

Reading Explorer 5, Unit 4: Time and Tide

Narrator:

Smith Island is a lonely outpost, 12 miles out in the Lower Chesapeake Bay. The shallow grassy waters around the cluster of islands that comprise Smith Island are some of the best blue crab habitat in the bay.

For more than 300 years, the people here have endured nature's hardships. But increasingly, they sense, that a more precarious future lies ahead.

The watermen are bringing in smaller catches, and profits are down. The population has dropped from more than 800 to about 300 over the last one hundred years. And Smith Island is losing its land.

Most of the island is only one foot above sea level. The higher areas, where the people live, are just two to four feet above the water.

Costal ecologists say that Chesapeake Bay has risen by more than a half foot over the past century, and continues to swallow the land.

Crumbly wooden crab shacks and battered bulwarks are testimony to the island's vulnerability to the sea. To help the islanders beat back the bay, the Army Corp of Engineers launched a plan to install new bulkheads and stone breakwaters around Tylerton—part of a multimillion dollar plan to slow erosion and persuade people to stay.

Despite this project, Smith Island may be running out of time.

Court Stevenson

University of Maryland/Center for Environmental Science

“If a hurricane category 4 comes up and actually hits this island, I think it could be flattened. It probably is the case that over the next century, that if we can't get control of greenhouse gases that we probably will have a few high spots, but not much more.”

Narrator:

Most people hope that the new efforts to stem erosion can at least delay the inevitable so that one or two more generations can make a living here at the edge of the sea.