

Seaside Water Trail Camping Platform Feasibility

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Virginia Coastal Zone
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



Seaside Water Trail Camping Platform Feasibility

In the public meetings held during the development process for the Seaside Water Trail (FY 2002 Task 12.08) the most frequently mentioned objectives were the creation of a trail that linked the entire seaside of the Eastern Shore, the creation of overnight camping facilities along the trail, and increased access to the barrier islands. While several sites along the trail allow for overnight accommodations in and around the coastal towns and villages of the Shore, there are several sections that are currently available only as day use trails. The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of creating a water trail system that includes facilities to allow paddlers to start at one end of the peninsula, and continue uninterrupted through to the other end of the peninsula.

Due to land ownership and wildlife management issues, there is very limited potential for ground camping along the Seaside Water Trail system. Elevated camping platforms strategically placed along the trail were suggested by several participants in the water trail public meetings. Several factors need to be evaluated in order to determine the cost / benefit equation for this type of project.



1. Kayakers Explore the Seaside Water Trail

The factors that will be discussed in this report are

- A – Need for additional overnight camping facilities along the trail
- B – Availability of suitable locations for camping platforms
- C – Regulations and restrictions on such structures
- D – Potential for land use conflicts
- E – Economic impacts

The Seaside Water Trail stretches from the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge on the South end to Greenbackville, VA on the North end where it links to the Maryland water trail system. Travel is encouraged in both directions, and there are several access points along the way for day use trips. For needs evaluation purposes, a trip itinerary from South to North was used as a framework.

Accommodations Needs Evaluation Spectrum (Scale 1 – 5)

- 1 – Additional accommodations are not determined to be necessary
- 2 – Additional accommodations will have little effect on water trail usage
- 3 – Additional accommodations may encourage additional use of water trail
- 4 – Additional accommodations will significantly improve ease of use of water trail
- 5 – Additional accommodations will dramatically improve water trail experience



2 Kayak Launch Site and Marsh at Eastern Shore National Wildlife Refuge



3 Kayak Campers on Mockhorn Island

Trip Description	Accommodation Availability	Need for Additional Accommodations
Day 1 – Arrive on Eastern Shore for pre-trip preparations.	Sunset Beach Resort (Hotel, and RV based camping) within 1 mile, Kiptopeke State Park (Camping, RV, Cabins, & Yurt) within 4 miles.	2
Day 2 – Paddle from Eastern Shore National Wildlife Refuge to Mockhorn Island.	Primitive camping available on Mockhorn Island.	1
Day 3 – Paddle from Mockhorn Island to Oyster	Rittenhouse Lodge (Motel) within 5 miles. Various Bed and Breakfast locations in Cape Charles within 7 Miles	5
Day 4 - Paddle from Oyster Harbor to Red Bank	No Accommodations within 5 miles	5
Day 5 – Paddle from Red Bank to Willis Wharf or Quinby	Virginia Landing (Camping & Cabins) on Water Trail, Fishermans Lodge (Camping, Hotel, Lodge) at landing	1
Day 6 - Paddle from Willis Wharf or Quinby to Wachapreague	Wachapreague Hotel and various house rentals at landing	1
Day 7 – Paddle from Wachapreague to Folly Creek	No Accommodations within 5 miles	5
Day 8 – Paddle from Folly Creek to Gargatha Landing	No Accommodations within 5 miles	5
Day 9 Paddle from Gargatha Landing to Wisharts Point or Chincoteague Island	No Accommodations within 5 miles at Wisharts. Various accommodations available on Chincoteague	4
Day 10 - Paddle from Wisharts Point to Chincoteague or around Chincoteague	Various Hotels, Motels, Rental Houses, & Camping within 1 mile of landing	2
Day 11 – Paddle from Chincoteague to Greenbackville	Various Motels, Rental Houses, Camping and B&B's available on Chincoteague Island	1
Day 12 – Post trip logistics & wrap up	Accommodations available at both North & South Terminus of trail	1

Results of needs evaluation showed that while there exist several opportunities for multi-day use of the water trail, 2 sections of the trail, between Mockhorn Island and Red Bank, and between Wachapreague and Chincoteague, are in need of additional accommodations to tie the whole system together.

With an understanding of the regional needs for additional accommodations, it is necessary to determine the availability of suitable locations for land camping or camping platform construction. The factors considered in the evaluation of sites included, but were not limited to;

- 1 – Ease of access, and safety enhancement to water trail users
- 2 – Potential for use or abuse by non-target individuals
- 3 – Environmental impact
- 4 – Contribution to the water trail experience

In the southern section of the trail, the area between Mockhorn Island and Red Bank includes 2 long paddling sections with no available lodging opportunities. There exist several locations suitable to overnight use. The following create the greatest value for water trail users while minimizing impact on the surrounding eco-system.

- 1 – Camping Platform at the South End of Smith Island
- 2 - Camping Platform on North end of Mockhorn Island.
- 3 – Ground Camping facility at Indiantown Park
- 4 – Camping Platform within Ramshorn Channel Area



4 Approaching a Floating Camping Platform in Alabama

Locating a camping platform on the South End of Smith Island creates an opportunity for the Seaside Water Trail and the Captain John Smith National Historic Trail to capitalize on the overlap in the trail systems. In 1608 Captain John Smith's crew sheltered inside of the southern tip of Smith Island, which they named for their captain. The opportunity to allow trail users to experience this vital part of Virginia's cultural history should not be ignored. The location is ideal for paddlers interested in doing a 2-3 day expedition through the waters surrounding Smith, Fisherman, and Mockhorn Islands, and provides a logical terminus for the trail as well as an opportunity to tie into the Capt. John Smith Trail.

A camping platform on the North end of Mockhorn Island would ideally be located within the area between Man and Boy Channel and Two Mouths Creek as indicated on the USGS topographic maps of the region. Exact location should be selected with consideration of prevailing weather patterns and extreme events as well as how to minimize the navigational difficulty involved in locating the platform from the water. Existing landmarks, such as channel markers should be available to assist paddlers in locating the platform.

Indiantown Park is an existing Northampton County facility that is located near the water's edge. Access would need to be secured for paddlers to approach the park from the water side.



5 Example of Land Camping Structure

A camping platform located within the Ramshorn Channel would ideally be located off of a side creek with limited use by recreational boaters and commercial watermen. Navigation concerns would need to be carefully considered, as well as viewshed issues from waterfront property owners.

In the Northern section of the Seaside Water Trail, the section between Wachapreague and Chincoteague contains some of the best paddling, but no overnight or multi-day opportunities. There are several available options for both land based camping and

platform construction. The following would create the greatest value for water trail users with minimal impact on the surrounding eco-system.

- 1 - Seasonal Ground Camping on Cedar Island
- 2 – Camping Platform in Great Channel area of Cedar Island
- 3 – Camping Platform in Wire Passage Area
- 4 – Ground Camping at NASA Docks
- 5 – Ground Camping at Wisharts Point
- 6 – Camping Platform in Kendall Narrows Area

Cedar Island is a mixed ownership island with private, NGO, and government owned lands. Due to the seasonal use of the island by migrating bird populations, environmental concerns would have to be addressed with this site through seasonal use of any ground camping facilities. Negotiations with private land owners may be the best opportunity for increased access for water trail users. The Great Channel region of marshland offers both an excellent opportunity for camping platform placement as well as potential access to Cedar Island that does not pose the safety threats that are present at the inlets at either end of the island.

A Camping Platform in the Wire Passage area would discourage the illegal camping that currently occurs on Metompkin Island by providing a legal alternative. Metompkin Island is heavily used by seasonal migrating and nesting birds. A camping platform would create an opportunity for an information station on the water. This could educate users as to the environmental importance of the area as well as discourage inappropriate use. Location and site design could also be used to create an excellent observation platform for birding enthusiasts creating a beneficial complimentary use.

The landing at the NASA docks facility is within a tract of government owned land that is large enough to accommodate several primitive camping sites. The history of the site as well as some existing infrastructure provide for an interesting setting, although there are safety concerns created by some of the structures on the site. Signage would need to be created to discourage users from climbing on potentially dangerous structures.

The landing at Wisharts Point is within a tract of land owned by Accomack County with a history of use by commercial watermen. While this cultural legacy is an attractive feature of the landing, there are also public safety concerns that come from the use of this property for illicit purposes. Reports of criminal activity have dropped in recent years. However, use of this site should be discussed with local law enforcement agencies. Accomack County has expressed a desire to upgrade this site, and it is foreseeable that appropriate infrastructure improvements could increase desirable public use and discourage undesirable use of the site.



6 Salt Marshes and Barrier Island beaches provide world class paddling opportunities on the Eastern Shore.

A camping platform within the Kendall Narrows area would encourage paddlers to stay out of the high traffic recreational boating areas on the South End of Chincoteague Island as well as creating an attractive overnight / weekend use area near this major tourism market. Chincoteague has exceptional tourism related facilities and would benefit from shoulder season use of these facilities by paddling enthusiasts.

Discussions with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) have determined that there are mechanisms in place for the creation of camping platform structures within both State-owned and privately-owned marshlands. It is necessary to complete a Local/State/Federal Joint Permit Application for Projects in Tidewater Virginia. This application is available from VMRC, and local VMRC officials are receptive to assisting in the development of an application that addresses their concerns for marshland structures. Recommendations that have developed from informal interviews include:

- 1 – Create structures that cover less than 400 square feet.
- 2 – Locations over non-vegetated lands are preferable where available
- 3 – Do not create toilet facilities in initial project scope
- 4 – Indicate what agency or organization will be responsible for upkeep and maintenance of structures

Effective management and maintenance of water trail infrastructure are key components in the success of the project. Two management models are predominant across the United States; government ownership through the park system, and ownership by a non-profit organization set up for that purpose. State Parks and the National Park System manage trails and camping platforms that lie within their boundaries. There are not widespread examples of any park system managing infrastructure beyond the geographical boundaries of the parkland.



7 A Chickee Camp Site in Everglades National Park

In situations where the trail and infrastructure continue across property owned by multiple stakeholders, a non-profit trail management organization set up as a 501c(3) entity is the predominant model. The Maine Island Trail Association manages the oldest and most widely recognized water trail in the country. The Maine Island Trail stretches 350 miles down the coast and includes over 150 properties belonging to a variety of landowners, but all managed by the Maine Island Trail Association. This original water trail model has been replicated throughout the country and has several key components:

- 1 – The non-profit trail organization maintains ownership of all trail infrastructure.
- 2 – Use of platforms and land based sites is regulated by the trail organization.
- 3 – Fees are charged to users of facilities.
- 4 – Liability insurance on the camping platforms is maintained by the trail organization.
- 5 – The trail organization is responsible for upkeep and maintenance of all trail infrastructure as well as ground camping facilities.
- 6 – Management contracts are created between the trail organization and all relevant property owners.
- 7 – Land sites are leased to the trail organization where appropriate.

The Seaside Water Trail covers over 100 miles along the Virginia Atlantic Coast, passing by or through lands owned by the federal, state, and county governments, as well as private lands. The prospect of uniting all of this property under the ownership of a park system is unrealistic. However the management model initiated by the Maine Island Trail Association is compatible with the proposed development of the Seaside Water Trail.

Representatives from Accomack and Northampton Counties as well as the Accomack / Northampton Planning District Commission have expressed positive impressions of this type of project, although without detailed drawings and plans, none are currently willing to endorse construction.

Representatives from The Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission have expressed support for the development of additional accommodations and increased use of the Seaside Water Trail, and stated that this type of project is in line with the goals expressed in their Eastern Shore Tourism Strategy.

The Tourism Committee of the Northampton County Chamber of Commerce endorses the effort to create increased usage and additional accommodation along the Seaside Water Trail.

Small business owners and representatives of the coastal towns and villages along the trail have expressed their approval for this type of infrastructure investment. Concerns have been expressed for the safety of the paddlers. Business owners and town representatives are pleased with the efforts to encourage paddlers to view the towns as resources along the trail as well as opportunities for cultural interactions and education.

**The Eastern Shore Brand
Capitalizes on the core
Assets of the Shore.**



Potential Land use conflicts include, but are not limited to impacts on migratory and nesting bird populations, impacts on commercial fishing and aquaculture operations, viewshed concerns from coastal land owners, and impacts on recreational fishermen. Of these concerns, the potential ecosystem impacts are the most likely to create opposition from the local scientific and conservation communities.

To minimize impact on the migratory bird populations, educational signage is essential on all camping structures as is educational information within all published trail materials and the water trail web site. Seasonal closures of some camping facilities may also need to be considered. Of the camping platform sites evaluated, the site within the Wire Passage Area is located closest to areas historically used by migratory and nesting bird populations. This area is already heavily used by recreational fishermen, and illegal camping is a recurring issue on Metompkin Island. Bans on camping have been ineffective in discouraging the practice, and land management staff is limited to the point of being unable to effectively enforce the current rules. The creation of a legal alternative that decreases impact on the bird population should give enforcement staff a more effective tool in decreasing illegal and undesirable use of the island. While the creation of a camping platform may create an increase in overall public use of this natural area, it will also create an opportunity to educate users and actually decrease the impact on the area. This potential conflict is also addressed by the seasonality of uses. Maximum levels of sensitive migratory and nesting bird activity occurs on the island in the late

spring through late summer months. The ideal time frame for use by paddlers is late summer through early winter. It can be argued that the minimal overlap of increased usage patterns minimizes the use conflict in these areas.

Commercial Fishing and Aquaculture operations are active throughout the Seaside region of the Eastern Shore. This is a vital component of the economy in both Accomack and Northampton Counties. It is imperative that eco-tourism related activities are directed in such a way as to minimize impact on these industries. In considering the placement of camping platforms it is obvious that locations must be selected that are removed from aquaculture operations geographically and that they are located in such a way as to ensure that currents do not draw potential contaminants from camping activities toward aquaculture operations. Additionally rules regarding appropriate waste management should be posted and included in camping permit applications. The Leave No Trace Foundation (LNT) has created commonly accepted Best Management Practices (BMPs) for wilderness waste management. A third factor to consider in camping platform placement is the travel patterns encouraged by location of the platforms. Locations should be selected that create travel patterns that do not pass over or near aquaculture operations.

Coastal land owners have expressed concerns over viewshed impacts of camping platforms on the seaside. The design and location of all trail related structures should include consideration of these concerns. Solid walls are of particular concern, as are large rooflines and near-shore locations.

Recreational fishermen have expressed concerns regarding public boat ramp and launch access, mixed use of heavily traveled waterways, and increased usage of prime fishing locations. While public launches and boat ramps are intended for many different types of users, it is advisable to direct paddling usage to areas with minimal use by recreational fishermen and other power boaters. This creates a benefit to both user groups, and enhances safety. Camping platform locations should be chosen with consideration for minimizing impact on prime fishing locations.

While there are sure to be other potential usage conflicts, these are the areas in which concerns were raised though interviews with many types of users within the Seaside ecosystem. These conflicts should be minimized wherever possible, and minimal ecosystem impact should be a goal throughout the location selection and design process.

The economic impact of well designed water trail systems has not been effectively demonstrated scientifically. However anecdotal evidence suggests that the economic impact of such a water trail system is significantly positive in many ways. According to industry reports and interviews with paddlesports retailers, water trail users tend to become repeat visitors to areas with varied, high quality paddling opportunities. Recreational flat water kayaking is the fastest growing segment of the paddlesports market, followed closely by kayak fishing. Both of these groups are drawn toward coastal water trails. Water trail users tend to stay in a locality for at least one night on either end of their paddling expeditions. Regional identities are often enhanced or

created with the development of a well designed water trail system. The Maine Island Trail and San Juan Islands Trail systems are excellent examples of how water trail systems have driven growth in regional tourism markets both by paddlers and by tangential groups by creating a regional identity focused around the trail. The current development of the Eastern Shore Brand is an effort that is complemented by the current Seaside Water Trail System, and would be further enhanced by upgrades to the water trail. Increased publicity for an enhanced water trail system could help create an understanding of the Eastern Shore as a significant natural area. This increased awareness of the natural resources of the area could be used by complementary industries such as aquaculture, agriculture, and marine research industries to enhance their value. Concerns about negative economic impacts of a water trail system have been limited to land value issues from coastal land owners. It can reasonably be expected that there are significant economic benefits for the region involved in the enhancement of the current Seaside Water Trail System.

Recommendations

If it is determined that the creation of additional accommodations for users of the Seaside Water Trail are desired, then the following actions are recommended:

1 - Ground Camping sites should be identified and pursued to enhance the Seaside Water Trail. The Seaside Water Trail would be significantly enhanced by the development of ground camping opportunities in the following locations:

A – Indiantown Park

B – Cedar Island – It should be noted that if significant resistance to the development of ground camping on Cedar Island exists that the construction of a camping platform in the Great Channel area West of Cedar Island is a desirable secondary option.

C – NASA Docks Site at Assawoman Creek

2 – Potential Camping Platform locations should be specifically identified with consideration for the issues indicated in this report. These platform locations should meet the goal identified by the local community of creating a safe and accessible water trail system that is available as a continuous route from the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge to Greenbackville. Furthermore these platforms should be located in such a way as to allow for responsible use of the Barrier Island and coastal marsh ecosystems.

A – The section of the Seaside Water Trail between Mockhorn Island and Quinby would be greatly enhanced by the development of camping platforms in the following 2 areas:

1 – North end of Mockhorn Island

2 – Ramshorn Channel North of Webs Island

B – The section of the Seaside Water Trail between Wachapreague and Chincoteague would be greatly enhanced by the development of camping platforms in the following 2 areas:

1 – Wire Passage

2 – Kendall Narrows

3 – Architectural plans should be developed for each location with consideration for site specific needs. In evaluating the need for additional accommodation on the Seaside Water Trail, 3 types of structures were considered for camping platforms.

A – Flat docks with no roof or wall structure.



B – Docks with a shallow sloped roof supported by vertical posts with no wall structure



C – Enclosed structures that provide shelter from hazardous weather. These structures would be built in a style that imitates the waterman's cabins that have been traditionally built on the seaside marshes as watch-houses and hunting retreats.



Through informal interviews and comparisons with camping structures in other regions, indications point to structure type B as the most desirable type of camping platform. While potential trail users identified a preference for C, coastal land owners were opposed to the potential viewshed obstructions. Concerns were also raised regarding use and abuse by non-target users, as well as increased maintenance needs in regards to structure type C. Discussions with VMRC indicated increased potential for approval of the Joint Permit Application for structure type B over type C.

It is further recommended that platform design include the potential for the addition of composting toilet facilities as use dictates and cost allows in the future.

For Ground Camping locations, there is little need for infrastructure. However, waste management issues should be addressed where appropriate.

4 – Support from local government agencies, citizens groups, and other concerned parties should be secured once site plans are developed.

5 – A management agency or group needs to be identified.

6 – An implementation plan should be developed that includes opportunities for public input.

In addition to these recommendations, it should be noted that the addition of a boutique Inn or B&B facility in the towns of Oyster and Willis Wharf would be a valuable asset to the Seaside Water Trail. While this is a goal that can only be met by the private sector, the value of this type of asset in any of the existing coastal communities along the Seaside Water Trail should be recognized.