

# Accomack-Northampton PDC

## Promoting Ecotourism to Support Conservation of Conserved Lands & Resilient Communities

Final Product Report

VCZMP FY21 Task 72, Grant # NA21NOS4190152

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## COASTAL VIRGINIA ECOTOURISM ALLIANCE (CVEA) STEERING COMMITTEE OUTCOMES & GOVERNOR'S ENVIRONMENTAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

This final report presents the progress and achievements of the Virginia Water Trails Steering Committee in implementing the ongoing marketing plan as well as maintaining the Virginia Water Trails assets. The Committee, consisting of several Coastal Planning District Commissions (A-NPDC, MPPDC, NNPDC, and PlanRVA), Virginia CZM Program, Virginia Oyster Trail, and Virginia Tourism Corporation, has been working collaboratively to enhance the Virginia Water Trails asset and promote its long-term management and sustainability. This strategy aims to emphasize community development, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health attributes, and cultural integration within the coastal communities. By focusing on ecological and economic potential, the project aims to improve the resiliency of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries through education and public outreach.

The Committee successfully organized and facilitated collaborative meetings with stakeholders, including the Planning District Commissions, CZM staff, and key partners. These meetings served as platforms for discussions, knowledge sharing, and decision-making to guide the implementation of the marketing strategy and action plan. The Committee worked diligently to continue implementation of the comprehensive marketing strategy for the Virginia Water Trails. The strategy encompasses various aspects, including branding, promotional campaigns, target audience identification, and outreach initiatives. By incorporating community development, environmental stewardship, and cultural integration, the strategy aims to create awareness and interest in the water trails among residents and tourists alike. As part of their efforts, the Committee drafted and submitted an application for the Virginia Governor's Environmental Excellence Award 2022 on behalf of the Virginia Water Trails. The award application highlighted the significant contributions of the water trails to ecological preservation, economic growth, and community resilience. This submission serves as a recognition of the Committee's dedication and achievements in promoting environmental excellence.

To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails, the Committee recommends the following actions:

- Continuously engage and involve local communities, organizations, and businesses in the development and management of the water trails;
- Strengthen partnerships with relevant state agencies, non-profit organizations, and tourism entities to leverage resources and support for the water trails;
- Regularly review and update the marketing strategy and action plan to adapt to changing market dynamics and emerging opportunities;
- Seek additional funding opportunities to enhance infrastructure, signage, and educational materials related to the water trails; and
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of marketing efforts and community engagement activities to inform future decision-making.

The Committee has made significant progress in developing and implementing a marketing strategy and action plan for the water trails. Through collaborative efforts, the Committee has effectively engaged stakeholders, promoted environmental stewardship, and showcased the economic and ecological potential of

the water trails. The Committee's Gold Medal for the Governor's Environmental Excellence Award further acknowledges their commitment to excellence. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, the Committee aims to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails asset.

Links:

[Governor's Environmental Excellence Award Application](#)

[Governor's Environmental Excellence Award](#)

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## IMPLEMENTATION OF CVEA 36-MONTH MARKETING MATRIX & VTC APPLICATION

This final report highlights the progress and achievements of the Committee and participating Planning District Commissions (PDCs) in utilizing the CVEA marketing matrix to draft an application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC). The application focuses on the continued implementation and development of the 36-month marketing matrix, with a specific focus on blog posts, social media engagement, and data analytics tracking. The administration of the marketing contract with [Scharle Outdoor Recreation](#) was undertaken by the Accomack-Northampton PDC.

The primary objective of this initiative is to leverage the CVEA marketing matrix to promote tourism and enhance the visibility of the CVEA region. The application to VTC aims to secure funding for the implementation and sustained development of the marketing strategy and action plan for securing the future of the Virginia Water Trails assets.

The Committee worked together to draft a comprehensive application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation's Marketing Leverage Program. The application highlights the importance of continued implementation and development of the 36-month marketing matrix, emphasizing the benefits of promoting tourism in the CVEA region. With this funding, the Committee was able to contract for web content, social media management, and public outreach. The Middle Peninsula PDC collaborated with Consociate Media to implement their portion of the Marketing Strategy and Action Plan. Through this collaboration, key marketing activities, such as branding, advertising campaigns, digital marketing, and content creation, were executed to enhance the region's tourism appeal. Lessons learned during the implementation process were identified and considered for building upon in future years.

Each participating PDC focused on sustaining the ongoing maintenance and updates of the Virginia Water Trails website, developing regionally-specific content, and public engagement and education of ecotourism. The PDCs recognized the importance of continuous efforts to strengthen the region's tourism industry. Throughout the project, the Committee and PDCs faced various challenges, such as resource constraints, coordination among stakeholders, and adapting to evolving market dynamics. These challenges provided valuable lessons, emphasizing the need for effective communication, strong partnerships, and flexibility to ensure the successful implementation and sustenance of the marketing strategy.

To further enhance the implementation of Virginia Water Trails marketing and to ensure long-term success, the Committee recommends the following:

- Strengthen collaboration with tourism entities and industry stakeholders to leverage resources, expertise, and marketing opportunities;

- Conduct regular analytic data reviews to measure the effectiveness of marketing efforts and identify areas for improvement;
- Foster ongoing communication and knowledge sharing among PDCs, tourism entities, and marketing partners to capitalize on lessons learned and emerging trends;
- Seek additional funding and/or partnership opportunities to support the sustained implementation of the Virginia Water Trails website and map assets; and
- Continuously monitor market trends and consumer preferences to tailor marketing campaigns and strategies accordingly.

The Committee has made significant progress in utilizing the CVEA marketing matrix to draft an application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation. The focus on sustained implementation and development of the marketing strategy reflects the commitment to promoting tourism and enhancing the visibility of the Virginia Water Trails in the coastal region. Lessons learned during the implementation phase provide valuable insights for future actions. By following the recommendations outlined in this report, the Committee aims to ensure the continued success and growth of the tourism industry in the rural coastal Virginia regions.

Links:

[Virginia Tourism Corporation Marketing Leverage Program Application](#)

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## WATER TRAILS WEBSITE MAINTENANCE

This final report outlines the progress and accomplishments related to the maintenance and content updates of the [www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com](http://www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com) website. The website serves as a platform to inspire new water-based recreation users, provide educational resources about the coastal region habitats, ecosystem services, tides, safety concerns, and experiential opportunities. The administration of the website maintenance contract with [Precision Legal Marketing](#) was undertaken by the Accomack-Northampton PDC.

The primary objectives of maintaining and updating the Virginia Water Trails website are as follows:

- Inspire and attract new water-based recreation users by showcasing the unique features and experiences offered by the coastal region;
- Educate visitors about the region's habitats, ecosystem services, tides, safety concerns, and other relevant information;
- Ensure consistency and alignment with the common goals and objectives of the Water Trail Website across different regions;
- Enhance the user experience by providing engaging and informative content, including text, images, video, and additional resources; and
- Optimize the website for search engines, connect it to analytics for monitoring and measurement, and integrate links to social media channels and an e-newsletter sign-up database.

As administrator, the A-NPDC coordinated with Precision Legal Marketing, ensuring regular updates and technical support for the [www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com](http://www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com) website. The maintenance company has worked closely with the A-NPDC as a liaison for each region to ensure that the updated content reflects the unique regional aspects while supporting the overall goals and objectives of the Water Trail Website.

The website has been regularly updated with additional content to provide a comprehensive and immersive experience for visitors. The content includes text, images, videos, and other multimedia elements that highlight the attractions, experiences, and natural resources offered by the Virginia water trails. Efforts have been made to ensure that the website remains responsive, user-friendly, and accessible across different devices. Foundational Search Engine Optimization (SEO) elements have been incorporated into the website to improve its visibility and ranking in search engine results. Analytics tools have been connected to monitor website traffic, user behavior, and other relevant metrics. These insights help in measuring the website's performance and inform future content and optimization strategies. The website includes links to various social media channels, allowing visitors to connect and engage with the Virginia Water Trails community. Additionally, an e-newsletter sign-up database has been implemented to facilitate regular communication and updates with interested users. The Planning District Commissions (PDCs) have continued monitoring and refining the trail assets presented on the website. Any necessary updates or improvements are made to the digital presentation and additional interpretive components to ensure accuracy, relevance, and consistency across all trail map assets.

During this project year, the Town of Urbanna approached MPPDC staff with an interest in developing a historical water trail that focuses on historical locations along the Urbanna Creek. Thus, with the water trail website established, this presented a platform for the historical water trail to be developed. To date the MPPDC staff has received a list of historical sites (i.e., site name and description of site history) and coordinates. MPPDC staff has developed a data layer of this information. MPPDC staff is currently waiting on the Town of Urbanna Council to approve the water trail to connect the historical locations. Once the water trail is approved, MPPDC staff will upload the data layers onto the Middle Peninsula Virginia Water Trail Map.

The maintenance and content updates of the [www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com](http://www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com) website have significantly contributed to inspiring new water-based recreation users and educating them about the coastal region's unique features and opportunities. The collaboration has ensured the website's consistency, regional relevance, and overall alignment with the goals and objectives of the Water Trail Website. By integrating additional content, optimizing for search engines, and connecting with analytics and social media, the website has improved its visibility and user engagement. Continued monitoring, refinement, and regular updates will ensure that the website remains a valuable resource for visitors interested in experiencing the Virginia water trails.

Links:

[VirginiaWaterTrails.org Homepage](http://VirginiaWaterTrails.org)

[Virginia Water Trails – Trail News](#)

[Virginia Water Trails Facebook](#)

[Virginia Water Trails Instagram](#)

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## VIRGINIA CERTIFIED ECOTOUR GUIDE COURSE

This final report outlines the outcomes and achievements of the 2022 Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course conducted by the Accomack-Northampton PDC. The report highlights the collaboration among the Steering Committee to advertise and deliver the training course and promote awareness. The Virginia CZM Program's support, along with input from various stakeholders, has contributed to the growth of the Ecotour Guide certification program and the establishment of ecotourism-focused businesses. The CVEA Steering Committee worked together to promote the course. PlanRVA staff promoted the Ecotour Guide Course via email and Facebook. Emails were sent announcing registration to PlanRVA partner agencies and locality staff to share with their networks. PlanRVA staff also posted to the [agency Facebook page](#) on 11/18/21 promoting the Virginia Ecotour Guide course and linking to the registration page.

The primary objective of the Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course is to train individuals as qualified guides who can provide high-quality and sustainable ecotourism experiences in coastal Virginia. By promoting awareness, fostering a connection with natural resources, and emphasizing the importance of environmental stewardship, the course aims to contribute to the long-term protection of coastal ecosystems.

The Virginia CZM Program, in collaboration with the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, has contributed to the development and funding of the Ecotour Guide certification courses since 1992. The curriculum focuses on equipping guides with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide informative and sustainable ecotourism experiences. From 2018 to 2022, the A-NPDC successfully facilitated the Ecotour Guide course annually, resulting in the certification of nearly 80 new Virginia Certified Ecotour Guides. This achievement has not only expanded the pool of qualified guides but has also inspired the establishment of new ecotourism-focused businesses in coastal Virginia.

Building on the draft plan developed in Year 1, the A-NPDC has enhanced the plan for the long-term sustainability of the Ecotour Guide Course. The plan aligns with the long-term planning efforts of the Virginia Water Trails (VWT) and the Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) to ensure its continued success and integration within the broader tourism framework. Ecotourism plays a crucial role in Virginia's economy, particularly in coastal regions. By connecting people to the natural resources and promoting environmental awareness, ecotourism aligns with the goals of the Virginia CZM Program to protect and preserve these valuable ecosystems. The continuity of the certification program distinguishes Virginia as a premier destination for ecotourism, offering quality guided experiences in sensitive coastal environments.

The 2022 Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course, facilitated by the A-NPDC in collaboration with educational institutions and key stakeholders, has contributed to the growth of ecotourism in coastal Virginia, certifying ten (10) new guides. The course has trained qualified guides who possess the knowledge and skills to provide sustainable and educational ecotourism experiences. By promoting awareness, fostering environmental stewardship, and aligning with long-term planning efforts, the certification program ensures the protection of coastal ecosystems while enhancing the state's reputation as an ecotourism destination.

Links:

[2022 Classroom](#)

[2022 Class Drive Folder](#)

[2022 Certified Guides](#)

[VWT Hire an Ecotour Guide](#)

[VWT Become an Ecotour Guide](#)

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## PUBLIC ACCESS SIGNAGE & RESILIENCY ASSESSMENTS

This final report provides an overview of the activities and achievements related to the installation of launch site signage and the expansion of the tiered priority list to include a resiliency assessment. The partnering Planning District Commissions (PDCs) have collaborated to improve visibility, accessibility, and resilience of the Virginia Water Trails. The consistent signage across regions and the assessment of access site vulnerabilities contribute to driving traffic to partner sites and supporting conservation and economic efforts.

In Year 2 (FY21) each PDC, in collaboration with localities and respective Public Works Departments, has developed a tiered priority list of launch sites requiring signage installation. The partnering PDCs have worked with a sign maker to fabricate signage for the three highest-ranked launch sites within their regions. The coordination with public entities and public access authorities has ensured the donation of signage to landowners of the public access/launch sites. All signs have been securely fixed to existing structures on public property. The installation of consistent signage across each region and the coastal zone as a whole has significantly improved the visibility of the Virginia Water Trails and other coastal recreational assets. This increased visibility has helped recreational users locate sites and quickly access resources via QR codes, supporting conservation efforts and economic development in the coastal region.

In Year 2, the partnering PDCs have expanded upon the tiered priority list developed in Year 1 to include a resiliency assessment. This assessment aims to identify the impacts of sea-level rise, flooding, wind, erosion, and other factors on access sites. It also seeks to determine potential improvements and mitigation measures to address the risks and vulnerabilities associated with these sites. The tiered priority list with the added resiliency assessment will serve multiple purposes in Year 3 and beyond. It will inform implementation and improvement grant proposals to various agencies such as the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, National Park Service, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, and Virginia Department of Transportation. Additionally, the PDCs plan to engage and collaborate with the Civilian Climate Corps, aligning with their mission to conserve and restore public lands and waters and address climate change impacts. The resiliency assessment will also be incorporated into existing PDC programs and plans, such as Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies, Transportation Plans, and Hazard Mitigation Plans, etc.

MPPDC staff worked with Consociate Media to design signs for 3 Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (PAA) water access locations within the Middle Peninsula including Belvins Creek Wildlife Recreational Area, Captain Sinclair Recreational Area (Main House Launch), and Captain Sinclair Recreational Area (Canal Launch). Once these signs were designed and fabricated, MPPDC staff hung the signs at each public access location. Finally, MPPDC staff completed resilience assessments for seven PAA properties along the Water Trails and began identifying funding opportunities to implement identified resilience needs.

MPPDC staff also worked with Consociate Media to develop a Recreational Needs Assessment for seven Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (MPCBPAA) properties. The assessment assesses short and long-term impacts of flooding and sea-level rise on MPCBPAA properties and inventories recreational assets and identifies potential resilience solutions. Resilience solutions range from elevating roads to shoreline management to removing or relocating structures. The installation of launch site signage and the

expansion of the tiered priority list with a resiliency assessment have significantly advanced the Virginia Water Trails initiative. The collaborative efforts have improved visibility, accessibility, and resilience of the coastal region. The consistent signage has boosted traffic to partner sites, supporting conservation and economic development. The resiliency assessment provides valuable insights for addressing climate impacts and planning future improvements. These efforts contribute to the long-term success of the initiative and the preservation of coastal ecosystems.

PlanRVA staff conducted resilience assessments of public access sites on the lower Chickahominy River. Each resilience assessment included two phases: (1) a GIS desktop analysis and (2) input from site managers. In the GIS desktop analysis, PlanRVA staff performed an overlay analysis of the following data on each access point: sea level rise, storm surge, wetlands, floodplains, and resource protection areas. PlanRVA staff developed key resilience conclusions about each access point by analyzing the geographic information. The map was posted online, and the conclusions were shared with access site managers for discussion and vetting. PlanRVA staff also asked for any resilience concerns not made evident in the mapping or for which GIS data might be lacking. Finally, PlanRVA staff worked with access site managers to compile a list of projects, plans, and studies of relevance. The results of these resilience assessments are summarized in the assessment report and can be used to guide future investments in public access in the watershed. During the resilience assessment process, PlanRVA staff also inquired with public access site managers about the need for additional or replacement signage. While there was interest in signage, no opportunities existed that would not also require ground disturbance in the installation process. Looking to the next grant year, access site managers hope to find an opportunity to take advantage of this signage offer.

Links:

[ESVA Public Access Assessment](#)

[ESVA PA Interpretive Signage](#)

[MPPDC Recreational Needs Assessment Potential Solutions](#)

[PlanRVA Public Access Launch Sites Assessment](#)

[NNPDC Public Access Inventory](#)

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## LOWER CHICKAHOMINY WATER TRAIL REFINEMENT & EXPANSION PLAN

This final report provides an overview of the activities and accomplishments related to the refinement and expansion of the VirginiaWaterTrails.org website during Year 2. PlanRVA has focused on improving the website's content, maps, and informational resources while incorporating feedback from stakeholders in the region. Additionally, the ecotourism infrastructure inventory gathered during FY19 of the Lower Chickahominy Watershed Project and the ongoing Ecotourism Infrastructure Plan have been utilized to expand the water trail and its associated assets.

During Year 2, PlanRVA has refined and improved the content on the VirginiaWaterTrails.org website. The informational content has been expanded and enhanced to provide comprehensive and accurate information about the water trails and their associated assets. PlanRVA staff has consulted with stakeholders to ensure that the content aligns with their needs and expectations. The website now serves as a valuable resource for



PlanRVA staff met with Virginia Oyster Trails staff to discuss the VOT Communities program. Opportunities for outreach about the program to both local governments in the lower Chickahominy watershed and Tribal Nations across Virginia's coastal zone were considered. Ultimately little action was taken with either group. Restrictions on growing oysters in the lower Chickahominy region make the VOT Communities program a less appealing option for economic development (see the VMRC mapper and turn on shellfish condemnation zones - [https://webapps.mrc.virginia.gov/public/maps/chesapeakebay\\_map.php](https://webapps.mrc.virginia.gov/public/maps/chesapeakebay_map.php)). For this reason and capacity concerns, it was decided to delay outreach to Coastal Tribal Nations.

The Virginia Oyster Trail Communities Program has made significant progress in its mission to promote the economic and cultural significance of Virginia oysters. Through the beta-testing phase in the Northern Neck communities and ongoing outreach to prospective communities, the program has demonstrated its potential for fostering community engagement, entrepreneurial growth, and environmental stewardship. With continued refinement and implementation, the program will further strengthen partnerships, amplify the Virginia Oyster Trail brand, and contribute to sustainable economic development across coastal Virginia communities.

The VOT met individually via phone/Zoom conference with representatives from each of the four program regions of the CZM collaborative to discuss potential communities that may be responsive to implementing the Virginia Oyster Trail Communities program

In addition to referencing the program overview and implementation documents as previously submitted to the CZM collaboration, VOT presented 7 overarching criteria for successful development of the program based on lessons learned.

1. Small town or unincorporated community footprint
2. Oyster relevancy with at least one business becoming a VOT member prior or as a result of the implantation of the Communities program
3. Preference that the town/community has not already participated in major revitalization programming. Consideration however is possible if said revitalization completion did not cover areas covered by the Communities program.
4. The community must have one enthusiastic member to serve as the lead representative on the Communities program steering team and engage others to become involved.
5. Understand the steering team meeting commitment minimum expectation of meeting once a month (possibly twice if needed) throughout the implementation year, either in person or virtually.
6. Understand there will be tasks to be completed between meetings
7. Understand the funding expectation with regard to fundraising/seeking sources to fulfil the objectives that the community determines as their priority.

**Potential implementation communities discussed with each region:**

- **Eastern Shore (9/17/21 met early due to Jessica Steelman maternity leave) :** Cape Charles, Onancock, Wachapreague, Saxis. It was determined that Saxis met the criteria.

- **Lower Chickahominy (2/4/22):** Wilcox Neck, however great discussion ensued around developing a tribal approach due to the lack of defined townships in contrast to the cultural center activities and the 2 sister Chickahominy tribes and 1 Pamunkey tribe that reside in the region.
- **Middle Peninsula (2/9/22):** Mathews Courthouse, Tappahannock, Urbanna, West Point, Deltaville. Interest in reaching out to the Pamunkey Tribe and Chickahominy Tribes
- **Northern Neck (2/22/22):** Lewisetta, Morattico, Colonial Beach, White Stone, Callao, Irvington. Tribe discussion around fact that oysters were a mainstay of the people's diet; "Perhaps tribal entities should be able to have the first pick IF they want to participate."

Links:

[VOT Communities Program Early Outreach](#)

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## NATURE PRESERVE INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE

The A-NPDC Staff collaborated with several local partners to design and fabricate interpretive signage for two nature preserves in Northampton County, VA in an effort to support local outdoor recreation and visitor education of the Shore's precious resources. Working with The Nature Conservancy, signs for Horsehead Island Trail in Oyster, VA were designed and fabricated, featuring oyster, eelgrass, and bay scallop restoration and the treasured migratory birds. In partnering with Northampton County and the Master Gardeners, interpretive trailhead signs and trail markers were designed and fabricated for the Edward S. Brinkley Nature Preserve in Cape Charles, VA. The installed interpretive signage along the trails and at the platforms each include graphics of the various flora and fauna visitors may see along their way. Below each graphic is the scientific and common name for each specie, with a few fun facts for all ages. Each sign also features a *Leave No Trace* principle along with graphic of the preserve map highlighting in color the trail visitor is on currently for quick location-reference. The trail markers are color coded and include written trail names for increased accessibility. Each trail marker also includes the direction for **P**arking with a distance to the entrance parking in case of an emergency. Made from aluminum & vinyl, these trail markers are sustainable, resilient, and yet easy to update with any potential future preserve changes!

Links:

[Horsehead Island Signs](#)

[Edward S. Brinkley Nature Preserve Signs](#)

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## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA) Steering Committee has made significant progress in implementing various initiatives to promote and enhance the Virginia Water Trails. The collaborative efforts of the Committee have resulted in the development and implementation of a comprehensive marketing strategy, the maintenance and updates of the Virginia Water Trails website, the establishment of the Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course, and the installation of launch site signage.

Through stakeholder engagement, collaborative meetings, and promotional campaigns, the Committee has successfully raised awareness and interest in the water trails among residents and tourists. These efforts have highlighted the ecological and economic potential of the trails, emphasizing community development, environmental stewardship, and cultural integration within the coastal communities.

The submission of an application for the Virginia Governor's Environmental Excellence Award further recognizes the Committee's dedication and achievements in promoting environmental excellence. The Committee's commitment to excellence is reflected in ongoing efforts to engage local communities, strengthen partnerships, regularly review and update the marketing strategy, seek additional funding opportunities, and monitor the impact of their initiatives. By implementing the recommendations outlined in the final report, the Committee aims to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the Virginia Water Trails asset. Continued collaboration, communication, and adaptation to changing market dynamics will be essential in maintaining the momentum and growth of the tourism industry in the rural coastal Virginia regions.

Overall, the achievements of the CVEA Steering Committee demonstrates a high level of commitment to promoting ecotourism, preserving coastal ecosystems, and contributing to the economic development and resilience of the Chesapeake Bay rural coastal region. The outcomes of their initiatives provide a strong foundation for the continued growth and success of the Virginia Water Trails.