

# Virginia Oyster & 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

NOAA Grant: NA17NOS4190152

Grant Year 2017 Task 72

*This project was funded by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program at the Department of Environmental Quality through Grant #NA17NOS4190152 of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.*

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

*December, 2018*

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NOAA Grant No. NA17NOS4190152

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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 31<sup>st</sup>, April 10<sup>th</sup>, October 30<sup>th</sup>, and had a webinar training for website maintenance on December 13<sup>th</sup>. 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](http://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](http://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. 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program's Biennial Workshop on Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>, and the Virginia Oyster Trail Summit on November 16<sup>th</sup>. 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 250<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Development of a Digital Engagement Tool for the Virginia Oyster Trail

Tasked by Virginia Oyster Trail management team members to develop an interactive mapping tool for the Virginia Oyster Trail website, <http://virginiaoystertrail.com/>, this product required the convention of a stakeholder group, including the Virginia Oyster Trail Director, Sherri Smith, the webmaster for the site, staff members from the NNPDC, in consultation with partner PDCs. Working collaboratively, the group met by telephone about



10 times throughout the 2018 calendar year to outline the task, determine progress, and preview the beta version of the mapping tool. The goal of the mapping tool is to engage visitors to the [virginiaoystertrail.com](http://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. The beta version of the tool was presented twice in November 2018 at the Coastal Partners Workshop in Richmond and at the Virginia Oyster Trail summit in Newport News.