

Accomack-Northampton PDC Promoting Ecotourism to Support Conservation of Conserved Lands & Resilient Communities

Final Product Report

VCZMP FY22 Task 72, Grant #NA22NOS4190187



This project was funded by the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission and the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program at the Department of Environmental Quality through Grant # NA22NOS4190187 of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.





I. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the ongoing endeavors of the Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) Steering Committee, a collaborative effort involving various Planning District Commissions and partner organizations. The mission of this steering committee is connecting locals and visitors to world-class ecotourism destinations. Initially conceived to guide the development and sustainability of the [Virginia Water Trails](#), the committee has broadened its scope to advance the Virginia Water Trails asset and bolster coastal resiliency. This report underscores the committee's sustained activities and unwavering dedication to improving the ecological and economic potential of the region while ensuring the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

The committee comprises key entities, including the Accomack-Norfolk Planning District Commission (A-NPDC), Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC), Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC), and Richmond Regional Planning District Commission (PlanRVA), alongside strategic partners such as the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program (CZM), Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT), and Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC).

The report details the primary objectives and activities pursued by the committee, encompassing quarterly meetings, engagement with partners, community public access assessment, environmental stewardship, and economic growth initiatives. A significant emphasis is placed on key attributes vital to the success and sustainability of coastal communities, including awareness of how to enjoy the coastal outdoors while implementing *Leave No Trace* principals and integration of cultural and historical assets.

Furthermore, the report outlines the committee's efforts in ecological and economic enhancement, focusing on wetlands, waterways, oysters, wildlife, and overall regional resilience. Key accomplishments, partnerships, and initiatives are presented to shed light on the committee's dedication to preserving the region's ecological integrity and stimulating economic growth through ecotourism. The report also provides links to relevant resources for further information on the initiatives and collaborations discussed in the report.

II. Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) Steering Committee (Committee) Outcomes Report

This report outlines the ongoing efforts of the Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) Steering Committee (Committee), comprised of various Planning District Commissions and partner organizations, in support of the Chesapeake Bay and Virginia's rural coastal region. The Committee, initially formed to guide the CVEA Marketing Strategy and Action



Plan, has expanded its focus to advance the Virginia Water Trails asset and bolster coastal resiliency. Key initiatives include quarterly meetings, engagement with partners, and a commitment to community development, environmental stewardship, and economic growth. This report highlights the Committee's ongoing activities and its commitment to improving the ecological and economic potential of the region while ensuring the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

The Committee consists of the following Planning District Commissions:

- Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission (A-NPDC)
- Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC)
- Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC)
- Richmond Regional Planning District Commission (PlanRVA)

Additionally, the Committee includes key partners such as:

- Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program (CZM)
- Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT)
- Virginia Tourism Corporation

The Committee has identified several primary objectives and activities:

- **Quarterly Meetings:** A-NPDC staff facilitated collaborative meetings of the Committee. These gatherings provided a platform for information exchange, progress updates, and strategic planning. The Committee met quarterly in the months of November 2022, February 2023, May 2023, & August 2023.
- **Marketing Consultant Engagement:** The Committee procured the services of Precision Legal Marketing to attend quarterly meetings and present website analytics for the respective quarter. These insights informed decision-making and guided marketing strategies moving forward.
- **Virginia Water Trails Asset Development:** The Committee has dedicated six years to building the Virginia Water Trails asset, aligning it with a clear mission and vision. This endeavor has enhanced the accessibility and attractiveness of the coastal region to visitors and residents alike.
- **Partnerships:** Collaborating with various local, regional, and state partners, and exploring sustainability options, the Committee has been successful in ensuring the long-term management and sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails asset post-funding.
- **Emphasis on Key Attributes:** All efforts of the Committee prioritized community development, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health attributes, and the cultural integration of coastal communities. These elements are seen as integral to the success and vitality of the region, lending to sustainable resilience for coastal communities.
- **Ecological and Economic Enhancement:** The Committee's initiatives are designed to increase both the ecological and economic potential of the wetlands, waterways, oysters, and wildlife in the area. These efforts are viewed as essential to the overall health and resilience of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.



Links:

[CVEA Steering Committee Agendas & Notes](#)

III. Virginia Water Trails Blogs, Page Maintenance, Final 3-Year Marketing Report

Concluding efforts of the 3-year marketing matrix, the Committee was successful in contributing blog posts, map and content maintenance, and collaborated with marketing partners to interpret website analytics and develop a strong following to support the sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails assets.

The Committee actively utilized the marketing matrix to guide marketing efforts, specific actions included:

- **Blog Post Contributions:** Partners consistently published blog posts relevant to Virginia's coastal region, public access to water recreation, and coastal Virginia supporting partners.
- **Map and Page Content Maintenance:** Partners were diligent in reviewing their maps, conducting updates, and ensuring accuracy and relevance for their respective region.
- **Engagement of a Marketing Consultant:** Precision Legal Marketing was procured to examine marketing metrics derived from the Virginia Water Trails website, encompassing various performance indicators to gauge the effectiveness of the marketing strategies implemented.

See Attachment: VirginiaWaterTrails.org General Project Report

IV. Virginia Water Trails Website Maintenance & Sustainability Plan

Launched with distinctive branding in FY2017, the Virginia Water Trails site aims to engage and educate water-based recreation enthusiasts about the coastal region. Accomplishments include the administration of website updates by the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission (A-NPDC), with an emphasis on aligning regional content with common objectives. The website received continuous content updates, SEO enhancements, analytics integration, and social media integration.

The Committee prioritized the sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails map and web assets upon the conclusion of public funding. Successful in this endeavor, the MPPDC has committed to taking on a leading role and developed an MOU that encompassed the Committee's mission while securing the site's future beyond CZM Program funding.

See Attachment: Fully executed MOU establishing Virginia Water Trails Sustainability

V. Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course (VCEG) & Sustainability Plan

The A-NPDC facilitated the 2023 VCEG course and oversaw recertifications; this year's course brought two (2) recertified guides and six (6) newly certified guides for a total of



eight (8) certified guides from the 2023 course year. Collaborations with partners, such as educational institutions like Rappahannock Community College and Eastern Shore Community College, and Virginia Green assisted in promoting awareness of the 2023 course. Each Community College offers continuing education credits to students who participate in the course; whereas Virginia Green promotes the participant once they are certified through offering free initial membership and awards programs. The course's curriculum is enriched through collaboration with various stakeholders, including the Virginia CZM Program, Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage, Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Virginia Tourism Corporation, local planners, interpreters, and private stakeholders.

2023 Newly Certified Guides:

<u>First</u>	<u>Last</u>	<u>Location</u>
Brian	Debauche	Eastern Shore
Spencer	Hull	VB & Others
Carly	Rhyne	Lower Chickahominy
Jim	Canter	Northern Neck
James	Ewan	Middle Peninsula
Chris	Malgee	VB & Others

2023 Recertified Guides:

<u>First</u>	<u>Last</u>	<u>Location</u>
Shannon	Alexander	Eastern Shore
Claire	Neubert	Hampton

Tourism is a vital contributor to Virginia's economy, with ecotourism playing a particularly crucial role in the coastal regions. Ecotourism not only connects people to the natural resources that the Virginia CZM Program seeks to protect but also fosters a strong commitment to preserving these resources. Continuity in the certification program enhances Virginia's reputation as an ecotourism destination and ensures the delivery of high-quality guided experiences in ecologically sensitive coastal ecosystems, while striving to minimize the tragedy of the commons.

The A-NPDC has committed to leading the sustainability of the VCEG course upon conclusion of CZM Program funding. The VCEG will continue to be offered virtually in response to ensuring its accessibility across the coastal plain. Ecotour guides serve as a critical bridge between tourism, environmental stewardship, and education. The significance of ecotourism lies in its contribution to the state's economy, its role in preserving coastal ecosystems, and its potential to provide quality experiences for tourists



and locals alike. Sustaining this program helps to uphold its mission beyond the current funding period.

Links:

[2023 Virtual Classroom](#)

[VWT Hire an Ecotour Guide](#)

[VWT Become an Ecotour Guide](#)

VI. Resiliency Assessments and Implementation

The report outlines the plans and objectives of the four Planning District Commissions (PDCs) for implementing resilience assessments. The primary goals are to utilize these assessments for two main purposes: (1) to enhance implementation strategies and strengthen grant proposals for funding agencies such as the Virginia Marine Resource Commission, National Park Service, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, and Virginia Department of Transportation; (2) to integrate resilience assessments into current PDC programs and plans, such as Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies, Transportation Plans, and Hazards Mitigation Plans.

The MPPDC utilized the findings from their Year 5 resiliency assessment to draft at least one grant application, aiming to address identified resilience needs on property owned by the Mid-Atlantic Paddling and Conservation Program Alliance (MPCBPA).

To ensure continuity and cohesion in resilience efforts across the Eastern Shore, a site assessment template was created. This template was shared with public landing owners (counties and Department of Wildlife Resources). Furthermore, this assessment template will be integrated into the pending development of the Regional Resiliency Plan.

PlanRVA staff updated and improved the Lower Chickahominy Resilience Assessment. First the assessment was broadened to include a more thorough analysis of sea level rise impacts including anticipated flood risk and wetland migration. PlanRVA staff evaluated potential impacts to eight public boat ramps and expanded the assessment to include an evaluation of the Virginia Capital Trail. Acreage of potential sea level rise impacts were calculated for each public access location utilizing three foot sea level rise projections overlaid on parcel data. Three foot sea level rise was chosen to match PlanRVA's current Scenario Planning efforts using the NOAA Intermediate-High curve at year 2060. NOAA's flood hazard composite data was examined as well, and each site's current flood hazards according to NOAA have been noted in the assessment. This assessment was done in coordination with PlanRVA staff who focus on transportation planning and support the Richmond Regional Transportation Planning Organization. The data and findings from the updated assessment will be incorporated in planning programs and projects at PlanRVA including regional resilience planning, transportation planning, and coordination of the Lower Chickahominy Watershed Collaborative.

Links:



Eastern Shore Site Assessment Template

VII. Developing VA Oyster Trail Communities & Cultivating Resiliency

The Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT) was focused on increasing awareness of the economic benefits associated with Virginia oysters, with a special emphasis on fostering connections among communities, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health benefits, and regional cultural assets. The Virginia Oyster Trail Communities Program was crafted to enhance resilience by purposefully identifying a community's "Merroir-Terroir" attributes in conjunction with the variety of oyster-related businesses and cultural assets, creating a unified marketing brand identity.

The program aimed to actively involve residents, businesses, and Trail members in identifying priorities that harnessed the Virginia Oyster Trail brand, promoting entrepreneurial engagement, project collaboration, and heightened awareness as a vital component of their sustainable economic growth plan. Partially funded through a recent VACZM TA Grant (Grant# NA21NOS4190152), the VOT Communities program methodology was beta-tested in the communities of Reedville, Heathsville, and White Stone within the Northern Neck region.

As the program evolved, it incorporated the newly launched trip planning and itinerary tools of the VOT, developed "Ask A Local" community narratives, established business-to-business connections, and improved SEO mechanisms during FY21. VOT successfully refined and finalized the VOT Communities Program and worked closely with the Planning District Commissions (PDCs) to identify potential communities within the CVEA regions for future program implementation. The inventory of communities that had engaged with this program discussion provided a basis for selecting a single community to complete the stakeholder program engagement process.

Links:

Community Program Notes for *(identify community within one CVEA region)*

VIII. Benefits Accrued

The Northern Neck was designated a National Heritage Area in January 2023, and links the Virginia Water Trails site to its website and continues to support Virginia Water Trails on social media channels. Also, the Northern Neck will be conducting a DRIVE 2.0 Outdoor workshop through Virginia Tourism Corporation, which will be a facilitated priority discussion regarding outdoor recreation and increased public access to the waterfront.

The Eastern Shore has seen several public access site improvements since the start of these analysis efforts and outreach conducted with public landing owners. Improvements included repairs to floating docks, parking lot repair and maintenance, vibrant county welcome signage with site name, and ramp replacements/repairs.

Links:



IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, this report highlights the Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) Steering Committee's ongoing dedication to advancing ecotourism in the coastal Virginia region. The committee, made up of various Planning District Commissions and partner organizations, has made significant strides in promoting ecological and economic enhancement, as well as coastal resiliency. Their commitment to sustainable development, public engagement, and environmental stewardship underscores their vision for a vibrant and ecologically sound coastal community. The accomplishments and partnerships outlined in this report serve as a testament to the committee's efforts to preserve the region's natural resources and stimulate economic growth through ecotourism, all while ensuring the well-being of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

