

# Virginia's Open Space & Public Lands

In 1607, when the first European settlers landed on the coast of what would become the Commonwealth of Virginia, the natural resources they encountered appeared to be inexhaustible. The rivers, lakes and bays were clean and pure, the virgin forests seemed limitless, the fish and wildlife were abundant and the air was clean.

It was almost 300 years before we realized that the natural treasures that made the New World so appealing were not limitless and had been carelessly used. Human, animal and industrial wastes were dumped directly into rivers and streams; marshes and swamps were drained; expedient farming methods led to widespread soil erosion; and unbridled, commercial hunting and fishing led to the extinction, or near extinction, of many of our native fish and wildlife species.

## Seeds of Change

By the mid-1800s, Americans were beginning to recognize the importance of wise and balanced use, or "conservation," of the natural resources that the country depended upon for its very existence. We were also realizing the need to protect for future generations at least a portion of the open spaces, unique landscapes and natural wonders that originally defined this land and made it a wonderful place to live. During the late 1800s, two social movements developed which set the stage for the government to act upon this new consciousness.

The conservation movement was based on the premise that wise and balanced use of natural resources was necessary to ensure continued use and enjoyment by future generations.

## National Park Movement

The federal government played a leading role in the movement by helping to conserve large, open spaces and unique landscapes, beginning with the designation of Yosemite Valley as the nation's first national park in 1864. The subsequent creation of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905 and the National Park Service in 1916 were the two most notable accomplishments of the early conservation era.

Over the years, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service have greatly influenced resource conservation and the provision of outdoor recreation opportunities in Virginia.

### **Urban Park Movement**

The urban park movement was 19th century America's response to increasing industrialization and the rapid expansion of urban populations. Landscape architects, typified by Frederick Law Olmsted, created a new legacy of public green spaces among the bricks and grime of the nation's crowded cities. Beginning with Olmsted's design for Central Park in New York City, the urban park movement spread rapidly across the country. By the early 1900s, most major cities had developed large public parks and local governments took responsibility for establishing public open space.

### **Wilderness Act**

In 1964, the Wilderness Act established Congressionally-designated wilderness areas that provide the highest level of conservation protection for federal lands. Designated wilderness areas don't allow motorized equipment or vehicles, temporary roads, or permanent structures or installations. Only congress may designate wilderness or change the status of a wilderness area. There are 24 designated Wilderness areas in Virginia within the Shenandoah National Park and George Washington and Jefferson National Forests totaling 214,904 acres. Designated wilderness areas provide challenging recreational opportunities which allow people to experience solitude, adventure and self-reliance. Wilderness areas also provide critical habitat for wildlife and plants, including endangered and threatened species and protection of open space, watersheds, natural soundscapes, diverse ecosystems and biodiversity.

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In addition to establishing the federal government's role in natural resource conservation and protection, these actions stimulated states to take similar actions to develop park and conservation programs.

### **Virginia's Response**

At the state level, public interest in parks and conservation was formally recognized by three actions:

1. creation of the [Department of Game and Inland Fisheries](#) in 1916;
2. establishment of a state forest system in 1919 (administered now by the [Virginia Department of Forestry](#)); and
3. Formation of the State Commission of Conservation and Development in 1926 (known today as the [Department of Conservation and Recreation](#)).

These three agencies continue to act as Virginia's primary conservation advocates.

In 1970, Virginians formalized the protection of natural and cultural resources by adopting Article XI of the Constitution of Virginia. Article XI is a strong statement of public commitment to protect air, water and other natural resources of the Commonwealth for the benefit of the people. The objective is to ensure that all Virginians have the opportunity to live in, use and enjoy a natural environment that can be passed on to future generations with satisfaction and pride.

#### Constitution of Virginia, Article XI, Section I

*"To the end that the people have clean air, pure water and the use and enjoyment for recreation of adequate public land, waters and other natural resources, it shall be the policy of the Commonwealth to conserve, develop and utilize its natural resources, its public land and its historical sites and buildings. Further, it shall be the Commonwealth's policy to protect its atmosphere, lands and waters from pollution, impairment, or destruction for the benefit, enjoyment and general welfare of the people of the Commonwealth."*

### **Current Status of Public Lands and Open Space**

Although the vast majority of land in Virginia is privately owned, that portion in public ownership-in the form of parks and open space-plays an important role in our lives. Through the combined efforts of local, state and federal governments over the past 80 years, Virginia has developed diverse and extensive lands and open space. This public lands and open spaces consists of national parks, national forests, state parks and natural areas, state forests, wildlife management areas, public fishing lakes, greenways, scenic rivers, scenic byways, public beaches and historic sites. The availability of these resources and facilities adds immeasurably to our quality of life.

### **What Constitutes the Public Lands and Open Space in Virginia?**

The **National Park Service** administers 18 sites in Virginia totaling almost 300,000 acres. Although most of the sites are historic, much of the acreage lies within Shenandoah National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway and Assateague Island National Seashore. All of these lands are managed for outdoor recreation and ecosystem protection.

The **U.S. Forest Service** administers the George Washington and Jefferson National forests, which cover more than 1.7 million acres of public land. The properties are managed for a variety of uses, including timber production, recreation and protection of wilderness and species diversity. Forest Service lands constitute half of the public outdoor recreation property in the state.

The **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** manages 15 wildlife refuges and a fish hatchery here, comprising more than 150,000 acres. The refuges are managed primarily to provide fish and wildlife habitat and to protect unique ecosystems. However, they also provide meaningful outdoor recreation opportunities for hiking, wildlife observation, environmental education and other "non-consumptive" recreation activities.

The **Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation** manages a system of 36 state parks and 62 natural area preserves. In addition to protecting significant natural and cultural resources, state parks offer a variety of outdoor recreation and environmental education opportunities. The Natural Areas Preserve System is managed to protect the habitat of rare, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species and rare or significant natural communities or geologic sites.

The **Virginia Department of Forestry** manages 24 state forests. These lands are managed for multiple uses, including timber production, watershed protection, outdoor recreation, applied research and fish and wildlife management.

The **Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries** is responsible for managing all of the state's wildlife and inland fisheries resources, including those threatened and endangered. The Department also acquires and develops lands and waters for public hunting, fishing, wildlife watching and boating access. The department manages a statewide system of 41 wildlife management areas. The department also provides technical help in managing fish and game resources on state, federal and privately owned land.

Over 70% of all counties and virtually all of the cities in Virginia have full-time park and recreation departments. Local facilities offer access to community open spaces and, through seasonal programs, satisfy the demand for close-to-home recreation.

### **The Future of Virginia's Open Spaces**

Despite the size and quality of Virginia's public estate, there are a number of trends which indicate that the future holds both challenges and opportunities with regard to open space and recreational resources. Virginia remains among the fastest growing states in the nation. In 2014 the population of Virginia was estimated to be 8.326 million people. More people bring increased demands for outdoor recreation and associated facilities and services.

While there are many positive aspects of growth, the natural resources and unique features that give Virginia communities their character can be altered or destroyed by that growth without careful planning. Resources such as

water, forests and open spaces play a vital role in the earth's natural systems, biological diversity and overall environmental health. And these same resources bring us pleasure and enhance our living environments while adding to the economic value of our communities. The challenge has been and continues to be, to provide for outdoor public uses and ecosystem protection while allowing for economic growth and development.

In the long run, this can only be accomplished through development of a stewardship "ethic" among Virginia's citizenry. A stewardship ethic rooted in respect for all natural systems will motivate people to ensure the well-being of the state's natural resource base. Successful stewardship will ultimately be measured by our ability to find and maintain balance between economic prosperity and vital, healthy natural resources.

### **Additional Resources**

#### *Web Sites:*

- [Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation](#), for information on natural heritage, state parks and Virginia's long-range outdoor recreation and open space plan
- [Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries](#)
- [Virginia Native Plant Society](#)
- [The Nature Conservancy](#)
- [U.S. National Park Service, National Park Service areas in Virginia](#)
- [U.S. Forest Service, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Virginia offices and refuges](#)
- [Wilderness.net](#)  
Information on wilderness and wilderness areas.

### **Fundamental Learnings Related to Open Spaces and Public Lands**

- Land is the structure for terrestrial habitats around which soil, water, air and living things interact.
- Land is both a public and private commodity and is fixed in supply (i.e. there exists a finite amount).
- The rate and extent of changes to the landscape are governed by both natural and human influences.
- The effects of land use tend to be cumulative and misuse from residential and commercial development, deforestation, overgrazing, over cropping, etc. can cause erosion, reduced ground water supply, flooding and other problems.
- Conservation of land can help prevent environmental problems such as species loss and decline in water quality.