

40 YEARS OF BETTERING VIRGINIA'S ENVIRONMENT

By Joseph H. Maroon, Executive Director, Virginia Environmental Endowment

This year, the Virginia Environmental Endowment (VEE), a nonprofit, independent grant-making foundation based in Richmond, celebrates its 40th anniversary. Although its grants and leveraged matching gifts have resulted in more than \$80 million of environmental improvement, many Virginians are unaware of the Endowment's unique beginning, the profound impact it has had on the Commonwealth's natural resources, and the role it continues to play today.

On February 1, 1977, VEE opened its doors. VEE's initial funding was a result of a \$13.2 million fine against a chemical company for polluting the James River with the toxic insecticide Kepone, which contaminated the river and impaired the health of workers at the plant.

With the approval of the presiding judge, the Honorable U.S. District Court Judge Robert R. Merhige Jr., \$8 million of the fine was used to establish VEE for the purpose of improving the quality of Virginia's environment. With its establishment, VEE became the first grant-making foundation in the nation to devote its funding exclusively to environmental issues.

Between 1981 and 1991, VEE received an additional \$1.4 million from five more environmental settlements, expanding its work into the Kanawha River and Ohio River Valleys, allowing it to extend its grant-making into West Virginia and Kentucky. Since 1977, it has awarded approximately 1,400 grants to nearly 500 partner organizations totaling over \$28 million, leveraging its requirement for matching funds to achieve over \$80 million in environmental improvement.

In 1977, Virginia's environmental landscape looked much different than today. There was no interstate Chesapeake Bay restoration partnership, few river organizations, little environmental education, and only a handful of local land trusts. Over its 40 years, VEE has been instrumental in each of these areas. It has:

- Provided catalytic grants to establish some of Virginia's most prominent conservation organizations, including the James River Association, Southern Environmental Law Center, the Elizabeth River Project, *Virginiaforever*, and the Virginia work of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and The Nature Conservancy.
- Initiated and supported university programs that promote dialogue and public engagement, including the Institute for Environmental Negotiation at the University of Virginia; the annual Environment Virginia Symposium held at the Virginia Military Institute; and the Virginia Coastal Policy Center at the College of William & Mary.
- Provided applied research funding to scientists at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, William & Mary and others to help determine scientifically grounded answers to key environmental policy issues facing the Commonwealth and including such projects as multispecies modeling of Chesapeake Bay fisheries to toxic contaminant analyses in Virginia waters.

- Awarded over \$600,000 in college scholarships to high school students in partnership with the Virginia Junior Academy of Science.
- Supported the establishment and training of local land trusts, environmental education efforts, and conservation networks such as the Virginia Conservation Network and the Virginia United Land Trusts.

While VEE has accomplished much over the past 40 years, many challenges remain. Many were unforeseeable in 1977. Actions to restore Chesapeake Bay must continue to move ahead as the latest 15 year effort reaches a critical mid-point this year. The health of local rivers and streams face new threats, as does the conservation of working farms and forests and natural and historic landscapes. Threats to drinking water supplies and from recurrent flooding require continued attention. Engagement must reach beyond the choir to bring greater involvement of local governments, farmers, businesses, developers, homeowners, students and diverse communities in addressing these and other challenges.

As the complexity of the problems facing Virginia's environment increases, sufficient funding will continue to be a critical element of many of the solutions. Recent efforts by Governor McAuliffe and the General Assembly have resulted in substantial investments in environmental funding. Virginia, however, has historically lagged behind other states in levels of funding for natural resources.

The future will demand new ways to stretch available public and private dollars to yield smarter investments. VEE will continue to be a part of that future, playing a constructive role in leveraging its available dollars.

Through the years, the VEE has been guided by extraordinary leaders from the business, academic, governmental, and nonprofit communities in conjunction with the exceptional work of its first executive director, Gerald McCarthy. Today's seven member Board of Directors has focused VEE on supporting projects designed to improve the water quality of local streams and rivers, restore the Chesapeake Bay, advance the conservation of important landscapes, enhance environmental literacy, increase awareness of environmental issues, and respond to emerging concerns such as changing climate conditions and coastal resilience.

As VEE reflects on its past and looks to its future, it recognizes that it has been and continues to be fortunate and honored to work with many outstanding partners across Virginia and beyond. With them, VEE will continue to partner to advance innovative projects and constructive approaches to address many of the complex environmental challenges facing Virginia today.

For more information on VEE and on how to contribute to its work, visit vee.org.

Joseph H. Maroon has served as the Executive Director of the Virginia Environmental Endowment since May 2013. He previously served as the Agency Director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and as the Virginia Executive Director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. He can be reached at info@vee.org.