered beetles

By Christy Goodman  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, January 25, 2010; B01

One hundred feet above the Chesapeake Bay, atop Calvert County's scenic cliffs, a battle rages between man and a tiny insect, the [Puritan tiger beetle](#).

The ground is literally falling out from beneath cliff-dwelling property owners in Lusby, and their push to stop the erosion has collided with government efforts to protect one of the few remaining habitats of the endangered species. The beetle, a predator that controls insect pests, needs naturally eroding, unvegetated cliff face to survive.

Residents of [Chesapeake Ranch Estates](#), which has some prime real estate offering picturesque views of the bay, no longer visit the slim beaches beneath the cliffs because a 12-year-old girl was killed by a landslide in 1996. Last month, the property owners' association closed a portion of one of the subdivision's streets because the road is now just 25 feet from the cliff's edge. William Carmichael woke up the day after Thanksgiving to find that 12 feet of his property had rolled down the cliff face, taking his hot tub with it.

Carmichael has lost 40 feet of his property since he moved in about 20 years ago.

"It is ridiculous. The whole damn thing is stupid," said [Del. Anthony J. O'Donnell](#) (R-Calvert), House of Delegates minority leader. "We have to find a way to help these people save these homes."

The Puritan tiger beetle, *Cicindela puritana*, is listed as a threatened species under the federal [Endangered Species Act](#). In Maryland, home to the beetle's largest global population, it is endangered.

"I would equate the loss of the Puritan tiger beetle with the loss of the polar bear," said Michael Raupp, an entomologist at the University of Maryland in College Park. "If it had fur and a cute smile and were the size of a cat, people would be more concerned about the loss of this thing."

Nearly 90 properties with about 80 homes are perched along the top of the cliffs in Chesapeake Ranch Estates. Dozens more properties along Calvert's eastern shore are in similar situations. State and federal agencies keep denying proposals to stop the erosion because the plans would destroy the beetle's habitat.

About 5,000 Puritan tiger beetles are left on the planet, about 4,500 of them in Maryland, said Glenn Therres, a biologist who heads the endangered-species program at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The beetle is found only in Calvert, along the Sassafras River between Kent and Cecil counties and along the Connecticut River in New England. The population was as high as 11,000 in the 1980s, Therres said, and the decrease is largely due to the loss of habitat.

On average, cliffs along the Chesapeake Bay erode at a rate of less than two feet a year, said Bhaskar Subramanian of the Department of Natural Resources. That's ideal for the Puritan tiger beetle but not for property owners.

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Beginning in 1984, Calvert required at least 300 feet between a new home and a cliff's edge, said Gregory Bowen, the county's planning and zoning director. If construction took place in an older community, such as Chesapeake Ranch Estates, the house could be as close as 100 feet from the edge. Before that, property owners could build as close to the edge as they wanted.

"The fact is, these things erode," said Kevin Smith, chief of the Department of Natural Resources' restoration services department. "They have been eroding for hundreds of years. When [Capt.] John Smith was sailing up the Chesapeake, these bluffs were eroding at that time."

After several years of planning with state and federal agencies, some Chesapeake Ranch Estates property owners were permitted in 2005 to install hollow concrete balls offshore to slow powerful waves hitting the cliffs.

The \$200,000 project did not work, said Tony Vajda, a homeowner and primary point man for the effort.

Vajda has reapplied for a permit for a stone wall at the base of the cliffs to stop erosion. The Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommended that the permit be denied and instead proposed segmented breakwaters, large rock walls placed a significant distance offshore. They suggested the same idea in 2005.

Breakwaters, which have been successful in other bay locations, allow limited erosion, slowing the process for homeowners but maintaining beetle habitat, Therres said.

"We try as best as we can to accommodate the wishes of the landowner, but we can't do it at the expense of an endangered species," Therres said.

Chesapeake Ranch Estates property owners are not convinced. Vajda said there is no place for the sand to accumulate to stabilize the cliff before it washes away.

"We have houses that are in danger, and they need armored shoreline, period," he said.

Leopoldo Miranda-Castro, supervisor of the Chesapeake Bay Field Office for the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#), said he wants to study contributing factors and alternatives, such as working with the Department of Natural Resources to move the beetle to protected habitat and examining the soil's hydrology.

"The population numbers are so, so low and limited, any action could result in the extinction of the species," he said.

The Maryland General Assembly passed a law in 2005 that allows incidental takings of the protected beetle with federal approval. O'Donnell, who sponsored the bill, is planning a town hall discussion to seek a compromise to help homeowners.

"Right now, they are not getting the help they need from government," he said.

Calvert County commissioners recently sent a letter to their federal representatives asking for assistance.

Property owners, meanwhile, worry that more of their land will slide down the cliff face while they are working with government agencies to find a solution.

"I have yet to have any agency convince me that the protection of the beetle should trump protection of the people," Vajda said.

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## Cliff residents might lose homes to save endangered beetles

One hundred feet above the Chesapeake Bay, atop Calvert County's scenic cliffs, a battle rages between man and a tiny insect, the Puritan tiger beetle .  
- By Christy Goodman

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### Comments

**dector** wrote:

It is much more environmentally friendly to make the cliffs stable - just some grading and lots of green stuff. Good for the bay to slow the erosion and silt. The picture in the article has a big house - more spectacular - but most are small.

1/25/2010 4:39:56 PM

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**dataport34** wrote:

Move your houses!

It's not about the beetle entirely, it's about living together with the planet.

Even if you build reinforced dwellings, you can't stop nature, just slow it done.

Then you get what happened in New Orleans when something traumatic happens.

Get over it, long live the beetle!

1/25/2010 3:22:44 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

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**rockettonu** wrote:

LOL... this article is great - beetle = polar bear... hahaha - also rich der der derr's building huge houses 15 feet from a cliff - just goes to show you its not what you know its who you know in the corporate world... they can't be rich from what they know cause their tarded for building on a cliff - A cliff... ahahaha WOW. good stuff

1/25/2010 3:20:16 PM

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**scientist6** wrote:

massmedia77, I am a scientist and still don't know how they came up with that exact number. It is very strange. What about statistical significance of the results? I would like to see a peer reviewed paper on this subject. I guess they see a couple of bugs and apply a multiplier factor....?

1/25/2010 2:50:26 PM

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**massmedia77** wrote:

"The best thing to do - for everyone - is to let current homeowners do erosion control work on the cliffs and keep the building moratorium in place for future homes. Also, people I know in this situation are not asking for a handout - they would pay for the work to fix their cliff if allowed."

Heck, if you put it that way, I say let the people save their homes! This shouldn't even be up for discussion. I still disagree with building a home on an eroding cliff....just too many possibilities for disaster in that scenario. But, for those that chose to do so and just want to pay for some work to keep their property safe, I don't see what the issue is.

I also wonder how they know that there are exactly 4,500 of these bugs in Maryland....4,231.5 would have been a little more realistic to me. But, what do I know. I'm not a scientist at all....

1/25/2010 2:26:46 PM

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**dector** wrote:

This thing isn't about rich vs poor people (anarcho-liberal-tarian is kidding, right?). Most of the houses along the Calvert cliffs are in the low \$200K - high \$300K ranges. How much did your home cost? Also, it isn't about whether people can build more. They can't. This is whether to prevent the ecological disaster of letting current

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homes all fall in to the bay because of bad science "protecting" a beetle. Clearly the "science" of allowing cliff erosion has not had a positive impact on the beetle numbers, as they have continued to diminish in the decade that we have had this policy. But, this policy has caused a lot of destruction to property. Its kind of like the "science" of letting that forest fire burn Yellowstone. Removing the old homes (some were built in the 50s) will turn them into construction sites - also bad for the bay. The best thing to do - for everyone - is to let current homeowners do erosion control work on the cliffs and keep the building moratorium in place for future homes. Also, people I know in this situation are not asking for a handout - they would pay for the work to fix their cliff if allowed.

1/25/2010 1:59:12 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

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**AHappyWarrior** wrote:

Teabag nuts will tell you this is a good example of the government getting in the way. Well, I think it's a good example of how people who can afford to build someplace else expect the government to bail them out when they make a stupid decision. If the guy can go out in his backyard and do something to slow the erosion fine...but don't take one dollar from any government agency (cause I don't want to see my tax dollars going to fix up your mcmansion).

1/25/2010 1:57:39 PM

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**massmedia77** wrote:

"I have yet to have any agency convince me that the protection of the beetle should trump protection of the people," Vajda said.

\*\*\*\*\*

I myself would have to agree with Vajda....a person is more important to me than a bug. But, I have to question the intelligence of any human who would build a home on an eroding cliff. One would have to see the future staring them right in the face....eroding....cliff. Doesn't sound like a place I'd want to build anything.

1/25/2010 1:54:35 PM

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**cschotta1** wrote:

"I would equate the loss of the Puritan tiger beetle with the loss of the polar bear," said Michael Raupp, an entomologist at the University of Maryland in College Park.

-No wonder Maryland is such an average school!

1/25/2010 1:54:28 PM

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**giggity1** wrote:

Insects will inherit the earth. These beetles must go now.

1/25/2010 1:43:52 PM

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**nonamenm** wrote:

I have absolutely no sympathy for the homeowners. If they had used any common sense before buying or building they would have realized that the erosion was an ongoing process and not subject to change.

1/25/2010 1:43:44 PM

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**savethepcbs** wrote:

This is so stupid and these homeowners deserve what they get. If you build a house in a wild fire prone area, DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN YOUR HOUSE GOES UP IN FLAMES!! If you build your house in tornado alley, DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN THE ROOF BLOWS OFF!! Likewise, if you build a house on an eroding cliff, DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN YOUR HOUSE FALLS INTO THE DRINK!!!! I mean come on!!! How f'ing stupid are these people??? I hope they fall in with the houses, we already have too many stupid people as it is.

1/25/2010 1:43:32 PM

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**vigilante1** wrote:

To guarantee your safety, move.

1/25/2010 1:14:07 PM

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**rmg4369** wrote:

Kill the remaining beetles. That's all there is to it. Why waste time on a small amount of insects when peoples lives and property are at stake. The environmentalists and government hacks in this case are out of their minds. The state of Maryland stands to lose multi-millions of dollars in lawsuits and lost revenue when these properties are no longer viable for human habitation. not doing anything is a taking and according to the constitution, the homeowners must be compensated. the bad part is they have to leave homes they've grown to love for many years. The heck with the view; if you don't have your home it's a tragedy. If they fix this the beetles won't have a home but let's face it -- they're bugs! Unless these beetles can play musical instruments and sing "Yeah, yeah, yeah!", we shouldn't be worried about them. I can't imagine the anguish those homeowners are feeling right now. They should rise up in an act of civil disobedience and spray the cliffs with a power insecticide and put an end to the problem.

1/25/2010 1:13:31 PM

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**anarcho-liberal-tarian** wrote:

Stupid rich people. The environment is for nature, not your view.

1/25/2010 12:59:28 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

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**cadlecreek1** wrote:

Has anyone considered the beetles help slow erosion?? Nature can work in strange ways.

1/25/2010 12:45:55 PM

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**kinkysr** wrote:

NINETY-NINE percent of all species that ever lived on earth are extinct, experts tell us.

So anyone today who'd question why a worthless insect should be favored over ANY worthwhile human-related cause has got to be a bit batty.

Some of you might remember a few years ago when The [oft-silly] Post ran a letter to the editor, calling for us to be "humane" when killing camel crickets, which Wikipedia describes as "... of little economic importance except as a nuisance in buildings and homes, especially basements."

Of course, there are those religious- and animal-rights-freaks among us ...

1/25/2010 11:32:56 AM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

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**properbostonian1** wrote:

There are so many private agendas present here, and so many issues missing.

What possible attraction could there be to owning a house overlooking a stinking, DYING Chesapeake Bay almost totally void of crabs and oysters ????

If that ownership were to provide the MOTIVATION to save THE BAY, these homeowners would be rabid, left-wing-radical tree-hugging crab savers who would be advocating the restoration of habitat from the North Pole to the South Pole and everything in between ... for the sole purpose of saving the very planet on which we live.

That they are so utterly greedy and stupid as to want their cliff-top homes, without really understanding what it is they want and why, proves that we need a driver's license for home ownership.

People should be required to take a whole battery of examinations before being permitted to buy or inherit land.

If they can't pass the tests, they aren't allowed to participate.

If they abuse their privilege, their license should be revoked !!!!

1/25/2010 11:20:23 AM

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**jckdoors** wrote:

What is stupid is building your house in an erosion zone. Nobody learns, they just want their view, and expect the world to help them when it catches up to them.

1/25/2010 11:06:54 AM

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**loved1** wrote:

For the sake of saving 4,500 bugs, people's homes will be allowed to fall onto the beach and into the bay. This is probably one of the reasons that people are so lax when it comes to most things green and environmental - it always ends in some ridiculous, extreme place. People and their homes are more important than these bugs and than polar bears. I hope these people can find good pro bono legal counsel, because this decision doesn't sound like its rooted in sound science. This law needs to be revoked or amended at the very least.

1/25/2010 10:57:49 AM

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- By Christy Goodman

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### Comments

**scientist6** wrote:

It turns out that I am a noaa scientist and do care about fish. I totally agree with dector. Josetucson makes no sense at all. It would be a huge disaster to let these houses fall into the water. I can't imagine what an environmental impact that would be...

On other issues, can some of these bug guys provide any report with scientific evidence on the counts of the beetle? So far, all I have seen lacks of scientific methodology (for example, can't find statistically significance of the results, etc). I could make up numbers myself and write a paper or a report, but of course, I would never get that paper peer reviewed or published on my field. Also, what about the connection between the erosion and beetle population? Any peer reviewed articles on this?

1/25/2010 10:36:08 AM

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**dector** wrote:

josetucson

Very strange point of view. Many of these houses were built in the 60s before the Tiger Beetle was "discovered". Are you suggesting that if no one is living in the house, these houses are not going to slide into the bay - with all the damage that would cause? Are you suggesting that people are not allowed to protect their property from the elements? If a tree was going to fall on your house, wouldn't you cut it? Or, would the county stop you from cutting it - criticizing you for being so stupid to buy the house with a dangerous tree? The sad part of this, is the erosion is easy to fix, by proper sloping and planting of the cliff. The result reduces sediment and other pollutants entering the bay - probably saving more marine species we have not yet discovered. But, oh yeah, you are probably a bug guy - don't care about the fish....

1/25/2010 10:19:08 AM

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**tslats** wrote:

We'll look at all the help New Orleans residents got and they build and live in a make believe world. Even after the big one .. were they required to rebuild on stilts? I'm not too sympathetic for our Maryland folks ... what does their insurance cover? But you wonder what the politics are that drive who gets assistance and who does not.

1/25/2010 10:03:06 AM

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**dector** wrote:

I find this article interesting for a few reasons. First, the fact that the Tiger Beetle population is diminishing in Maryland has probably no relation to making the cliffs stable for the safety of residents. This connection has never been proven scientifically, and recent beetle counts show this very likely to be untrue. Regulations have been in place since the late '90s that stopped homeowners from saving their properties - so they could save the Tiger Beetle. Cliffs have been crumbling, and families have lost their homes and property, but the beetle population continues to fall! Residents simply want to shape and plant the cliffs to stop erosion. In particular, we need to control the landslides, which transfer pollutants to the bay, and probably kill more beetles and other wildlife than anything. There have been many landslides (not just cliff crumbling) with Hurricane Isabel and more recent storms. While making cliffs stable is likely to have no impact on beetle population, it will save lives and property. I know of a retired couple who live in a small house that was built in the 60s on a cliff in Calvert County. They are on a fixed income, and the cliff edge is now within 20 feet of their house. Insurance will not cover their house when it falls into the bay along with their septic tank, etc - they will likely go bankrupt. They have applied for permission to shape their 20 foot cliff (not a big job) to save their home and property, but have been rejected over and over. This is crazy! If the state wants to create a bug sanctuary with their home, they should be required to pay for it!

Stable cliffs won't hurt the bugs!

People are more important than bugs!

I hope everyone saw the statement in the article that these (particular) bugs are as important as the Polar Bear! At least everyone can see the mentality of who is fighting against all these families!!

1/25/2010 10:02:39 AM

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**gmclain** wrote:

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At what point in time should these beetles and others be allowed to become extinct? All that is happening in many instances is delaying the inevitable.

1/25/2010 9:44:17 AM

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**josetucson** wrote:

Hmm, do you think that maybe people shouldn't buy homes built on top of "naturally-eroding" cliffs? Do the idiots that buy homes on eroding cliffs think the erosion will somehow magically stop just because they bought a house there?

Absolutely no sympathy for them whatsoever. After their homes finally fall apart, I guess they will go buy homes on top of a volcano or next to a sports stadium and start to complain about the noise and traffic.

1/25/2010 9:42:23 AM

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**jedwardchapman** wrote:

I take exception to Tony Vajda's statement, ""have yet to have any agency convince me that the protection of the beetle should trump protection of the people." These people are not in danger, there property is. I am sure that each and every homeowner along these cliffs was fully aware of the erosion issue when they bought or inherited these houses. This is unfortunate for them, but in no way constitutes a crisis for local or state governments.

1/25/2010 5:28:06 AM

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Biologists say the population of Puritan tiger beetles is down to about 5,000, 4,500 of them in Maryland.

Photo Credit: © Chris Wirth Photo

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