

Assateague Coastal Trust

HOW IT BEGAN

Assateague Coastal Trust (ACT) was first established as The Committee to Preserve Assateague Island. The catalyst for the creation of this all-volunteer, grassroots group was the introduction of legislation that established Assateague Island National Seashore, including a provision that would have allowed a significant portion of the island to be developed as a resort, destroying the unspoiled beauty of the island.

As the founding chairperson of the Committee, Judith Johnson began her campaign with little direct experience in politics or science. In fact, her most recent position had been managing the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra where she was the first woman in the country to serve in such a role.

Johnson began her activism at the behest of her young son, Reid, after they took a trip to Assateague together in the 1960s. He remembers her reaction on learning of plans to “improve” the pristine barrier island with a thirty-mile highway, a 14,000-car parking lot, motels, and fast-food restaurants. “This is horrible. This is wrong,” he recalls his mother declaring. “Someone has to stop this.” She did. The Committee fought to eliminate that provision, and the island’s pristine landscape today is a testament to its success and the crucible for ACT’s ongoing commitment to protecting our coastal environment.

Together with Mrs. Johnson, Ilia Fehrer was also a leading figure on the Committee to Preserve Assateague Island. Her tireless efforts, including testimony before Congress, were instrumental in the successful campaign to save the Island. Her legacy includes Assateague Island’s state and national parks, the designation of the Pocomoke as a “wild and scenic river,” the Nassawango Creek Preserve, and the Worcester County rural legacy area. She battled offshore waste incineration, the building of an industrial park near Ocean City, and the needless destruction of acres of wetlands and forests. Every New Year's Day, Mrs. Fehrer led a nature walk on Assateague Island, a tradition that ACT honors to this day with our annual Ilia Fehrer & Judith Johnson Memorial Beach Walk.

While our name has changed, Assateague Coastal Trust has stayed true to our founders' legacy of fighting to protect our coastal landscape and waterscape. Over time, our vision has expanded and our membership has grown. Now we work to protect not only Assateague Island but the entire Atlantic Coastal Bays watershed and the surrounding Lower Eastern Shore region.

In 2002, ACT strengthened its capacity to watch over the Coastal Bays watershed of Maryland and Virginia's Eastern Shore by joining the Waterkeeper Alliance and launching the Assateague Coastkeeper program. The Coastkeeper patrols this geographic area as well as adjacent watersheds on the Lower Eastern Shore not protected by a Waterkeeper program. The Coastkeeper is our on-the-water monitor, on-the-ground educator, and in-the-trenches advocate for clean water and healthy communities.

In 2003, ACT enhanced the education component of our mission with the creation of our Coast Kids program to provide environmental education and interactive nature experiences for area youth and their families. Offering monthly membership events and excursions around the region, a "Little Scientists" series for schools and community-based organizations, and most recently a "Nature Explorers" summer camp, Coast Kids allows ACT to educate and engage our next generation of environmental stewards.

In 2009, ACT launched the Grow Berlin Green program to support and facilitate environmentally sustainable policies and practices in our home town of Berlin, Maryland. Working in partnership with the town government, businesses, schools, and citizens, Grow Berlin Green-led projects in the community were instrumental in Berlin being the first municipality in the state of Maryland to be certified as a sustainable community by the University of Maryland's Environmental Finance Center.

In recent years, ACT has continued to introduce new programs and campaigns responding to emerging challenges and opportunities in our coastal region.

In 2010, the Coastkeeper launched the Swim Guide water quality monitoring program to measure bacteria levels in some of the most heavily recreated areas of the Coastal Bays and report to the public on where and when it was safe to go in the water during the busy summer season.

In 2015-2016, ACT led the local campaign of the successful effort to thwart the federal government's proposal to open the Atlantic coastal waters to offshore oil exploration and drilling.

Finally, since 2015, ACT has been the driving force in the ongoing campaign to oppose and mitigate the environmental and public health impacts of a dramatic expansion of industrial-scale poultry operations on the Lower Eastern Shore.

We've come a long way from our founders' landmark victory to protect Assateague Island and we're still going strong!