

5 Virginia Cluster & Water Trail Eco-Tourism Collaboration



Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program

Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission

Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission

Northern Neck Planning District Commission

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Fiscal Year 2017 Virginia Oyster & Water Trail Eco-Tourism Collaboration Report

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On the cover – Photograph taken by Shannon Alexander of a single kayaker in Beasley Bay near Saxis and Guard Shore Wildlife Management Area south of the Town of Saxis. The kayaker stops in front of a duck blind on the edge of the marsh.

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Introduction

The Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission (A-NPDC) was formed in 1970 to provide planning and housing services on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. A-NPDC is a regional commission consisting of Accomack and Northampton Counties and the Town of Chincoteague. In addition to Chincoteague, the A-NPDC assists 18 incorporated towns on the Eastern Shore.

The Eastern Shore, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck regions together encompass approximately 4,785 square miles of rural landscape with 5,300 miles of shoreline, a fact that has established a rich cultural history in water-based entrepreneurialism. The three regions, all rural, coastal regions, typically have limited staff and resources compared to more urban coastal regions in the Commonwealth. For that reason, it is beneficial to each region, the Commonwealth, and our shared water bodies, to work collaboratively to properly promote and manage our coastal resource. Through this project, the three regions work together to build new and promote existing ecotourism initiatives.

Summary

The Eastern Shore, Middle Peninsula, and Northern Neck worked together and with partners to enhance existing water trails, develop an engaging itinerary tool for the Virginia Oyster Trail, develop the Virginia Water Trails website, establish the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA), advertise the 2019 Ecotour Guide Course, and promote our similar green assets.

The first year of this large, multi-regional three-year project has begun the process of supporting and generating direct, indirect, and induced jobs - jobs that rely on the natural resources of rural coastal areas. The individual products and cumulative effects of this program will address identified targets in the [2014 New Virginia Economy Strategic Plan](#) and [Virginia Statewide Tourism Plan](#).

Products and Outcomes

The following sections describe the activities completed during calendar year 2018 and their current and anticipated outcomes.

Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Vision Statement, Goals, and Objectives

The Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Steering Committee met January 31st, April 10th, October 30th, and had a webinar training for website maintenance on December 13th. Meeting agendas, minutes, and supplemental information can be found at <http://www.anpdc.org/water-trails/>. The minutes include a list of members and invited guests that were present.

The three rural coastal PDCs in the Committee established the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA), purchased several domains to be used for that collaborative Alliance (RuralCoastalVirginiaAlliance.com/net/org & RuralCoastalVA.com/net/org). The Committee decided on the following Mission and Vision Statements, which will be featured on the new www.VirginiaWaterTrails.org website on the ‘about us’ page.

Mission

“The Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance exists to present unique ecotourism activities and destinations for locals and visitors to easily enjoy. The three alliance partners embrace sustainable, vibrant, healthy ecosystems, and a resilient, diversified, nature-based economy.”

Vision

“Connecting locals and visitors to world-class ecotourism destinations.”

Virginia Water Trails Research and Branding Initiative

The Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Steering Committee researched existing Water Trails and Blueways logos and branding initiatives. The Committee contracted with a graphic designer to develop the logos and with a media and marketing company to both develop the website and serve on the Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Steering Committee in order to form an overall Rural Coastal Virginia Water Trails theme. Each region worked with local entities to ensure approval and disseminate information. An assortment of logos was developed, horizontal, regional identifiers, and ‘just the swoosh’, all based on the main logo (below). Mr. Dan Ortiz of Coastwise Designs in Mathews County on the Middle Peninsula was contracted to complete the logo project.



Summary of Stakeholder Input to update the Seaside Water Trail Guide and Seaside Water Trail Update

Three Seaside Water Trail Stakeholder meetings were held to solicit input from various agencies, the localities, and coastal land holders. The agendas and the sign in sheets for these meetings can be found at <http://www.a-npdc.org/water-trails/>. In total, eighteen individuals participated and their knowledge about ecosystem sensitivities, waterway safety, and watermen activity was invaluable in creating an update to the trail that serves the

community and avoids use conflicts as much as possible.

Rather than develop a printed brochure, the A-NPDC and the Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Steering Committee opted to purchase several domains and develop the www.VirginiaWaterTrails.org website, which will be further refined during year two and year three of this project. The team at Consociate Marketing Media Management worked diligently to incorporate all of the elements that the Steering Committee suggested and their expertise in messaging and presentation were key in developing such an appealing product. Should printed materials be developed, that will wait until year three of the project, when more work has been completed and the vision for RCVA and ecotourism in the three regions is more refined. The website was presented at the Virginia Coastal Policy Center's 6th Annual Conference on Nov. 2nd, the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program's Biennial Workshop on Nov. 14th, and the Virginia Oyster Trail Summit on November 16th. The power point used during these presentations can be found at <http://www.a-npdc.org/water-trails/>.

Outreach Material and Map Development of Middle Peninsula Ecotourism Assets and Trails

The MPPDC Met with Middle Peninsula project partners to produce a Google map database and map of potential access locations to the Mattaponi, Pamunkey and York Rivers, including boat ramps owned by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Department of Transportation road endings, State Parks, County owned sites, and Public Access Authority (PAA) sites.

The Google Map was updated with all relevant data, including access locations, historical sites, Mathews & Gloucester Blueways, the Captain John Smith Trail, & VA Oyster Trail locations. This map created a foundation and a visual to share with stakeholders within the region. On August 30, 2018, MPPDC staff organized a meeting of Eco-Tourism Stakeholders to review work completed to date. Stakeholders also discussed the ingress and egress rules and policies at publically held locations on the waterfront which helped to pin

point those locations available to be included in regional water trail maps. MPPDC staff also created a post card for the MPPDC.com site of information about the water trails website to begin marketing this effort within the region (see screenshot below).



This new information and map, hosted on the new Water Trails website, will be used to attract economic development opportunities that align with economic and stewardship initiatives for the region particularly as the region gears up for America's 250th Commemoration.

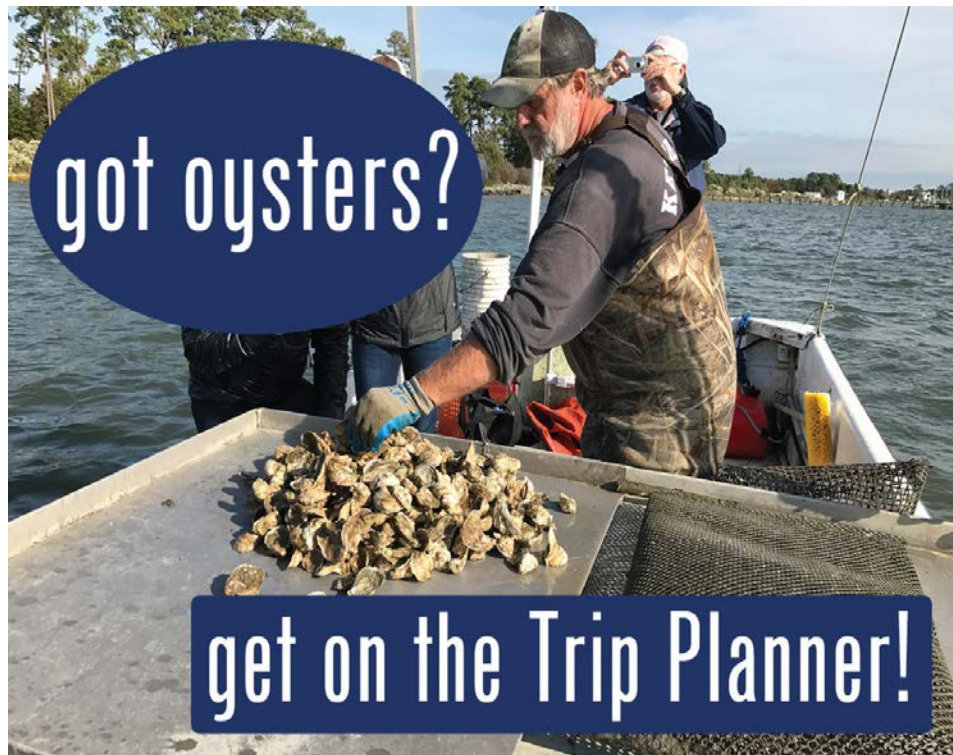
Guinea Marsh Donation

The Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission completed appraisal and approval from NOAA for the Guinea Marsh Islands being donated to the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority prior to April 2018. The islands were valued at \$107,000. Deeds were prepared for recordation and shared with VCZMP and NOAA appropriately. Please see Appendix A.

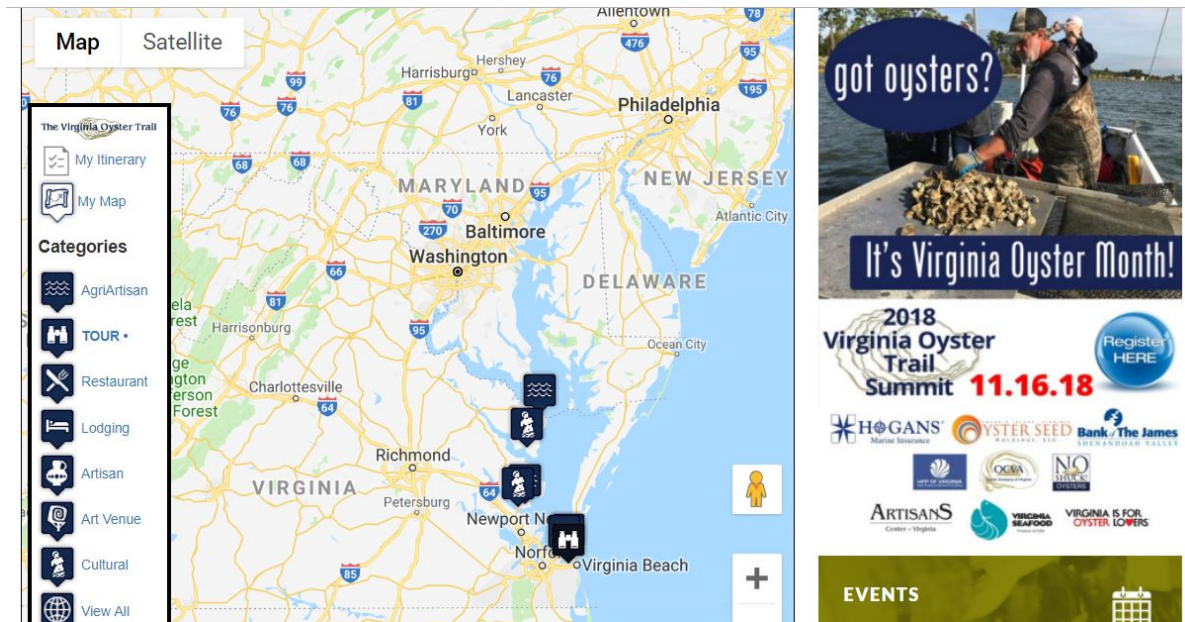
Development of a Digital Engagement Tool for the Virginia Oyster Trail

The goal of the mapping tool is to engage online visitors to the virginiaoystertrail.com site so as to convert website visitors to tourists in the Chesapeake Bay and Virginia coastal region where most of the oyster assets are located, thus increasing economic resiliency in

coastal communities. While exploring a potential “oyster community” designation for coastal communities that share an oyster-focused history, NNPDC staff spoke at three community meetings in the Northern Neck at White Stone, Heathsville, and Reedville in the winter and spring of 2018, and gathered stakeholder input into how the Virginia Oyster Trail could best serve the communities and support entrepreneurship in the coastal region, including the development of the engagement tool. Virginia Oyster Trail Director Sherri Smith also spoke at those meetings about this digital tool, and other mechanisms to increase visitor engagement. Positive discussions among stakeholders informed the task to develop an interactive mapping tool for the Virginia Oyster Trail website, <http://virginiaoystertrail.com/>. Work on this product required the convention of a management team, including the Virginia Oyster Trail Director, Sherri Smith, the webmaster for the site, staff members from the NNPDC, in consultation with partner PDCs in this project. Working collaboratively, the group met by telephone about 10 times throughout the 2018 calendar year to outline the task with the Artisans Center of Virginia, determine the content and presentation of the tool, track progress, and preview the beta version of the mapping tool. Through email blasts from the Artisans Center of Virginia, Virginia Oyster Trail members were encouraged to update their organization/business profile to maximize the utility of the digital tool prior to its launch (see below). The beta version of the tool was presented at the 2018 Coastal Partners Workshop in Richmond and at the Virginia Oyster Trail summit in Newport News on November 16, 2018.



The Trip Planner's web-based itinerary tool, now live in its beta-testing phase (see screen shot from the <http://virginiaoystertrail.com/> landing page below), is intended to help communities of the coastal region develop greater connectivity with one another and among existing educational, economic, and cultural assets. The online tool offers opportunity to present community information that increases public understanding and generates engagement as participating businesses invite residents and visitors alike to plan and take part in their public oyster-related/eco-tourism activities. During this live beta/second year period, feedback will be continuously solicited to improve the module user functionality with modifications to be considered and implemented per fund availability.



Implementation benchmarks in the development of the itinerary system module achieved to-date are:

- Program customization of the mobile/tablet-responsive itinerary module.
- Development of iframe placement capability for third-party integration on partnering with the Virginia Water Trails website.
- Installation of the module and testing for proper functionality.
- Development of trip planning access features on individual business profile pages.
- Implementation new itinerary category structure in the current Virginia Oyster Trail's content management system.
- Programming of visitor account creation/access to itinerary module.
- Integration of itinerary options into site design, including distinctive category graphic icons
- Creation of new itinerary category landing pages
- Launch of live beta-testing for feedback on user functionality
- Presented beta version at the Coastal Partners Workshop, Richmond and at the Virginia Oyster Trail Summit, Newport News in November 2018