

My name is Randy Childs. I'm an Eastern Shore Master Naturalist

At the Barrier Island named Wreck I was amazed to walk on humps of peat that mushroomed in the edge of the surf. It was spongy, wet, brown.... I didn't sink into it.... it felt like walking on marshmallows....

SoWhat is peat?? ... Spoiler alert - Think Ancient Partially Decayed Vegetation.

- Most of the world's peatlands were formed after the end of the last Ice Age when the glaciers retreated twelve thousand (12,000) years ago.
- Melted glaciers added water to the oceans.
- Rising sea level flooded the flat lands east of the Appalachians.
- The growing salt marshes missed some isolated spots which were protected from the full effects of the in-rushing salty water.
- The groundwater that was very close to the surface & abundant rainfall allowed dense vegetation to thrive in those isolated bogs.
- In these vast bogs Sphagnum moss, sedges, Spartina grasses and shrubs grew and decayed very slowly.
- Constant flooding obstructed the flow of oxygen from the atmosphere. That slowed the decomposition of plants in the isolated wetland bogs.
- This dense, partly decayed vegetation over time became thick layers of peat rich in carbon.
- It took thousands of years for our Eastern Shore peat to develop to a depth of 5 to 7.5 feet.

So...What is peat good for? ... Spoiler Alert #2 ... Lots of Stuff

- Peatlands store water and carbon.
- Peatlands also provide opportunities for tourism and agriculture.
- Eastern Native Americans used peatlands for collecting useful plants and for hunting.
- The former residents of Hogg Island used the peatlands for a source of fresh water and forage for their sheep and cows.
- Elsewhere in the world peat is used as fuel. To use it as fuel peat is compressed and dried. This fuel is still burned in Ireland and Scotland for both cooking and heating. It can burn wet or dry and even burns underground. Finland and Russia rely heavily on burning peat to produce power.
- The Scots make arguably the BEST use of peat. They produce the distinctive smokey flavor called “peatiness” in Scotch whiskey by using peat fires to dry malted barley for 30 hours before distilling the whiskey.

Will Peat last on the Eastern Shore? ... Spoiler Alert#3 ... Who knows.....

The current change in climate and rising sea level are causing rapid shifting of our sandy Barrier Islands and causing the old peatlands to break and erode.

So, if you get the opportunity

go out to one of the Barrier Islands and look for the peat....Enjoy the springiness and realize it took thousands of years to get where it is..... and then think about where it's going.....

References:

USDA and US Forest Service (fs.fed.us) - What Is A Fen?

National Geographic Society - Peat: The Forgotten Fuel

