

THE VIRGINIA BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TRAIL: A LAND CONSERVATION TOOL FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract. As people become more involved in outdoor and wildlife watching activities, the greater their interest becomes in conserving these natural resources. In recent years there has been a significant increase in participation in wildlife and other soft adventure activities. Two national surveys conducted in 2006 reported that over 81 million Americans took part in birdwatching (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment) and spent over \$268 M on wildlife watching trip-related expenses (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 2006) This gives wildlife and the associated habitat a monetary value and provides an incentive to local communities to conserve these resources. The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail (VBWT) is a statewide effort to develop wildlife viewing opportunities and encourage local communities to utilize their natural resources to bring tourism dollars into the local economy, while also providing motivation to conserve the land and habitat that attracts these dollars. The Trail further provides an excellent tool to educate visitors to the trail of the importance of conserving land and habitat for the species they enjoy watching. Previous trails have demonstrated that once communities realize the economic potential of nature-based tourism, they become invested in open space preservation, managing for parkland and more wildlife-friendly development. Here we provide examples of how nature-based tourism initiatives, such as the VBWT, bring communities together to promote their natural resources, and conserve land for wildlife viewing.

Key Words: birdwatchers, economics, nature-based tourism, Virginia birding, and wildlife trail.

EL SENDERO PARA LA OBSERVACIÓN DE AVES Y VIDA SALVAJE DE VIRGINIA: UNA HERRAMIENTA DE CONSERVACIÓN DE TIERRAS PARA EL FUTURO

Resumen. En la medida que las personas se involucran más en actividades al aire libre y en la observación de vida salvaje, mayor también resulta su interés en conservar estos recursos naturales. En los últimos años ha habido un significativo aumento en la participación humana en actividades de vida salvaje y excursiones moderadas. Dos encuestas nacionales realizadas en el año 2006, reportaron que más de 81 millones de estadounidenses tomaron parte en observaciones de aves (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment), gastándose por encima de \$268 millones en expensas de viaje relacionados con la observación de vida salvaje (U. S. Dept. of Interior, 2006). Estos datos conceden a la vida salvaje y al hábitat asociado un valor monetario y proporcionan un incentivo a las comunidades locales para conservar esos recursos. El Sendero para la Observación de Aves y Vida Salvaje de Virginia (VBWT), es un esfuerzo estatal con el fin de desarrollar oportunidades de observación de vida salvaje, a la vez que se alienta a las comunidades locales a utilizar sus recursos naturales como vía de aporte de dólares, provenientes del ecoturismo, a sus economías y en consecuencia, estimular la motivación por conservar la tierra y el hábitat que atrae a esos dólares. Adicionalmente, el sendero provee una excelente herramienta para educar a sus visitantes sobre la importancia de conservar la tierra y el hábitat de las especies que ellos disfrutan observar. Experiencias en senderos anteriores han demostrado que, una vez que las comunidades han caído en cuenta del potencial económico del turismo de naturaleza, se hacen partícipes de la preservación de espacios abiertos, la gestión de zonas verdes y el desarrollo de acciones respetuosas de la vida silvestre. Esta presentación dará ejemplos de cómo las iniciativas turísticas de naturaleza, tales como el VBWT, mancomunan a las comunidades en la promoción de sus recursos naturales y en la conservación de la tierra para la observación de su vida silvestre.

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INTRODUCTION

Nature tourism, the fastest growing segment of the tourism market (International Ecotourism Society 2005), includes birdwatching and ecotourism. When people are actively engaged in the natural world, they become more involved in conserving it. Birding trails and ecotourism engage people in the outdoors, which can then inspire them to become involved in land conservation. The goals of nature tourism include promoting habitat conservation, sustainable economic development and building broad-based public support for wildlife conservation programs. This includes marketing locations and communities to visitors who will support local economies. Local communities may then engage in conservation and stewardship as they seek to protect and enhance the land that generates wildlife watching revenue streams. Wildlife and native habitats will more likely be conserved if society determines they have monetary value. While some segments of the population value wildlife for its intrinsic values, putting natural resources in an economic context helps sell the conservation message. It is especially relevant when economic concerns outweigh environmental concerns among decision makers.

One facet of nature tourism that is increasingly successful is the development of birding trails. Birding trails engage people in the outdoors, which can then inspire them to become involved in land conservation. They have the potential to provide local communities with economic benefits, which can then translate back to conservation dollars. This paper will provide examples of how this may already be occurring on-the-ground in Virginia through the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail (VBWT). The paper also examines the larger role that the VBWT can play in land conservation within the state and identifies future needs and directions for the VBWT.

TRADITIONAL AND NOVEL MECHANISMS TO FUND CONSERVATION

Wildlife watching, and birdwatching in particular, have shown enormous growth over the past 25 years in the United States. The 2006 U.S. Forest Service National Survey on Recreation and the Environment found that over 81.5 million people in the U.S. participated in birdwatching in 2006. This was a fourfold increase since 1983. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2006) wildlife watchers spent over \$44 billion domestically in 2006, with almost \$13 billion going toward trip-related expenses, a 21%

annual increase in money spent on nature tourism since 1996.

This large and growing constituency clearly can make a huge difference in conservation of our natural resources. However, we still have the challenge of how to engage this growing cadre of interested individuals in conservation action. A prime example of how to do this is shown by hunters and anglers who contribute to population and habitat conservation via license and permit fees. This has been extremely effective over the past 50 years with Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funding.

One specific example of how to engage wildlife viewers in supporting wildlife programs is in Virginia where the General Assembly passed House Bill 38 in 1998. This bill appropriates 2% of the state sales tax on the sale of outdoor equipment in Virginia to the state wildlife agency. Funds go into the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' main agency fund and makes up about 20% of the total agency budget each year. Survey research shows that 46% of each year's money comes from hunters/anglers and 54% comes from strictly wildlife viewers. The development of the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail is a more recent example of engaging wildlife enthusiasts in Virginia wildlife conservation efforts.

THE VIRGINIA BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TRAIL

The VBWT, started in 2001, was developed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (Department). Over the course of four years the VBWT expanded into a statewide wildlife viewing trail with the assistance of numerous partners across the Commonwealth. As of this date, over 686 sites are arranged into 65 distinct driving loops that highlight every region of Virginia. Trail guides provide information on each loop and site, and are available both online and in printed form. Road signage assists travelers in following written directions. There is a preponderance of loops in southwest Virginia where communities pushed for more sites to boost visitation in their areas. This region has lagged behind the rest of Virginia in terms of economic development and these communities saw the potential early-on for economic development based on ecotourism.

Partners include over 500 state, local, and federal agencies, local, state and regional tourism agencies, conservation organizations, and private landowners. They nominated sites, wrote letters of support, reviewed maps and text, assisted with driving directions and provided in-kind assistance. The involvement

of these partners, along with financial support from the state transportation department, NOAA's Coastal Zone Management Program, and the state department of tourism, was critical to the Department's ability to finish the project. These partnerships also introduced many constituents to the Department for the first time.

The exposure the VBWT has provided Virginia and the associated local communities is huge. Over 450 000 trail guides, and numerous brochures have been shipped to all 50 states and 126 foreign countries. In addition, the VBWT has been featured in several national publications, over 50 regional newspapers around the country, and every major newspaper across Virginia.

This exposure has translated into economic benefits for local communities. Rosenberger and Convery (2008,) indicated that a conservative estimate of the economic impact of the VBWT was approximately 8.6 million dollars to the Commonwealth annually during the first five years of its existence.

The following examples show how the VBWT can lead to conservation at the local scale. The first case is that of the Clarkton Bridge in Charlotte County in south-central Virginia. The land adjoining this historic bridge had been purchased by a citizens group after the Virginia Department of Transportation had slated the bridge for demolition in 2003-04. A local citizens group formed to lobby legislators, collect donations for bridge restoration and save the bridge specifically for wildlife watching. They used information both from the VBWT and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail to demonstrate the benefit this project could have for the local community. This site is now part of the Staunton River Loop of the VBWT. While this example illustrates conservation of a man-made structure rather than land conservation, it demonstrates the power that the VBWT can have to motivate people and local governments to become involved in local conservation efforts.

In the above example conservation was implemented in a reactive manner. A community mobilized and responded to a threat. Department staff is actively working toward enabling more proactive examples. The key is increasing awareness among communities along the Trail to the Trail's potential benefits to them. This potential will not be realized unless communities become involved in marketing the VBWT. The Department has built the tool, but it is up to local communities to take the initiative.

This has begun to happen in places like Carroll County in Southwest Virginia. County tourism staff has worked with Department staff for over 3 years to develop their own piece

of the VBWT. With technical assistance from Department staff, they are now in a position to promote their region. They are linking 6 existing sites on two different VBWT Loops into a local Warbler Trail. Further, they are connecting this project to a biking trail and enhancing existing trail sites.

Anecdotal examples such as those above can be complemented by taking a larger view of the potential role that the VBWT may have in promoting land conservation in Virginia. When the VBWT was first developed, Trail sites were nominated based on their wildlife viewing potential, rather than their importance for sustaining viable wildlife populations. Since then, tools have been developed which can contribute to an assessment of the VBWT for its potential to contribute to meaningful land conservation.

One such tool is the Virginia Audubon Council's Important Bird Area (IBA) Program (Weldon, 2007), which has recognized 19 IBA's in the Commonwealth over the past 3 years. A gross comparison of VBWT locations to IBA boundaries shows that roughly 15% of all VBWT sites fall within established IBA's, with nearly one quarter of those sites contained within coastal IBA's. This modest overlap between VBWT sites and IBA's highlights the need for partners to consider how they might more strategically align the implementation of the VBWT and the IBA program to achieve land conservation goals.

For example, strategic placement of future sites within IBA's under significant private ownership may open the door to using conservation easements to enhance IBA protection. The IBA Program is just one tool that can be used to evaluate the placement of VBWT sites. Other focal areas and related land conservation layers that take into account organisms other than birds (e.g., Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan Priority Land Conservation Layers for Species of Greatest Conservation Need) are also available and could be included in a more comprehensive analysis.

Another important factor to consider in assessing the link between the VBWT and land conservation is the system of land ownership within which the VBWT exists. Approximately 85% of all VBWT sites are in public ownership, while 15% are in private ownership. The Department made a concerted effort to include private lands in the development of the VBWT and considered 15% to be a success. One unintended consequence of this situation is that the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, a state agency which is the leading conservation easement holder in Virginia, is currently contacting land-owners of privately owned VBWT sites to gauge

their interest in putting their lands into conservation easements. The VBWT program has the potential to benefit sites within public ownership as well, by increasing visitation to many of those sites and raising revenue that can be used for their management or expansion. This is particularly true for local parks.

THE FUTURE

The VBWT comes with a host of future needs. Department staff needs to look at the conservation potential of sites as it assesses future additions to the VBWT. Better tools for conducting these assessments are now available. Additionally, to assess the impact of VBWT visitation, biological evaluations need to be conducted on many sites. The Department's single greatest need is to hire an individual to coordinate all aspects of the VBWT program. A VBWT coordinator with public relations and marketing skills will be better able to maintain consistent contact with tourism and local communities and assist them with local and regional marketing. Providing workshops for local businesses and Chambers of Commerce to demonstrate how best to reach and serve wildlife watchers will be critical. Such statewide educational efforts will require significant time and resources. Realization of the full potential of the VBWT as a land conservation tool will be greatly enhanced by the addition of a dedicated staff person with the skill set to accomplish defined objectives.

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