**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.”

Ecotourism Steering Committee Meeting

June 6, 2019

Conference Call 10:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.

Dial-in number (US): (515) 604-9862

Access code: 363564#

Online meeting ID: salexander67

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MINUTES

1. Introductions and welcome new VCZMP Coastal Planner Jeff Flood, replacing Beth Polak. Those present included: Laura McKay and Jeff Flood, VCZMP; Shannon Alexander and Curt Smith, A-NPDC, John Bateman & Lisa Hull, NNPDC; Jackie Rickards, MPPDC; Stephanie Heinatz, Consociate Media; Sherri Smith, Virginia Oyster Trail. Staci Martin, VTC, and Lewie Lawrence, MPPDC were unable to attend.
2. Regional Progress Updates:
   1. A-NPDC, Shannon Alexander presented an updated about the ES Water Trail Working Group, needed website updates and schedule of Bayside Water Trail (met 3/8, next 8/7, then 10/TBD) meetings. Brief presentation with survey results, quotes, VDCR and Virginia Green partnerships, and recertification process discussion for the Ecotour Course. Shannon is to send quotes to Stephanie and reach out to Alex Wilke from TNC for a quote as well. Shannon is to reach out to Virginia Whitmere to confirm necessary updates to the DEQ website. Shannon is to revisit the ‘resources’ associated with the updated seaside water trail to ensure information from the DEQ website is included. Shannon is to finalize the recertification guidance and consult with DCR, DGIF, TNC, and CZM to review and approve (primarily partners of the renamed STP, the Virginia Eastern Shore Conservation Alliance).
   2. MPPDC, Jackie Rickards presented about progress with the Middle Peninsula Project Management Team in connecting existing water trails and plans into the MP plan/map. Jackie met with the Mattaponi & Pamunkey River Association in March and added link to their website to the Virginia Water Trails site. She has been in communication with both Gloucester and Mathews Counties. The NNPDC has been in communications with Bryan Hoffman of the Friends of the Rappahannock, and Jackie will reach out with an updated timeline for incorporating new trails that the Friends are developing into the Virginia Water Trails site.

No update on the Marketing and Eco Business Inventory and Gap Analysis

* 1. NNPDC, Lisa Hull and John Bateman provided an update on progress on the Northern Neck in working with stakeholders and the Virginia Oyster Trail Digital Engagement Working Group.

1. Sherri Smith provided an update as to the status of the Virginia Oyster Trail as a unique 501(c)3 and what that means moving forward. Refinements of the digital engagement tool were put on hold until the nonprofit designation is finalized, but goals for the SOW is still attainable during year-2. Shannon is to set up a meeting for the Tech Subcommittee, including Sherri, Nick, Stephanie, Mark, and herself before the end of June in order to ensure the updates are as compatible and effective as possible.
2. Timeline Discussion (20)
   1. Press Release and Hard Roll Out for Oyster Trail Tool & Water Trail Website
      1. Update with news about Press Pass unavailability

*POC with VTC for press contacts/set up?*

* 1. Long-Term Sustainability Discussion (10 min)

1. Website Presentation – Stephanie Heinatz, of Consociate Media provided an update on MP marketing successes and analytics for the Water Trails website and MP Facebook page. In the fall she will have more information about acquisition, how users are finding the website, what key words people are using to find the website, etc.
   1. Stephanie also recommended some items to go ahead and consider prior to development of the 3-year strategic plan, including a video/photo shoot to develop a robust media gallery and inventorying events to perhaps develop a Water Trails events calendar.
   2. Discussion about long-term maintenance and management costs ensued. The team is supportive of cautiously expanding to include other rural coastal Virginia areas following the conclusion of the current 3-year efforts. Further discussions about the lower Chickahominy and potentially others (southern VAB, North River, etc.) will be warranted as new focal area ideas are developed for CZM. There was also discussion about the option of having ‘sponsors’ for the website to provide assistance in the ongoing costs of maintaining and improving the website. A quote is going to be needed in order to assess sponsorship levels. Stephanie also indicated that having more refined analytics to be able to show potential sponsors exposure for their organization/business will be important, emphasizing the importance of improving the numbers on the website and social media as vital here.
2. Timeline Discussion
   1. With the news that VTC is not currently offering their Press Pass program, alternatives were discussed. In order to still have the Water Trail site and Oyster Trail assets with a hard roll out in the spring of 2020, journalists/influencers will need to visit the regions in late summer/early fall of 2019. Each region is to work with their respective Tourism Commissions in order to develop a 1-night, 2-day experience including accommodation, dining, and water & oyster-related experiences. These need to be complete by June 27th in order to have package to present to targeted journalists/influencers. It will be encouraged to visit all 3-regions in one full-week experience, but this cannot be a requirement. Adventure travel writers are on the rise and very popular currently, perhaps include some additional activity (hang gliding was mentioned on the Shore).
3. Next steps and next meeting, Shannon is to send out a Doodle Poll for late-August/early-September for the next quarterly meeting.