Outreach and Education at The Nature Conservancy’s Virginia Coast Reserve: Engaging a Rural Community in Coastal Resiliency and Habitat Restoration

Jennifer Davis, Bo Lusk, Jill Bieri, Margaret Van Clief

Virginia Coast Reserve’s Outreach and Education Program

The Virginia Coast Reserve (VCR) has taken a multi-tiered approach to community engagement. Through providing various opportunities through volunteer opportunities, public outreach, events, and educational programs, we strive to not only convey the importance of our conservation work, we also strive to support the surrounding community.

Educational Opportunities

VCR is working with local teachers and students to provide hands-on field experiences for 5th, 7th, and 10th graders on the Eastern Shore. Several teacher workshops are held each year to provide unique professional development opportunities for local educators. Through summer field camps, school-aged kids are able to explore their local environments on TNC-owned nature preserves.

Access to Nature Preserves

VCR provides year-round access to several of the TNC-owned properties. Brownsville Preserve, a 1250-acre preserve centrally located on the Eastern Shore. The William B. Cummings Birding and Wildlife Trail offers a 3-mile loop through pine forest, meadows, and saltmarshes. Many of the TNC-owned barrier islands are open to the public for day-use, and Conservancy staff frequently take groups out to the barrier islands.

Public Events

VCR provides several public events throughout the year to engage our local community. Two large events, our Open Farm in the spring and Holiday Open House in the winter, take place at Brownsville Preserve each year and are free and open to the public. During the year we offer smaller events like guided walks and talks with our staff.

Public Outreach

VCR is engaging the local community in a variety of ways. Though tabling at events, collecting oyster shells, talks and walks, Conservancy staff is getting our message out into our local community.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers make up an integral part of the work we do at VCR. From building artificial oyster reefs out of 13,800 castles, to trail clearing and maintenance, volunteers are being engaged year-round.

Web-based Engagement

Through online platforms such as the Coastal Resilience tool (coastalresilience.org) and our VCR homepage (nature.org/vcr), we provide information that is available at your fingertips. We also engage users through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). Follow us @ DC, MD, VA Nature Conservancy.

Eastern Shore of Virginia at a Glance:

The Eastern Shore of Virginia (ESVA) has a total population of around 45,000 people located along the largest expanse of undeveloped natural coastline on the eastern United States. The two counties in ESVA (Accomack and Northampton Counties) depend on agriculture and aquaculture as the main sources of income.

Median Household Income:
- National Average: $55,482
- Accomack County: $39,389
- Northampton County: $34,656

% Minority Population:
- National Average: 22.9%
- Accomack County: 31.4%
- Northampton County: 38.5%

ESVA Total Population: 45,128
Total Land Area: 661 sq miles

Community Engagement

Virginia Conservation Trust (VCT) provides the opportunity to conserve land through the creation of easements. The Trust can be used to conserve land owned by private parties or government entities. Through partnerships with the State of Maryland, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), and local counties, the Trust is able to purchase the easements for use with the State. One example of this is the Pocomoke River Easement, which includes the Kings Creek Marsh, a significant wetland that provides habitat for various species of birds and mammals.

Educational Opportunities

VCR is working with local teachers and students to provide hands-on field experiences for 5th, 7th, and 10th graders on the Eastern Shore. Several teacher workshops are held each year to provide unique professional development opportunities for local educators. Through summer field camps, school-aged kids are able to explore their local environments on TNC-owned nature preserves.

Access to Nature Preserves

VCR provides year-round access to several of the TNC-owned properties. Brownsville Preserve, a 1250-acre preserve centrally located on the Eastern Shore. The William B. Cummings Birding and Wildlife Trail offers a 3-mile loop through pine forest, meadows, and saltmarshes. Many of the TNC-owned barrier islands are open to the public for day-use, and Conservancy staff frequently take groups out to the barrier islands.

Public Events

VCR provides several public events throughout the year to engage our local community. Two large events, our Open Farm in the spring and Holiday Open House in the winter, take place at Brownsville Preserve each year and are free and open to the public. During the year we offer smaller events like guided walks and talks with our staff.

Public Outreach

VCR is engaging the local community in a variety of ways. Though tabling at events, collecting oyster shells, talks and walks, Conservancy staff is getting our message out into our local community.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers make up an integral part of the work we do at VCR. From building artificial oyster reefs out of 13,800 castles, to trail clearing and maintenance, volunteers are being engaged year-round.

Web-based Engagement

Through online platforms such as the Coastal Resilience tool (coastalresilience.org) and our VCR homepage (nature.org/vcr), we provide information that is available at your fingertips. We also engage users through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). Follow us @ DC, MD, VA Nature Conservancy.