



CHAPTER 9

*Water Trails and
Public Access*

Guests can enjoy mountain scenery and a variety of outdoor activities at Douthat State Park. | Sam Dean/Virginia Tourism Corp.

Background

Meandering among Virginia's water-rich coast, inland rivers and lakes are more than 2,268 miles of water trails. This is an increase from the 1,930 miles reported in the in 2013 Virginia Outdoors Plan. Additionally, there are 426 established water access sites managed at the local level, 55 sites managed by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation through its state parks and natural area preserves and 298 sites that are managed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF). Over the past decade, the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail has increased awareness of public access along the Virginia rivers that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. It is a team effort, across all levels of government, to increase opportunities for meeting the citizen needs and desires for water-related recreation.

For the purposes of this plan, water access encompasses all forms of boating, swimming and fishing in freshwater and tidal salt waters, as well as access to shorelines and beaches for passive recreation and nature study. Over the past few decades, Virginia has seen a steady increase in the development of water trails (also referred to as blueways). Established water trails let users plan their trips with the confidence of knowing that there are take-outs and amenities within reasonable water miles. This allows for more flexibility when trip planning and a better overall experience.

Southern Virginia Wild Blueway

This water trail offers amazing scenery, fishing and paddling over 100 miles of navigable water, leading to 1,200 miles of beautiful freshwater lake shoreline. The water trail covers miles of unspoiled wilderness and abundant fish and wildlife.

What Virginians Believe is Needed

Water and land trails are tied as the third most needed activity, according to 43 percent of respondents to the 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey (VODS).

Seaside Water Trail

The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program developed the 100-mile Virginia Seaside Water Trail as a series of day-use paddling routes. The Seaside Water Trail runs between the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge at Cape Charles and Chincoteague Island.

Most Popular Water Activities

Statewide, the fourth most popular outdoor activity is swimming in an outdoor pool, followed by the fifth most popular activity, sunbathing and relaxing on a beach. Figure 9.1 shows the percentage of Virginians participating in outdoor water-related activities.

Figure 9.1 Percent Participation in Water-Related Activities

activity	2011	2017
Swimming/outdoor pool	43	48
Sunbathing/relaxing on a beach	41	47
Viewing the water		38
Swimming/beach/lake river (open water)	38	37
Fresh water fishing	24	34
Canoeing/kayaking	16	25
Salt water fishing	14	15
Power boating	10	14
Tubing on water	8	12
Jet ski/personal watercraft	6	8
Water skiing or towed on water	4	6
Paddleboarding		6
Splash pads		4
Sailing	4	3
Whitewater rafting (guided or solo)	3	3
Surfing		2
Crew rowing		1
Sail boarding		1
Other water-dependent activities	2	2

Source: Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

DGIF evaluates and selects sites to provide boating access for hunters, bird watchers, anglers, paddlers, power boaters, wildlife enthusiasts and tourists. The agency's Boating Access Program provides access to all river systems, the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

There are 186,999 active registered boaters in Virginia. DGIF boating access facilities are regulated for boaters and anglers to fish or launch boats. Camping and swimming are prohibited, and violators are subject to arrest.

The DGIF Boating Access Program arose from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1950, Congress passed the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, also known as the Dingell-Johnson or D-J Program. This act created the Sport Fish Restoration Program administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The objective of the program is: "To support activities designed to restore, conserve, manage, or enhance sport fish populations and the public use and benefits from these resources and to support activities that provide



Lake Pelham, Culpeper | Culpeper Tourism Department.

boating access to public waters.” Since the revenue to support this program is generated from a federal tax on gasoline used to fuel motorboats, the funds from the program focus on boating facilities for motorboat access.

Since 1986, DGIF has invested more than \$14.8 million from the Sport Restoration Fund toward the development and maintenance of boating access facilities. These funds have been invested to develop or renovate 236 boating access sites and 62 public access fishing piers in more than 89 cities and counties, of which 184 sites provide access to freshwater and 52 sites provide access to saltwater. These facilities provide 124 lanes to launch and retrieve boats and approximately 3,165 spaces to park a vehicle with trailer. DGIF has invested more than \$1.27 million of program funds for the maintenance of existing boating access sites each year.

Virginia Boat Registration Trends

The number of boating registrations is trending downward regardless of boat size. The following chart shows registration trends over six years broken out by boat length.

Figure 9.2 Boat Registration Trends

year	< 16 feet	16 < 26 feet	26 < 40 feet
2011	66,441	129,752	8,331
2012	65,455	128,762	8,167
2013	64,824	127,699	8,072
2015	62,789	126,604	8,015
2016	59,310	121,689	6,874
2017	59,724	120,473	6,802

Source: Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

Beaches

The 2017 VODS lists relaxing on a beach as the second most popular water-related activity. However, beaches are a limited commodity and yet an enormous tourist attraction for counties and cities situated on the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The city of Virginia Beach has nearly 50 percent of its oceanfront in public ownership but most of Virginia’s shoreline remains privately owned. The Virginia Department of Health tracks and posts [swimming advisories and beach closures based on water quality data](#).

Assets and Opportunities

- The Virginia Departments of Transportation, Game and Inland Fisheries, and Conservation and Recreation signed the 2015 “Agreement for Cooperative Action to Develop and Enhance Public Water Access at Bridge Crossings and Roads” (see Appendix 9).
- Since the completion of the 2013 VOP, more than 100 water access sites have been added to the DCR water access inventory database, along with 290 miles of water trails.
- Virginia Tourism Corp., localities, planning districts and nonprofit organizations are working locally and regionally to facilitate development and promote water trails.
- Public access authorities (PAAs), established by the General Assembly, create an avenue for local priorities to be addressed by local communities. PAAs can close on land deals more quickly than state and federal agencies and can own and manage land in perpetuity. There are two PAAs in Virginia: the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay PAA (2003) and the Northern Neck PAA (2005). A third PAA is forming on the Eastern Shore.

- The [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Public Access Plan](#) was developed by the National Park Service in cooperation with federal and state agencies. The plan aims to increase public access to the bay and its tributaries by adding 300 new public access sites baywide by 2025.

[Port Royal Water Trail Guide](#)

The Port Royal Water Trail is made up of three paths along the Rappahannock River starting at the Port Royal Canoe/Kayak Launch. The trails overlap but are designed for the novice, intermediate and advanced paddler.

Challenges

- Virginia lacks a statewide committee or nonprofit organization to coordinate water trail advocacy and development.
- Virginia's waterfront is primarily in private ownership.
- There is a need to increase state staffing support for water access and water trails and for improved interagency coordination.
- There is no statewide source of funding for public water access and water trails maintenance.
- Coordination of water trails that cross jurisdictions can pose challenges at the local level.

Recommendations

- Create a web-based guide for water trail development. (DCR)
- Continue interagency coordination for public access along highways and bridges. (Virginia Department of Transportation, DGIF and DCR)
- Identify resources and funding to conduct a water and lands recreation opportunity study to evaluate Virginia's water trails based on physical, social and managerial attributes for all or a portion of Virginia's waters. (DCR, Virginia Tourism Corp. and university)
- Update the shoreline inventory to accurately identify how much coastal shoreline is in private ownership. (public access authorities, planning district commissions and localities)



Watershed education paddle on the Rapidan River | Bryan Hofmann/Friends of the Rappahannock

Resources

- Chesapeake Bay "Find Your Chesapeake" site: <https://www.findyourchesapeake.com/>
- National Water Trails System Toolbox: <https://www.nps.gov/WaterTrails/Toolbox>
- Michigan Water Trails: http://www.michiganwatertrails.org/downloads/water_trail_manual_20170609_web.pdf
- Iowa Water Trails: <http://www.iowadnr.gov/Things-to-Do/Canoeing-Kayaking/Water-Trail-Development>
- Prepare to Launch: <http://prepartolaunch.river-management.org>
- [FishSwimPlay.com](#), Hampton Roads Planning District Commission interactive water access map