

# APPALACHIAN WOODLANDS

*& Sportsmen's Review*

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for outdoor sportsmen and women . . . compliments of **Verbatim Editing**

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## What is the Virginia Environmental Endowment?

Virginia Environmental Endowment (VEE) has worked collaboratively since 1977 as a leading independent grant-maker, improving environmental quality, advancing environmental literacy, and partnering to establish land trusts, conservation networks, and a statewide mediation center.

In May 2013, VEE's first Executive Director, Gerald "Jerry" McCarthy, retired after 36 years of service. Mr. McCarthy joined VEE when it was created, and his legacy and that of the VEE Board includes a long list of outstanding environmental grants and accomplishments. Then the VEE Board of Directors named Joseph H. Maroon to succeed McCarthy as Executive Director. Maroon has over 30 years of environmental executive leadership experience, through his previous service as the former Agency Director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Executive Director of the Virginia Office of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and Principal/Owner of Maroon Consulting.

*Appalachian Woodlands* has been impressed over the years with the efforts and successes of VEE and decided to interview Mr. Maroon for this issue.

### **Question: Tell us about what makes the Endowment unique.**

**Maroon:** VEE has a long history. We are an independent, nonprofit grant-making foundation that came about in a unique way, by court order. In 1977, the highly toxic chemical Kepone was found to have been illegally discharged into the James River at Hopewell. One of the worst environmental disasters in Virginia history was turned into one of the most innovative environmental solutions when, with U.S. District Court Judge Robert Merhige, Jr.'s approval, Allied Chemical paid \$8 million of a \$13.2 million fine to fund the creation of VEE. The Endowment was the first grant-making foundation focused exclusively on environmental improvement. VEE later received other funds from environmental cases that expanded our grant-making into the Kanawha and Ohio River Basins of West Virginia and Kentucky.

VEE's mission is to improve the quality of the environment by using its capital, resources and expertise to encourage all sectors to work together to prevent pollution, conserve natural resources, and promote environmental literacy. Virginia is the natural place for an Endowment such as ours, and is one of only a few states to have an imperative to protect the environment in its state constitution.\*



May 30 2014 Piankatank River oyster reef funds. Participants from left: Thurston Moore (Mary Morton Parsons Foundation), Joe Maroon (VEE), Michael Lipford (The Nature Conservancy), The First Lady, Governor McAuliffe, Secretary of Natural Resources Molly Ward and Colonel Paul Olsen (Army Corps of Engineers).

### **What progress has been made since 1977 when VEE was established?**

**Maroon:** Virginia is blessed to have an abundance of natural resources from the mountains to the Chesapeake Bay. Many of these resources are the backdrop of our economic vitality and frame our quality of life. There has been much progress over the past three decades in several areas, but unfortunately many of these resources are degraded and in need of enhancement, or threatened, and in need of protection.

Since 1977, our rivers have improved, thanks largely to the upgrade of sewage treatment plants and greater use of conservation practices on farms

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and development. Conservation of our sensitive landscapes and working farms and forests has occurred at a much higher rate than ever. Many businesses and industries see the value of sustainability, and much legislation has been put in place to better protect ecologically sensitive resources. Public support for the environment remains high, but translating that support into funding and policy choices remains challenging. Much of the low hanging fruit has been picked, and the challenges ahead are many and great and real. The approaches that worked in the past may not work as effectively today.

### How did VEE contribute to these efforts?

**Maroon:** Over the years, the Endowment has caused the creation of, or provided the first substantial funding, for several organizations that continue to benefit Virginia's environment. The Endowment is proud to have provided seed funding and/or significant support for the establishment and growth of organizations and networks, including the Southern Environmental Law Center, the Virginia Conservation Network, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, land trusts promoting land conservation, friends-of-the-river groups such as the James River Association and the Elizabeth River Project, and an environmental mediation center at UVA. When combined with matching funds, grants awarded by VEE since 1977 to a wide variety of organizations represent an investment of over \$75 million in environmental improvement.

### What have been some of your first year's accomplishments as VEE's new Executive Director?

**Maroon:** When I came to VEE, one of my first opportunities was to develop a new strategic plan for the Endowment's Board to consider. I took my 30 years of experience and went looking for advice and guidance. I interviewed about 40 leaders in environmental and conservation groups, state government, local government, business, industry, and universities. The grant-making areas of focus subsequently adopted by the Board represent more of a sharpening of our focus than a major departure from the Endowment's long legacy. Among other activities, we reviewed our largest number of grant proposals since 1999, made grants to several new partners, convened several "roundtables," redesigned our web presence, and moved our office in downtown Richmond. This has been a dynamic period as we hit the ground running to build on the great work the Endowment has previously done.

### Tell us a bit more about your strategic focus on water quality, in particular.

**Maroon:** Our focus is on the improvement of local rivers and the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay, with preference for projects and policies that promote implementation of best practices for advancing agricultural stewardship, address local and regional stormwater infrastructure needs, and achieve on-the-ground improvements that contribute to healthy watersheds. This past year, spills or near misses on the Dan River, the James River and in West Virginia, again

highlighted how important clean water is to the public's drinking water supplies and to quality of life and environmental health.

The Bay remains at the top of public concerns for the environment. Over half of the Commonwealth of



The VEE board

Virginia drains to the Bay. Our focus is to support the implementation of Virginia's Plan to achieve the Clean Water Blueprint (also known as the "TMDL," Total Maximum Daily Load) adopted by EPA and the partner jurisdictions by 2025. Preference is given to innovative and creative strategies to reduce implementation costs and pollution and accelerate progress, when possible. We are also interested in improving fisheries management and restoration of keystone fisheries (fish of iconic and economic value such as blue crabs, oysters, striped bass, etc.) as well as expanded recreational access, as the public often relates to clean water in these ways; for example, in April 2014 VEE partnered with the Virginia Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, other funders and state and federal agencies to help restore oyster habitat in the Piankatank River.

### Land conservation and use are also important to VEE. What's your current approach?

**Maroon:** While VEE does not provide grant funds for land purchases, special emphasis is placed on strategies, direct policies, and projects focused on conserving significant landscapes and restoring and protecting riparian buffers and headwater streams. We have also emphasized the need to establish conservation practices on land previously placed under protective easement, as many of those lands were protected from development or protected to provide scenic views 40 or 50 years ago but are in need of additional water quality measures today. We have also been working with partners such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and the Land Trust Alliance hopefully to establish local land trusts or supporting organizations in areas where a gap exists, for example in Southern Virginia. For VEE, land conservation is an extension of our other priorities as a nexus with water quality protection or climate resilience is important.

### What's the role of environmental education and public awareness?

**Maroon:** This is a critically important, yet challenging area. There is growing concern that our younger generations have more book knowledge about environmental *Continued page 4*

\* Article XI, Constitution of Virginia: "To the end that the people have clean air, pure water, and the use and enjoyment for recreation of adequate public lands, waters and other natural resources, it shall be the policy of the Commonwealth to conserve, develop, and utilize its natural resources, its public lands and its historical sites and buildings. Further, it shall be the Commonwealth's policy to protect its atmosphere, lands and waters from pollution, impairment or destruction for the benefit, enjoyment and general welfare of the people of the Commonwealth."

issues than actual outdoor experiences. VEE's current focus is on outcomes-based approaches to environmental literacy that incorporate best practices related to student learning



The two 2014 award winners of the VEE annual environmental scholarships to college with Joe Maroon (center). Jennifer Radcliffe, left, won the Henry MacKenzie Scholarship (\$5,000 over 4 years), and Catherine Pollack won the Frances and Sydney Lewis Scholarship (\$14,000 over four years)

and teacher and principal training, and to advancing regional standards and Next Generation Science Standards. Our desire is to support programs that offer meaningful experiential learning opportunities to connect students and families to nature. We are also working with state agencies, the Chesapeake Bay Founda-

tion and several partners to try to boost environmental literacy statewide and with the Commonwealth of Virginia to promote the sale of more "Friend of the Chesapeake" (Bay) license plates as a way to increase the number of small grants for schools and communities. VEE has also been a long-time sponsor of two college scholarships for environmental science named after original Board members, Frances and Sydney Lewis and Henry MacKenzie, Jr.

#### **Do you also focus on environmental education for adults?**

**Maroon:** Reaching adults with a greater understanding of environmental issues is definitely important. Several national polls have shown that leaders in business, government, and civic affairs sometimes lack basic environmental understanding, and as a result, can disregard environmental impacts and opportunities when making decisions that impact every aspect of community life. The new 2014 Chesapeake Bay Agreement contains several aspirational principles including greater outreach to local officials and increasing the number and diversity of supporters. This will happen only with intentional efforts aimed at these outcomes.

Over the years, VEE has commissioned several polls of the public's awareness of environmental issues. The polls are an important means to connecting the public's support to decision-makers. The latest polls for 2009, 2010, and 2011 were conducted by Christopher Newport University's Wason Center, and are featured on our web site. We are now exploring how we might help to foster projects that tie environmental stewardship to jobs and those that use innovative, collaborative, and creative approaches such as media messaging and conservation technology to reach non-traditional audiences.

#### **Tell us about a few grantees whose efforts are particularly compelling.**

**Maroon:** VEE is honored to have supported many outstanding organizations, large and small, throughout the years. Several of our partners are well known, such as the Chesapeake

Bay Foundation, while others like the Blue Sky Fund (Richmond city) and StreamWatch (Charlottesville) are known more locally. Other organizations function in partnership with, or are housed within, universities including The College of William & Mary's Coastal Policy Clinic, the Elizabeth River Project's Learning Barge with the University of Virginia, and the Virginia Master Naturalist program through Virginia Tech. We also have a long history of support of the Southern Environmental Law Center's efforts to ensure that the Commonwealth's water protection goals move forward, along with more sustainable land uses and compact development, and smart transportation choices.

Beyond the Commonwealth, we are also proud to support the West Virginia Rivers Coalition (WVRC) through our Kanawha and Ohio River Basins grant-making program. As the only statewide advocacy organization focused on water quality in West Virginia, WVRC has a long history of assisting and enabling citizens to shape policy and improve public participation in the regulatory process. Following the Elk River chemical spill, the West Virginia Rivers Coalition was instrumental in advocating for the passage of the most potentially impactful water protection bill the state has seen in a generation.

Those interested in more information about the wonderful work advanced by our grantees are welcome to contact them directly, or to visit the Featured Projects section of [www.vee.org](http://www.vee.org).

#### **What do you see as some of the main challenges the Endowment is facing in the near future?**

**Maroon:** The Endowment is interested in growing our financial resources, not for ourselves but for the many organizations and communities with which we partner. In that regard, we are hoping to be the recipient of additional settlement funds from environmental cases so that we can increase the number of grants improving our natural environment. We are also looking to partner more with community foundations, corporate funders and others to support the work being done to improve Virginia's environment.

#### **What is the best way to get more information about VEE?**

**Maroon:** Competition for VEE grants is always high, and there are many more worthwhile proposals than funds. However, we encourage those who are interested, to check out our website ([www.vee.org](http://www.vee.org)) to determine eligibility for a grant or learn more about our programs, partners and latest news. Our email is [info@vee.org](mailto:info@vee.org). ~~~~

Joe Maroon is also an adjunct faculty member at both the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech, where he teaches graduate students about environmental policy and the Chesapeake Bay. Maroon has received numerous awards, including being among the first persons presented with an Outstanding Environmental Leader of Virginia Award in 2000 at the annual Environment Virginia conference. Upon his departure from state government, the 2010 General Assembly passed a resolution commending him for his years of service and accomplishments.

