

# **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VIRGINIA MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM**

*Provided by Michelle Prysby*

## **Before VMN**

It is important to know that two Master Naturalist style programs existed in Virginia prior to the start of the development of the statewide program. One program had been organized locally in 1994 had moved around to several different communities in Central Virginia until 2005. When the statewide program got started, this local program was incorporated into the statewide program as one of our first chapters. The second local program was loosely associated with the Extension Office but did not continue.

## **General Timeline for VMN Program Development**

**February 2004:** The team from Virginia attended a workshop near Saint Louis, Missouri. This workshop was funded by a grant from the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to the Texas Master Naturalist program with the goal of having Texas and other established programs (e.g., Florida Master Naturalist program, Fort Collins, Colorado Master Naturalist program) help programs start and/or grow in other states. Seven individuals from Virginia attended and later became early members of the VMN Steering Committee.

A second, similar workshop was held in Shepherdstown, West Virginia in August 2004. Several of the individuals from Virginia who attended this workshop later became active in the VMN as well.

## **Spring 2004 – Summer 2005:**

Over the 12-15 months following the Missouri and West Virginia workshops, a group of individuals from the various agencies plus a few volunteers met regularly to build the Virginia Master Naturalist program concept.

The key team of players during this phase included representatives from Virginia Cooperative Extension, Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (now Department of Wildlife Resources-DWR), Department of Conservation and Recreation, Department of Forestry, and several volunteers.

Key accomplishments during this period included:

- Deciding to model the Virginia program after the Texas program. The group also explored the Florida Master Naturalist program as a possible model, but decided that the Texas program better matched the goals they had for a Virginia program.
- Starting to draft bylaws and other program documents
- Developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that would be signed by Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), VT College of Natural Resources, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation, VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VGIF, now DWR), VA Department of Forestry (DOF), and VA Museum of Natural History (VMNH). It outlined an agreement to have VCE, DCR, DGIF (DWR), DOF, and VMNH each contribute funding to support a VMN Program Coordinator and associated program expenses. VCE was identified as the lead agency for the VMN program, and the Virginia Tech (VT) Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation (then just called the VT Department of Forestry) agreed to house the Coordinator position. This same MOU

established an advisory committee made up of representatives of each of the sponsoring agencies.

- Developing a job description for the VMN Coordinator position and getting the position approved through Virginia Tech

Getting the MOU and funding from all 5 agencies required leadership and foresight from every agency and VCE played a lead role in this effort as well as providing mentorship to the VMN Program Coordinator position.

**Summer 2005:** The position of VMN Program Coordinator was advertised by Virginia Tech/Virginia Cooperative Extension

A job announcement for the Virginia Master Naturalist Program Coordinator position was advertised. Michelle Prysby was hired for the position.

**October 2005:** VMN Program Coordinator began.

In the first 8 months of the position, The VMN Program Coordinator worked with the Steering and Executive Committees to:

- Finalize program documents such as bylaws templates for chapters and volunteer handbook
- Finalize procedures for establishing chapters
- Develop curriculum requirements
- Choose a program logo
- Recruit and receive 10 applications to start new VMN chapters
- Plan a New Chapter Coordinators Training
- Develop communications tools, including a website

**May 2006:** First VMN New Chapter Coordinators Training.

In May 2006, the first VMN New Chapter Coordinators Training was held at Douthat State Park. Representatives from the ten local coordinating committees working to form our first ten chapters attended.

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