



Virginia Coastal Zone MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program
Semi-Annual Success Story ("Section C")
April 2023

Ecotourism: Sustainable Economic and Environmental Benefits



THE PROBLEM:

Rural coastal communities often contain some of the richest ecological and recreational resources. At the same time, they also have a limited tax base and are looking for ways to generate revenue. Too often we look to residential or industrial development for additional revenue, but that can lead to loss of important habitats for wildlife, stormwater runoff, water quality degradation and vulnerability to climate change.

Furthermore, local planners in rural coastal communities were often hearing from visitors and residents that there is a lack of places to paddle, hike and recreate to enjoy the region's peaceful coastal environs and a lack of information on where to find those places. Although some information existed, it was located in numerous places and was hard to find, making planning a visit difficult.

All things considered, this set of rural, coastal problems presented an opportunity to strategically develop the ecotourism industry and to grow local economies in a sustainable way by minimizing ecological impacts and planning for resiliency.

Ecotourism: *responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education*

- as defined by the International Ecotourism Society

THE FIX:

Conserved land **can** create local tax revenue through well-managed ecotourism. Conserved land has been proven to save localities money due to a lessened need for local services (e.g. roads, trash collection, schools, etc.), which are not needed on conserved lands. See the CZM-funded George Mason study on this topic at: <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showdocument?id=17962> and the April 2018 Virginia CZM Section C report.

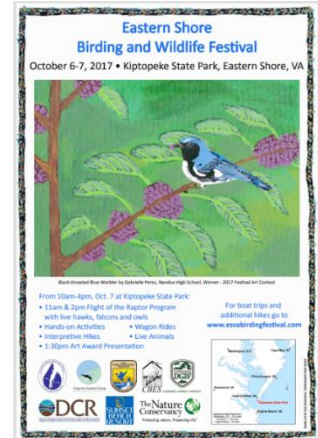
<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/8705/637560011957630000>.

Since 1988 the Virginia CZM Program has supported the development of ecotourism in Virginia's rural coastal communities. In the early years of the Virginia CZM Program the focus was on **public access**



planning and the **construction of trails, piers and boardwalks**. From 1988 through 1993 eight plans or guides were created and twelve construction projects undertaken such as the Wilcox Wharf Pier in Charles City County shown at left.

Then beginning in 1993, through a series of Special Area Management Plans (SAMPs) there was an added focus on creating **festivals** to highlight the natural resources of particular areas such as the Eastern Shore Birding Festival, which ran from 1993 through 2017 to celebrate the fall migration of millions of songbirds that stop to rest on the southern tip of Virginia's Eastern Shore before heading to Central and South America. The CZM-funded SAMPs also supported a Green Sea Festival in Hampton Roads and a Dragon Run Festival in the Middle Peninsula.



In 1993, through the Northampton County SAMP, as more was learned about the critical habitat for birds on the Eastern Shore, the Virginia CZM Program became concerned that the public was not aware of how sensitive some of these bird habitats are to human disturbance,



especially at some times of year. So the program began funding the development and offering of **ecotour guide certification classes**. The first curriculum was developed in 1994 through a grant to the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Natural Heritage Program. It was later undertaken through a CZM grant to the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in 1998, then transferred to Eastern Shore and Rappahannock Community Colleges in 2007 and 2011 and now the course is offered by the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission through a series of CZM grants.

Scores of guides have now been certified and can advertise with the certification logo. The PDC created a 4 minute video describing the value of the course: <https://a-npdc.org/water-trails/virginia-certified-ecotour-guide-course/>.

In 2006 the Virginia CZM Program began focusing on **interpretive signage** with a major investment in a series of large, 3-panel kiosks to highlight the ecological and economic value of the coastal resources on the Seaside of Virginia's Eastern Shore where the program made a \$1.4 million investment in eelgrass and bay scallop restoration and other conservation measures. This emphasis on signage has continued to today with interpretive signage being funded at Chapel Island on the James River in Richmond,



at Chippokes State Park, at the New Point Comfort boardwalk in Mathews County and, most recently, 3 major kiosks on the boardwalk in Virginia Beach that highlight ocean resources, marine debris and climate change and also provide stationary binoculars for tourists. In 2019 the program began a concerted effort to ensure that all CZM-funded land acquisition and construction projects have updated, intact acknowledgement signs.



An emphasis on **water trails** began in earnest in about 2002 with CZM funding for an 80-mile-long Seaside Water Trail as part of the Seaside Heritage Program which ran from 2002 through 2008. This was the first online water trail and other CZM-funded water trails soon followed in Port Royal, Hampton Roads, Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. As the PDCs worked on their water trail networks independently, it became clear that their efforts would benefit from a collaborative approach. So in 2017 the Virginia CZM Program began funding a major, **\$486,000 six year effort** by the 3 rural coastal Planning District Commissions (Accomack-Norhampton, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck). Later Plan RVA joined the effort focusing on rural portions of their district. The group created the Virginia Water Trails website (<https://virginiawatertrails.org/>) and formalized this initiative as the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA), to pool resources and maximize their limited resources. The website hosts the water trail and oyster trail maps and interpretive information. It is also an educational tool to teach paddlers about coastal habitats, ecosystem services, tides and safety concerns. The website provides tips, news, info on events and how to become a guide. The RCVA continues to offer the Ecotour Guide Certification course. In fact, The Nature Conservancy announced that they would only allow certified ecotour guides and their customers to visit their Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve, a string of protected barrier islands on the seaside of Virginia's Eastern Shore.



The Virginia Oyster Trail (also accessed on the website at <https://virginiawatertrails.org/virginia-oyster-trail/>), connects visitors with communities to promote ecotourism around the Virginia oyster industry. It focuses on increasing awareness of the benefits Virginia Oysters have on local economies, with emphasis on community development, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health attributes and regional cultural assets." Through the CZM grant funds an interactive and integrated visitor trip planner was created.

In the fourth year of CZM funding, the PDCs added a focus on economic and climate resilience as part of the overall effort. Ecotourism business resiliency trainings were held and an analysis of ecotourism infrastructure at risk for sea level rise was begun.

THE IMPACT:

Through this work, the improved ecotourism opportunities, resources, and trainings have helped to protect economic resiliency and support the maintenance and appreciation of conserved lands. All told, the Virginia CZM Program has invested over **\$2.8 million in about 100 ecotourism planning and infrastructure projects** over the years. Below is the breakdown by category of ecotourism project:

Planning/ Guides	Construction	Signage	Festivals /Events	EcoTour Guide Certification	TOTAL
\$1,240,966	\$1,135,766	\$197,659	\$93,500	\$134,549	\$2,802,440

Between 2018 and 2022 almost 50 ecotour guides have been certified, inspiring the establishment of new ecotourism focused businesses and events. A recent CZM funded economic impact analysis of ecotourism in the Middle Peninsula showed the value of investing in this economy. The study found that ecotourism has a \$33.1 million dollar impact, employing 442 individuals, and raising \$1.6 million in state and local tax revenues in the Middle Peninsula alone (see the [full report](#) here and the [summary infographic](#) here). Since the beginning of the collaborative RCVA effort, the Virginia Water Trails

webpage has grown in popularity and has both benefited from and bolstered visitation to rural, coastal Virginia. Marketing efforts have reached large audiences and raised the brand identity of the Virginia Water Trails program. With this heightened awareness and centralized approach, visitors and residents can easily access a multitude of ecotourism information. In fact, since October 2019 there have been 82,664 visits to the website with 85% of the visits being from unique users. Other regions of the state are now interested in joining the program. and an onboarding process for new regions to join has been created. The popularity and success of the Virginia Water Trails program was recognized when it received the 2022 Governor's Environmental Excellence award (see the list of [gold medal winners here](#)).

MORE INFORMATION:

Visit the Virginia Water Trails website for more information: <https://virginiawatertrails.org/>

Visit the Virginia Oyster Trails website for more information: <https://virginiaoystertrail.com/>

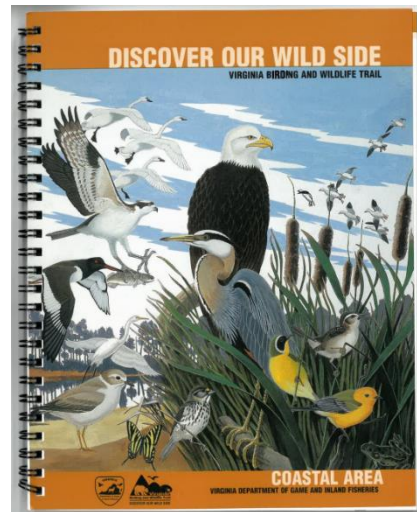
More information on the Ecotour Guide program can be found here: <https://virginiawatertrails.org/become-an-ecotour-guide/>

PARTNERS:

- The Accomack-Northampton, Northern Neck, Middle Peninsula, and Richmond Regional Planning District Commissions (AKA the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance)
- City, county and town representatives from throughout Virginia's coastal zone
- Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
- Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources
- Virginia Department of Forestry
- Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center
- The Nature Conservancy
- Virginia Tourism Corporation

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In 2000, the VA CZM Program funded the Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, now the Department of Wildlife Resources with \$106,000 to develop the Birding & Wildlife Coastal Area Trail.