

# Northampton County Special Area Management Plan

## Special Area Description

Northampton County is located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, bound by the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Chesapeake Bay to the west. It is a rural, agricultural county suffering from a depressed economy and chronic unemployment, yet has a cornucopia of natural resources and is blessed with a vast system of barrier islands, bays and salt marshes. The intertidal and shallow subtidal areas, undeveloped beaches and marshes have supported an incredible array of waterfowl and shorebirds. The seaside of the county is recognized by the United Nations as an International Biosphere Reserve. Over 59% of the landscape is made up of woodland and wetland natural community types, which contain a variety of seasonal and permanent wildlife populations and a number of rare and threatened species. The "Southern Tip" is a critical migratory songbird stopover area. To many it seems a coastal wilderness, however, a development boom is occurring in the County. In the past two years, two large retirement communities have been constructed and more are proposed. With growth comes concerns regarding the cumulative impacts to county-wide natural systems. Furthermore, because the local economy is dependent on agriculture, seafood industries, and increasingly tourism, protection of these resources is a high priority.



## Partners and Participants

The Northampton County SAMP is a collaborative effort between Northampton County, the Virginia Coastal Program and NOAA. The Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage and Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries provide technical expertise. Many local stakeholders have volunteered numerous hours toward this effort.

## Project Goals

- D**evelop new, enforceable policies to protect bird and fish habitats and control cumulative and secondary impacts of coastal development by maintaining maximum vegetative cover for wildlife habitat and nutrient uptake.
- E**nsure the protection and management of groundwater quality and quantity available to Northampton County.
- D**evelop new, sustainable industries and protect a sense of place and quality of life, and to develop responsible heritage tourism, ecotourism, aquaculture and other sustainable industries.

## Project Objectives:

- C**ontrol cumulative and secondary impacts of residential and commercial development by strengthening local ordinances to maintain maximum vegetative cover for wildlife habitat and nutrient uptake.
- S**teer development away from sensitive areas through conservation easements.
- P**romote aquaculture and seafood product development by reducing water use conflicts, protecting water quality through exceptional waters designation or easement; dredge disposal plan, aquaculture siting guidelines and a stormwater ordinance.
- P**romote responsible heritage tourism by protecting natural and cultural assets through agreements with major public and private landowners, ecotour guide certification, an ecotourism code of ethics and a year-round birding/wildlife viewing plan.
- D**evelop new, sustainable industries by redeveloping an industrial waterfront and creating a sustainable technologies industrial park.

## Project Outcomes:

- T**hree years of research on migratory bird habitat requirements was completed. A landowners habitat management guide was published. A Geographic Information System for the County was established.
- T**en conservation easements plans for large seaside farms were completed and many of these farms have now been sold with the recorded easements.
- T**he Eastern Shore Birding Festival was initiated in 1993. Since then this event has brought hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to the community. Work was completed on a Nature Tourism Code of Ethics and an Eco-tour Guide Certification Curriculum was developed spurring formation in 1998 of the Virginia EcoTourism Association (VETA).
- T**he County was chosen as one of four sites by President Clinton's Council on Sustainable Development for a model eco-industrial park. Construction of the solar-powered Port of Cape Charles Sustainable Technologies Industrial Park (STIP) is complete.
- A**doption of the Northampton County Grounwater Protection ordinance.
- A**doption of a Sensitive Natural Resources Area overlay will be voted on by the Northampton County Board of Supervisors on July 16, 2003. The SNRA will require maintenance of native vegetation in sensitive habitats and BMPs such as rain gardens in critical groundwater recharge areas.

# Dragon Run Special Area Management Plan

## *Special Area Description*

The Dragon Run is a fresh and brackish water stream that flows forty miles through the Virginia Middle Peninsula counties of Essex, King and Queen, Middlesex, and Gloucester. The stream, along with the surrounding Dragon Run Cypress Swamp, forms an ecologically unique system with excellent water quality and numerous species of flora and fauna. The watershed is largely undeveloped and consists of 140.3 square miles of land area, of which 10% is wetlands. The Dragon Run watershed is central to the region's culture and identity. Forestry and farming are the primary land uses, while hunting, fishing, and paddling are popular recreational activities. Its pristine nature offers both residents and visitors a high quality of life and a sense of wilderness. This can largely be attributed to exemplary landowner stewardship.

## *Partners and Participants*

As a response to encroaching development, the Dragon Run Steering Committee formed in 1985. The Committee consists of landowners and county elected officials concerned about preserving the Dragon Run's natural and economic resources. The Dragon Run Watershed Special Area Management Plan (SAMP) is a partnership of the Dragon Run Steering Committee, the Virginia Coastal Program and NOAA. The Steering Committee's SAMP Advisory Group comprises diverse stakeholders, including: local officials, landowners, state agencies, representatives from farming, forestry, and ecotourism, educators, and nonprofit organizations.



## *Project Goals*

**E**stablish cooperation and communication between the four counties,

**F**oster educational opportunities to establish the community's connection to and respect for the watershed, and

**P**romote landowner stewardship that has preserved the Dragon Run as a regional treasure.

## *Outcomes: Present and Future*

The Dragon Run SAMP is an early work in progress. The four counties have signed a Memorandum of Agreement agreeing to participate, to accept the project goals, and to consider the Steering Committee's recommendations. To achieve the project's goals, recommended enforceable policies are being developed that may include: a Dragon Run overlay zoning district; local Comprehensive Plan amendments; and no wake zones. Additional activities that are planned or considered include: a natural resources inventory; a cross-boundary land use policy analysis; a public education program for citizens and local decision-makers; an initiative to promote the use of forest stewardship plans; watershed boundary signs; and a stewardship awards program.

**Special Outcome:** As a result of the SAMP, a 121-acre tract along the Dragon has been purchased through a Virginia Coastal Program grant and will be incorporated into the Virginia Chesapeake Bay Estuarine and Coastal Research Reserve System. The tract includes approximately 3000 feet of riverfront, old loblolly pine forest, mixed pine-hardwood, and forested wetlands.

The Dragon Run Special Area Management Plan leverages resources to collect baseline ecological information for the watershed. The plan also utilizes geographic information systems (GIS) data to map watershed features. Analysis of this information is incorporated into the planning process so that informed choices can be made to preserve the watershed's unique ecosystems and traditional uses (e.g. forestry, farming, hunting, fishing). Furthermore, educators are using the GIS data to meet learning standards for middle school, high school, and college students.

# Southern Watersheds Special Area Management Plan

## *Special Area Description*

The Southern Watersheds Area (SWA) of the Cities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Great Dismal Swamp on the west, and borders the rapidly expanding Hampton Roads metro area which is home to over 1 million people. The SWA encompasses Back Bay, the North Landing River and the Northwest River, and is located in the headwaters of the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuarine Complex. The waters of the SWA are used for water supply, recreation, navigation, habitat support, and irrigation. The SWA covers approximately 325 square miles. The southern end of the watersheds, adjacent to the North Carolina border, is rural and contains extensive wetlands that include a variety of rare swamp, pocosin and marsh communities. Land uses in this area of the SWA are primarily agricultural, silvicultural and rural residential. Continued urban expansion is placing increased stress on both the aquatic and terrestrial resources of the watersheds.

## *Partners and Participants*

The Southern Watersheds Special Area Management Plan (SWAMP) is primarily a collaborative effort of the Cities of Chesapeake and Virginia Beach, the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, the Virginia Coastal Program and NOAA. A broad range of local, state and federal agencies, stakeholder groups and the general public also participate in the project.



## *Project Goal and Objectives*

**Goal:** Protect natural resources, sensitive lands and water supplies in the Southern Watersheds through management of competing uses and collaboration of local, state and federal agencies working in the SWA.

**Objectives:** Protection of water quality, preservation of open lands, sustainability of agricultural and forestal activities, preservation of rural character, compatibility of recreational activities and commerce with natural resource protection.

## *Outcomes: Present and Future*

### *Chesapeake and Virginia Beach Cooperative Management Agreement:*

Established the working relationship between the two cities.

### *Conservation Plan for the Southern Watersheds Area:*

Identifies a set of riparian corridors and recommends management techniques for their preservation.

### *Multiple Benefits Management Program MOA:*

Agreement among local, state and federal agencies to improve coordination of the wetlands mitigation process. The Program identifies a set of conservation corridors in the SWA and establishes a methodology for enhancing the wetland site selection process to augment the corridor system when off-site mitigation is necessary.



### *North Landing River Water Use Management MOA:*

Agreement among local, state and federal agencies to enhance education on boating and ecological stewardship issues on the North Landing River - includes a Water Use Plan Map of voluntary "designated" use areas to minimize conflict between the diverse set of recreational and commercial users of the River - areas best suited for low impact recreation, general recreation and special use/high speed recreation. The plan also aids in protection of the valuable wetland ecosystem that surrounds the River by minimizing damage by watercraft.

### *Conservation Subdivision Under Development:*

A conservation subdivision, designed by Randall Arendt, is under construction in Chesapeake. Chesapeake is also in the process of reviewing its subdivision ordinance and is considering inclusion of a conservation subdivision section based on Mr. Arendt's recommendations. Other localities in the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission have expressed an interest in the work of Mr. Arendt.

### *Integration of SWAMP research into Comprehensive Plans:*

Both Chesapeake and Virginia Beach are in the process of updating their Comprehensive Plans and are including elements of the SWAMP research.

### *Green Sea Festival:*

An educational component of the SAMP, the Green Sea Festival celebrates the cultural and natural heritage of the southern watershed area. The site of the festival, which has been held annually since 1997, alternates year to year between the two cities.