

**Board of Conservation and Recreation
Friday, January 5, 2024
Pocahontas State Park, Chesterfield, Virginia**

TIME AND PLACE

The meeting of the Board of Conservation and Recreation took place at 10:00 a.m. on Friday, January 5, 2024, at Pocahontas State Park in Chesterfield, Virginia.

BOARD OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION MEMBERS PRESENT

Danielle Heisler, Chair	Colonel Eric A. Hoggard
Esther M. Nizer, Vice Chair	Hunter H. Ihrman
Susan Allen	John W. Inge, IV
Chief Walk "Red Hawk" Brown	Camila Simon
The Honorable James Cheng	Ross Stewart

BOARD OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION MEMBERS NOT PRESENT

The Honorable Kyle Kilgore	Kat Maybury
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DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION STAFF PRESENT

Matthew S. Wells, Director
Andrew Smith, Chief Deputy Director
Laura Ellis, Deputy Director for Administration and Finance
Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations
Michael Fletcher, Board and Constituent Services Liaison

Dr. Melissa Baker, State Parks Director
Derrick Bolen, Special Assistant for Policy
David Bryan, State Parks Planner

Jason Bulluck, Natural Heritage Director
Nathan Clark, Manager, Pocahontas State Park
Whitten Cluff, Executive Assistant for Operations
David Collett, Western Field Operations Director
Veronica Flick, Chief of Business Administration, State Parks
Paula Lam, Budget Manager
David Neudeck, Public Communications and Marketing Director
Sharon Partee, Director of Finance
Timothy Shrader, Eastern Field Operations Director
Katie Shepard, Chief of Education and Interpretation, State Parks
Rebecca Whalen, Chief Park Ranger, Visitor Experiences, Pocahontas State Park
Bryce Wilk, District IV Manager, State Parks
Emi Endo, Senior Public Relations and Marketing Specialist

ESTABLISHMENT OF A QUORUM

With ten (10) members of the Board present, a quorum was established.

WELCOME AND CALL TO ORDER

Chairwoman Heisler called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. and called for introductions.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM NOVEMBER 16, 2023

Ms. Allen moved that the minutes from the November 16, 2023, meeting of the Board of Conservation and Recreation be approved as submitted. Mr. Ihrman seconded, and the motion carried.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Director Wells gave the DCR report. He welcomed members to Pocahontas and noted that staff was looking forward to discussing the agency's education mission.

Director Wells noted the following:

- A total of \$14.7 million in Virginia Land Conservation Foundation grants was awarded to help protect a record 46,000 acres. The 29 projects receiving funds include land acquisitions for new public outdoor recreation areas, and conservation easements to protect active forests and farmlands.
- DCR completed 21 land acquisitions in 2023, protecting more than 3,300 acres. Projects include 994 acres for a future state park in Highland County, the doubling of Chestnut Ridge Natural Area Preserve in Giles and Bland counties, and several projects at Clinch River State Park in Southwest Virginia.
- DCR worked with the Department of Environmental Quality to ensure that the new stormwater guidelines include information regarding caves and karst.
- DCR State Parks opened the Inn at Foster Falls, the agency's first hotel.
- Governor Youngkin dedicated DCR's 42nd State Park, Sweet Run State Park, in Loudoun County.
- Several improvements were made at Widewater State Park, including a new motorized boat ramp and a paddle launch. Additionally, the following improvements were made:
 - Bear Creek Lake campground, Chestnut campground bathhouse
 - 25 historic cabins at Douthat and Fairy Stone State Parks (recognized by Preservation Virginia with an Outstanding Preservation Award)
 - Claytor Lake bathhouse
 - 2 bathhouses at First Landing State Park campgrounds
- Virginia's natural area preserves saw significant visitation with 160,00 visitors in the first three quarters.
- DCR's new Office of Environmental Education is addressing the Chesapeake Bay and helping to develop an environmental education plan for K-12 students.
- DCR introduced an improved Virginia Native Plant Finder on the DCR website. This free online tool includes 1,600 plants native to the state for use in projects of any scale, from backyard gardens, pollinator-friendly solar sites.
- Virginia received its first national Outdoor Recreation Legacy Program grant. The National Park Service award is for the City of Norfolk for a new park called St. Paul's Blue Greenway.

Director Wells noted that the legislative session would begin the following week. There are several new members. Agency legislation includes a bill to exempt park resale from the Virginia Public Procurement Act which limits the ability to purchase products for resale. Several similar retail operations (including museums) have this exemption.

REVIEW OF BOARD MEETING CALENDAR

2024

- April 17-19, 2024, First Landing State Park, Virginia Beach
- October 2-4, 2024, Douthat State Park, Clifton Forge

2025

- January 3, 2025 – Pocahontas State Park, Chesterfield
- April 23-25, 2025 (tentative) – Claytor Lake State Park, Dublin
- October 1-3, 2025 (tentative) – Twin Lakes State Park, Green Bay

Colonel Hoggard commented the staff and construction crew for the reconstruction work on the cabins at Fairy Stone State Park.

FINANCIAL REPORT

Ms. Partee gave the financial update.

General Fund Appropriation & Expenditures

FY 2024 Total Legislative Appropriation: \$556,564,758

Appropriation Transfers & Adjustments	
Water Quality Improvement Fund Transfers	(341,071,399)
SWCD Dam Repair	(500,000)
Dam Safety/Flood Prevention & Protection	(732,147)
Land Conservation Fund Transfers	(16,000,000)
Resilient Virginia Revolving Loan Fund	(100,000,000)
SWCD Owned Dams Major Repairs	(25,000,000)
Central Appropriation Adjustments*	4,147,275
Discretionary Reappropriated Amounts	23,716,413
	(455,439,858)

FY 2024 Total GF Appropriation Available for Operations: \$101,124,900

* Adjustments for estimated central appropriations service items anticipated to receive in FY24.



General Fund Appropriation & Expenditures

Division	Division Target	YTD Actual (As of November 30, 2023)	Target vs. Actual %
Soil & Water Conservation	\$21,132,083	\$5,481,118	25.9%
Dam Safety	\$2,130,735	\$729,740	34.2%
Natural Heritage	\$4,995,256	\$1,984,474	39.7%
Land Conservation	\$4,104,277	\$1,184,180	28.9%
State Parks (Ind Breaks)	\$33,487,254	\$28,693,908	85.7%
PRR (Ind Design & Construction)	\$23,630,640	\$770,901	3.3%
Director's Office - Admin- Finance	\$11,644,655	\$5,499,372	47.2%
Grand Total	\$101,124,900	\$44,343,693	43.9%



State Parks Operating Revenues July 1, 2023 - November 30, 2023

	FY24 Estimate	YTD Actual (Through November 30, 2023)	Prior Year YTD Actual (Through November 30, 2022)
Grand Total	\$ 31,602,730	\$ 18,144,939	\$ 16,817,955



Ms. Partee noted that the numbers reflected that the agency was in a good position at this point in the fiscal year.

REVIEW OF GOVERNOR YOUNGKIN'S PROPOSED BUDGET

Director Wells gave an overview of the Governor's proposed 2024-2026 budget. He noted that the proposed budget funds key agency initiatives including:

- Staffing and startup funding for Hayfields State Park in Highland County
- Staffing and startup funding for Culpeper Battlefields State Park in Culpeper County
- Additional staffing to support Clinch River State Park
- Additional Public Safety and Law Enforcement Personnel
- Capital funding support for land acquisition
- Funding to acquire fire vehicles and equipment to support emergency response and prescribed fire programs

Director Wells noted that the agency has strong support from the Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources as well as the Governor's Office. He noted that this proposal was not final but would be addressed by the General Assembly.

Director Wells noted that DCR has the opportunity to obtain the historic Oak Hill property, which is 1,200 acres in Loudoun County, just south of Leesburg. The property once belonged to James Monroe.

It includes a fully intact historic presidential home and adjacent protected landscape, associated barn and office facilities, and additional older historic home.

EMBRACING OUR EDUCATIONAL MISSION

Mr. Stovall noted that at the November meeting at Fairy Stone State Park, Dr. Baker spoke regarding the future of education in state parks. When language was added to the Code of Virginia in the 1920s to develop the state park system, one of the key components was education. He commented that education has often felt the impact of budget reduction.

DCR has challenged divisions to look at that mission and to envision what the parks system will look like when it reaches the 100th anniversary in 2036, and what the Natural Area Preserve system will look like at 50 years.

Mr. Stovall called on staff members to give an overview of the agency's education efforts.

Taking the Pulse of our Program

Katie Shepard, Chief of Education and Interpretation, Division of State Parks.

Ms. Shepard commented that interpretation was one of the most important tools in the parks' toolbox. She reviewed the staff positions tasked with education.

Office of Education and Interpretation

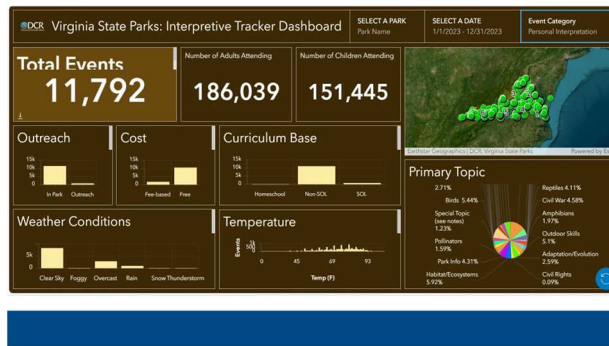
- Chief of Education and Interpretation
- Visitor Experience Director
- Visitor Experience Specialist – East (full-time)
- Visitor Experience Specialist – West (wage)

Park Field Staff

- 23 Parks – Chief Ranger of Visitor Experience
- Interpretive Program Managers
- 1500-Hour Wage Interpreters
- Seasonal Interpreters/Education Support Specialists
- Volunteers

Ms. Shepard noted that preliminary 2023 numbers show state parks tracking above 2022 numbers.

The interpretive tracker dashboard allows the agency to track where the programs take place, and how many guests participate.



There are three broad categories of interpretation.

Active Interpretation
Ranger Led Programs
Field Trips, Outreach
Adventure Programs
First Person Interpretation



Passive Interpretation
Self-guided Programs
Museum/ Visitor Centers
Junior Ranger Booklets
Track Trails



Non-Interpretive
Outreach Events
Special Events
Festivals
Community Engagement



Ms. Shepard noted that the tracker was put in place in 2023. The goal is to look for opportunities for growth.

Ms. Nizer asked if the numbers could be tracked in parks without a visitor's center.

Ms. Shepard noted that by looking at the information, staff can see which parks are actively reporting but not a list of those that aren't.

Colonel Hoggard asked if the development of visitor's centers was part of the capital request.

Director Wells noted that there were a number of requests for capital development including development at Clinch River and Pocahontas State Parks, but that there were things that did not get funding.

Chief Brown noted that a 1988 map included in the Virginia atlas showed where all Native American tribes were in the 1600s. He noted that all state parks have a Native American history and commented that this needs to be documented with each park.

Educational Planning

David Bryan, State Parks Planner

Mr. Bryan gave an overview of the Visitor Experience Plan. He noted that this was an important part of the Master Planning process.



A Critical Part of Master Planning a Park

The Link from Where We Are to Where We're Going

Overview of Process



VE Section Development is Jointly Led by the VE Team and State Parks Planner in cooperation with the Parks Staff during the Master Planning Process, usually via formal Workshop(s).



Mr. Bryan noted that the Visitor Experience planning starts with the question “What makes this park special? He advised that a lot of the park purpose statements in master plans were generic and did not address each park individually. He commented that State Parks is moving away from generic, broad-brush statements to meaningful, specific statements and themes based on the park resources, culture, and context.

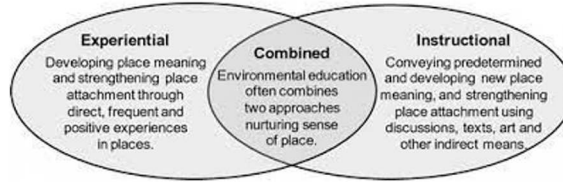
Designing for Education

Dr. Melissa Baker, Director, Virginia State Parks

Dr. Baker commented that it was a very exciting time to be a par of the Board, DCR, and Virginia State Parks. She noted that state parks are moving toward the centennial and that all park employees are aware of that. She advised that DCR and parks staff are setting the foundations for the next century.

Dr. Baker reviewed visitors’ centers in state parks.

Why are Visitor Centers Important?



Kudryavtsev, A and Others, 2012 

Dr. Baker noted that, by necessity, park staff are frugal. She advised that one of the challenges from the current administration was to consider what it looks like to be best in class.

Interpretation – Education at the Park Level

Rebecca Whalen, Chief Park Ranger-Visitor Experience, Pocahontas State Park

Ms. Whalen advised that with each park, the beginning point is with the park's purpose and mission. She gave this example from Pocahontas State Park.

The purpose of Pocahontas State Park is to provide active and passive recreational opportunities to park visitors, while protecting and ensuring continued health of the natural, cultural, and historic resources present in the rapidly growing and changing Richmond metropolitan area.



Park statements are unique to each park and address the features and culture of the area. The interpretive programs are developed from that starting point.

Natural Heritage and Education

Jason Bulluck, Natural Heritage Director

Mr. Bulluck gave an overview of education efforts in the Natural Heritage division, with a focus on Research & Collections permits.

Interpretive Visits to on Natural Area Preserves

- Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer events
- Elementary and Middle School groups
- University field trips of Restoration Ecology and Forest Ecology classes from Va Tech and VCU
- Sierra Club, Native Plant Society and Friends of the Cedars field trips

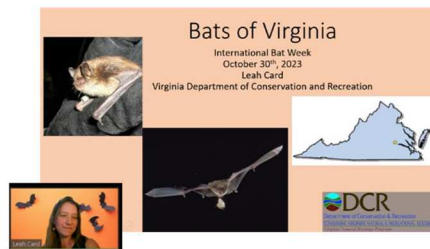


Natural Heritage Ecologist leading CBLP certification candidates at Powhatan State Park.



Classrooms, Conferences, & Workshops

- Dozens of presentations annually
- Elementary classrooms, to university lectures, to conferences and workshops



Research & Collection Permits (RCP)

- NAPs are managed for the primary objective of protecting and enhancing natural heritage resources.
- Scientific monitoring & research guide management decisions and are an appropriate public use.
 - DNH is not obligated to permit research that:
 - Does not contribute to improved understanding or resource management
 - May harm rare species or habitats
- Every RCP proposal is reviewed by DNH to determine compatibility, scientific merit, and management impact, per VAC5 -30-50 requirements



RCP Definition

- Written permission provided to authorize applicant to conduct specific research activities on natural area preserve(s)
- Must be conducted in accordance with standard conditions, collection guidelines, and any additional stipulations deemed appropriate
- Proposals reviewed by, and stipulations developed by the natural areas science coordinator & review team at DNH.

Appalachian gentians at Buffalo Mountain NAP are a focal species in a regional climate change study led by the Native Plant Trust and Oak Spring Garden Foundation. Photo credit: R. Klorf



RCP Review & Approval Process

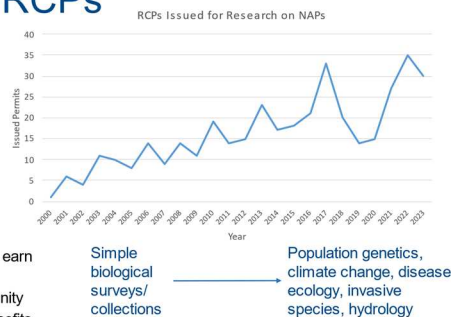
(30 Days)

- Permit application submitted and received via online portal
- Review team organized & led by natural areas research coordinator
 - Regional Supervisor, Chief of Natural Areas Stewardship, Chief Biologist and others as needed
- Review team may:
 - Approve permit with stipulations
 - Request additional information from applicant
 - Recommend modifications to the application
 - Deny permit
- Research coordinator and/ or regional supervisor coordinate access
- Research coordinator maintains communication with researchers and ensures deliverables (e.g., research reports, publications) are shared



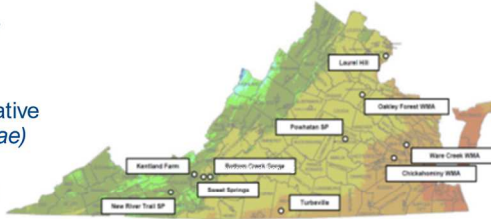
History & Impacts of RCPs

- 389 permits issued to date:
 - University students and faculty
 - 16 Virginia and 22 out-of-state
 - Private conservation organizations
 - State & federal agencies
 - Museums & Botanical Gardens
- Key Outcomes
 - Improved ecological understanding
 - Long-term monitoring
 - Unique field sites utilized by many students to earn advanced degrees
 - Robust network of DNH and scientific community
 - Reciprocal relationship and emergent benefits
 - New research ideas (e.g., Small whorled pogonia project, Bog turtle restoration proposal)
 - Enhanced reputation of agency in scientific communities



Highlighted Project: Biocontrol of *Ailanthus altissima*

- Virginia Tech study of a new invasive species treatment
- Inoculation of *A. altissima* with native wilt fungus (*Verticillium nonalfalfae*)
- Field sites include Sweet Springs Natural Area Preserve (SSNAP)
- *A. altissima* management is a top priority within SSNAP's montane dry calcareous woodland habitats supporting:
 - Smooth coneflower (S2/G2)
 - Addison's leatherflower (S1/G1)
 - Cooper's milkvetch (S2/G4)



Highlighted Project: Red knot monitoring

- Virginia Tech monitoring of Red Knots on Virginia's barrier islands since 2007
- Red knots (S2/T2, state and fed listed)
 - Monitoring critical to future of species
 - Field sites include Wreck Island NAP
 - Research has involved graduate & undergraduate students

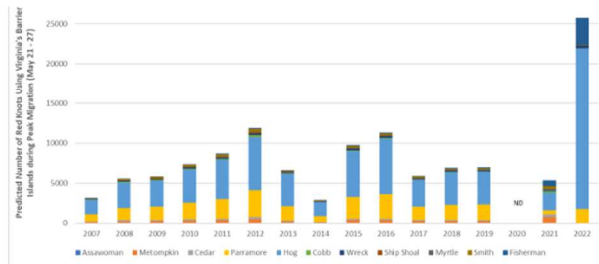


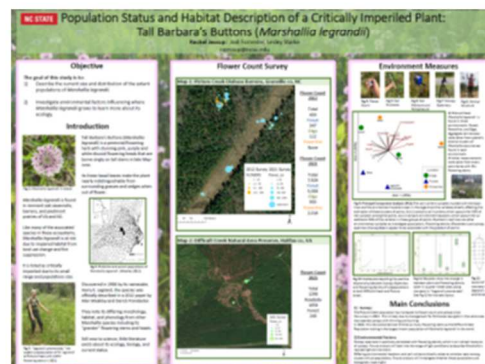
Photo credit: Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Photo credit: Kristy Lapenta

Highlighted Project: Ecology of *Marshallia legrandii* (Jessup 2020)

- Master's student research, habitat of *M. legrandii* (S1/G1)
- Found that restoration of this species through thinning & fire, as well as planting plugs is an effective way to increase population size
- Received awards from the Botanical Society of America & the Southern Appalachian Botanical Society
- Difficult Creek NAP is one of only three populations of this species.



The Vision – Leading by 2036

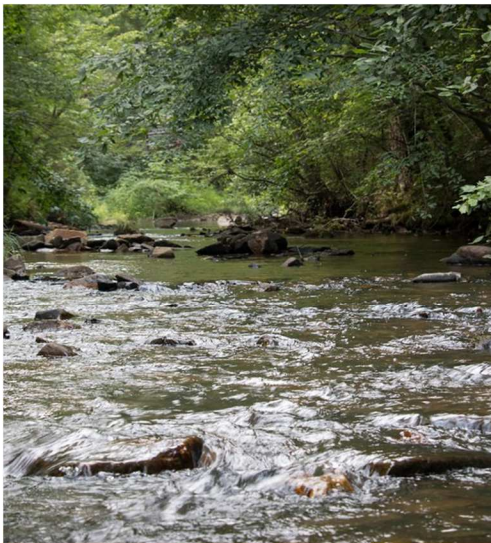
Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations

Mr. Stovall noted that 2036 would have the following anniversaries.

- 70th anniversary of the Open Spaces Act
- 50th anniversary of the Natural Heritage program
- 100th anniversary of the State Park's system.

Mr. Stovall advised that the actions taken over the next 10-12 years will determine what parks and natural areas look like and that they are known for in 2036.

Mr. Stovall commented on the foundation of what the agency will build on looking into the next century.



Embracing our Education Mission

By 2036

- Leading Provider of Outdoor Education Programming in the Commonwealth of Virginia
- Working beyond the boundaries of our parks and natural area preserves and supporting Virginia's classroom educators
- A trusted gateway to outdoor recreation pursuits
- Education and Resource Management factored into all decision making
- Recognized leader in interpreting the history of the Commonwealth
- A trusted and valued research partner



Director Wells commented that what matters to Virginia today also matters to the Virginia of tomorrow. He noted that what the agency is currently doing is foundational for what the system looks like in the next century.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

NEXT MEETING

Mr. Fletcher noted that the next meeting will be April 17-19, 2024, at First Landing State Park in Virginia Beach. Staff will be in touch regarding lodging and logistics.

REVISED: 1/22/2024 1:30 PM

OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 12:25