

Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail

National Park Service | Chesapeake Bay Office



Making the Trail Visible and Visitor Ready: A Plan for the James River Segment

This is the first detailed plan for how the John Smith Trail will be developed along one segment of its 3,000 mile length. The plan outlines an approach to trail development based on: (1) a set of five initial focus areas for relatively rapid trail enhancement; coupled with (2) a set of strategies for supporting these focus areas and connecting, promoting, interpreting, protecting and further enhancing the trail.

The five initial focus areas contain solid resources and stories associated with Smith's explorations, American Indian cultures of the time, and significant, evocative 17th century landscapes. Each area also provides a variety of immersive visitor experience opportunities associated with the trail. Further, each focus area contains a key anchor site that already provides public access and key visitor amenities, receives high visitation, and has the potential for significantly contributing to trail themes in concert with existing programming. These anchor sites will serve as primary locations for directing visitors to a variety of trail opportunities and resources within a specific focus area – and to the other focus areas along the James. The five focus areas are: Jamestown and Powhatan Creek; Chickahominy River and Riverfront Park; the James River Oxbows; Chippokes Plantation State Park/Hog Island Wildlife Management Area; and the Pagan River and Smithfield. For each focus area, the plan describes trail-related themes and resources, a set of desired trail experiences, specific actions for making the trail visible and visitor ready, and the set of partners who can play a role in implementation.

The plan also describes several cross-cutting actions necessary for supporting the focus areas, as well as for connecting, promoting, interpreting, protecting and further enhancing the trail. These actions are grouped in the following categories: Orientation and Interpretation; Promotion, Marketing and Events; Expanding Public Access; Connecting Sites by Land; and Resource Protection. In addition, the plan addresses two key aspects of interpretation. First, it sets out an interim approach to coordinating implementation among numerous partner organizations through a steering group of representatives of: the National Park Service, the James River Association, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Chesapeake Conservancy and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The steering group will focus on the following top priorities over the coming year. Each is critical to raising awareness of the trail and making it "real" to visitors: (1) Provide clear, consistent trail orientation and marking signage at key sites; (2) Assist in and promote development of guided tours, equipment rentals, and itineraries which get people out on the trail who may not have the equipment to do so on their own; (3) Promote and assist in development of interpretive programs that explicitly engage people with trail stories and resources at selected key sites; (4) Work towards an effective, collaborative marketing campaign for the trail that connects with other marketing efforts; emphasis in initial stages will be placed on linking with and expanding electronic media opportunities; and (5) Work to enhance public access opportunities/facilities at feasible sites. Second, the plan also sets a comprehensive list of the specific actions needed at each focus area and throughout the segment; this forms the basis of an action plan for the James section of the trail.

The plan was prepared by the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office, in cooperation with a planning team consisting of representatives of the Commonwealth of Virginia, James River Association, Chesapeake Conservancy, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. In developing the plan, the team held a set of intensive focus group discussions with dozens of stakeholders along the James, as well as an in-depth discussion of a draft version of the plan at a larger stakeholder workshop in July 2011.

