

Science and Wetlands Management: The Virginia Model

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With the passage of its Tidal Wetlands Act in 1972 and Coastal Primary Sand Dune and Beaches Act in 1980, the Commonwealth of Virginia established a successful model for the local control of natural resources. The legislation mandated a strong advisory and support role for the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), a state supported institution with marine research, graduate education and advisory programs. The Tidal Wetlands Act and the Coastal Primary Sand Dune Act (which was modelled after the former) are state local option laws written with the clear intention that counties, cities and towns adopt and implement the model state ordinance written into the law. The Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), a state regulatory agency, has state overview authority and as such reviews all decisions made by, and appeals made as a result of, local wetlands board decisions.

The role mandated for the Virginia Institute of Marine Science was the scientific evaluation of wetlands by type, conducting and updating an inventory of the resources and assisting the lead state agency in the preparation of guidelines. Over the ensuing years since passage of the wetlands legislation, the role of science and the scientist-advisor in the local decision-making process has expanded with the scientists involved assuming additional functions which go beyond those codified in the law. The increased scientific role occurred as a result of needs defined by the local resource managers and involved provision of environmental education classes and publications as well as site-specific environmental impact assessments.

Over the past 20 years, the model has not been without controversy, since questions of division of labor and the proper role of science in the regulatory process have surfaced numerous times. The Virginia model may be unique among state regulatory programs since it entails a form of partnership involving local resource management boards, manned by volunteers, assisted through the provision of technical expertise by scientists from a marine research and graduate educational institution. Studies accomplished to date would indicate a highly successful program of resource management with economic, political and environmental benefits to the Commonwealth of Virginia and its citizens.