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## PROTECTING VIRGINIA'S SPECIAL AREAS

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Virginia's coastal zone is treasured by Virginians and admired by many Americans. From the impenetrable pocosins and marshes of the Great Dismal Swamp, the windy wilderness of the Eastern Shore's barrier islands and the recovered colony of Jamestown, to the resort strip of Virginia Beach and the international port of Hampton Roads, Virginia's coastal zone is truly a national treasure.

The Virginia Coastal Program has been entrusted with preserving, protecting and restoring the natural beauty and ecological function of our Coastal zone, while fostering appropriate economic growth and development. One way to achieve this balance and spirit of cooperation is through Special Area Management Plans (SAMPs).

The reauthorization of the Coastal Zone Management Act in 1990, included guidelines for development and implementation of SAMPs in Section 309 (Coastal Zone Enhancement Grants). SAMPs are rooted in the following principle: to coordinate multilevel planning efforts for the protection of significant natural resources through development and implementation of new enforceable policies.

Though each of Virginia's three active SAMPs is based on the same unifying principle, each addresses different levels of development pressure, land-use issues and potential protection solutions. The Northampton County SAMP was initiated in 1991 to protect globally important migratory bird stopover habitat and develop sustainable industries in an area where impacts from development were gradually increasing. The Southern Watersheds SAMP was created in 1995 to find a balance between the economic and residential development needs of two intensely developed cities (Virginia Beach and Chesapeake), and the protection of open-space and natural resources. The Dragon Run SAMP was established to protect the nearly pristine character of the Dragon Run watershed, which spans portions of four counties. This pro-active effort, started in January 2002, focuses on continuing to preserve the cultural, historic and natural character of the watershed.

Special Area Management Plans are valuable tools for managing the complex issues involved in resource protection. Unlike other management options, SAMPs are unique in several ways. They allow us to 1) focus on unique ecosystems, 2) integrate economic and environmental protection and 3) provide long-term continuity and stability in funding.

## FOCUSING ON UNIQUE ECOSYSTEMS

The development of a SAMP allows us to use an ecosystem approach toward protection, regardless of the political boundaries. Inherent in the process is coordination among stakeholders so that cross-boundary issues can be addressed effectively.

The Dragon Run is not only treasured for its central role in the Middle Peninsula of



*Figure 1. Biodiversity in the Dragon Run - state rare plant American Featherfoil, Hottonia inflata*



*Figure 2. Canoeing down the Dragon Run*

Virginia's natural and cultural identity, it is also a geographic centerpiece, spanning 140 square miles of four counties. The watershed has been recognized by state biologists, researchers, The Nature Conservancy and the Smithsonian Institute as a nearly pristine watershed with unmatched biological diversity. The farming and forestry operations in this rural watershed have fostered environmental stewardship in the past, but residents are becoming more concerned about forest fragmentation and the threat of development.

The mission of the Dragon Run SAMP is to "support and promote community-based efforts to preserve the cultural, historic and natural character of the Dragon Run, while preserving property rights and the traditional uses within the watershed." The SAMP advisory committee includes representatives of all four counties (landowners, county staff and elected officials), the regional planning district commission and various state and federal agencies active in the region. One of the policy objectives of this SAMP is to achieve consistency across county boundaries with respect to land use plans and regulations that affect farming, forestry and natural communities.

## INTEGRATING ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Through their foundation in Coastal Zone Management under NOAA, SAMPs should consider both environmental protection and economic development issues. Recognizing that recreation and development are important to a locality's economy, SAMPs can foster sustainable practices that ultimately benefit the resource.



**Figure 3. Neotropical songbird (Vireo)  
- Eastern Shore Birding Festival**

Northampton County, an impoverished, rural locality, is home to one of the world's last undeveloped barrier island systems, and provides one of the two most important concentration areas on the Atlantic coast for fall migration of neotropical songbirds. With its proximity to Virginia Beach and Norfolk, separated only by the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, development pressures have been steadily increasing in the county.

A focus of the Northampton SAMP has been to promote ecotourism while also encouraging natural resource protection. The Eastern Shore Birding Festival, initiated under the SAMP, draws approximately 800 birders to Northampton County each fall during the migration. The festival, which celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year in 2002, has been a great success in fostering sustainability. It educates participants about the value of the migratory bird habitat and provides a source of much-needed tourism income for the county. At the same time, the county is working toward adopting a Sensitive Natural Resource District Overlay which provides an extra level of local protection for areas important in maintaining water quality and migratory bird habitat.

## PROVIDING LONG-TERM CONTINUITY AND STABILITY IN FUNDING

Coastal Zone Management Act funding has been a very stable source of funding for Virginia since the program was approved in 1986. The guidelines for SAMPs include five years for development and two additional years for implementation of the enforceable policies. With a stable source of long-term funding, this allows for each SAMP Manager to identify any gaps in data or information, pursue projects to collect that information and develop recommendations and finally implement the recommendations or enforceable policies with cooperation of the stakeholders.

The Southern Watershed SAMP was designed to protect and enhance water quality, natural resources and the rural character of the Back Bay, Northwest and North Landing watersheds in the southern portion of the intensely developed cities of Chesapeake and Virginia Beach. This area contains some of the most diverse and extensive wetlands in Virginia, housing over 40 rare or endangered species.



***Figure 4. Riparian buffer preservation in the Southern Watershed.***

The need to protect the riparian buffers along these rivers for habitat and water quality preservation was recognized as a priority early in the process. Under the SAMP, the cities were able to catalogue the wetlands and buffers and consider options for preserving these areas. The outcome is the Multiple Benefits Conservation Plan for the Southern Watersheds. Under this plan, agencies involved in mitigation issues in the Southern Watersheds are coordinating their decisions to preserve a riparian buffer system identified as the Conservation Corridor System. This coordination and

effort is the result of several years of putting together the pieces into a workable mitigation program.

Special Area Management Plans can be flexible to fit individual circumstances but are rooted in sound principles of cooperation, coordination and sustainability. The development and implementation of three SAMPs in Virginia has allowed the Coastal Program to make great strides toward protecting, preserving and restoring our treasured coastal resources.

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***Figure 5. Canoeing on the North Landing River***