People People

Take a walk beside the James River. Breathe in a gust of Afton Mountain air. Gaze over the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley. You have to admit…Virginia truly is a beautiful state. And since 1993, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has worked to improve our environment. Still, enhancing Virginia's air and water, preserving coastal zones, revitalizing contaminated land and enforcing state regulations are just part of the job. Looking after Virginia's environment means looking after the people who live with it. After 20 years, DEQ still recognizes the most important environmental issue: Virginia is our home, but *Virginians* will always be our priority.

Citizens today can use online resources and stewardship initiatives to communicate and collaborate with DEQ. The Geographic Information System (GIS) is an interactive mapping tool designed to inform citizens about agency policy and operations using a variety of online features.

One of the most innovative is the "Coastal GEMS" (Geospatial and Educational Mapping Systems) program. Available to anyone, Coastal GEMS was designed to educate users about the well-being of our coastal resources. Information is broken down into data layers that cover various aspects of coastal environment including water, land and wildlife. Outdoors enthusiasts can refer to Coastal GEMS for information on everything from scenic tours and bird watching to public boat access, and conservation planning ideas are available for anyone ready to lend a green thumb.

Continuing sustainable practices, DEQ has partnered with state organizations to spearhead the Virginia Green initiative. Virginia Green promotes stewardship through four tenets: recycling, waste reduction, energy conservation and water conservation. The Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) plan is a way for DEQ to protect the well-being of our waters by restricting the amount of pollutants that can be released into rivers and streams. Public notices, alerts and RSS feeds are other online tools that DEQ uses to relay environmental information in a timely fashion. When you need to know, drought condition updates, air quality forecasting and water quality monitoring are all just a click away.

DEQ works in concert with Virginia citizens to keep your environment clean and safe, and there are all kinds of ways to help the cause. We all know that carpooling cuts down on harmful emissions and everyone has been reciting "Reduce. Reuse. Recycle" since they could toddle. But Virginians these days are taking a much more active role in environmental quality. The citizen water quality monitoring program gives volunteers the opportunity to contribute valuable data. Citizens can collect samples from private ponds and streams (or from nearby public waters) and send in the results. The Master Naturalist program allows volunteers to help conserve natural resources, and residents of the Chesapeake Bay area can participate in reef restoration by growing their own "oyster gardens."

As we move into the 21st century, technological advances make it easier than ever to stay informed. The development of the internet into a worldwide network will continue to provide a platform for information sharing. The GIS system continues to develop, mapping wildlife habitats, providing recreational information and keeping citizens informed.

Since its inception, DEQ has been working with Virginians to preserve the beautiful state we live in and will keep going right into the new century. Your grandchildren deserve to drink clean water. Your children deserve to breathe clean air. And you deserve to know who is seeing to that. When we work together our environment can only improve, and DEQ will be there to make sure that it does. After all…this was only the first 20 years.