

## **Old Growth Across Virginia**

How would you like to walk across the depth and breadth of the Commonwealth of Virginia surrounded by ancient, old growth trees? Hike from The Bay to West Virginia and from the Occoquan River to North Carolina and never leave the leaf canopy of a natural cathedral. You can't do it now, but your descendants can. Create contiguous trails across Virginia and let the plants grow for 300 years. Voila, Old Growth all the way across Virginia!

Sound outlandish? Benton MacKaye thought his visionary idea for an Appalachian Trail would take 60 years. Then, during the Depression the public works projects made it happen fast. Today, localities and the Commonwealth work together to create walking and biking trails from Jamestown to Richmond and across NoVa. Why not extend the vision to go across the state and expand the idea to produce Old Growth?

Old Growth in Virginia can be achieved in 300 years. There are very few trees older than three centuries. If you put in native plants and don't disturb them, the old growth will come. It will be well on its way in a hundred years. Just imagine.

Take a decade to buy or get in grants land for, say, six great trails. Build three bands from East to West – from the Northern Neck, Middle Peninsula and Dismal Swamp west. Build one band east of I-95, one band west of I-95 and one along the Piedmont or west of The Valley.

Get the General Assembly to pass a law that keeps the land free of local or state taxes for perpetuity. The trails will generate more eco-dollars taxing tourists, taxing the salaries of guide, wardens and others than as subdivisions of sprawl. Let a non-profit corporation manage the project or a state agency, but don't use eminent domain to take the land. A non-profit can do fund raising. Sooner or later Virginians along the path will want to help, especially if there is tax incentive for donations. The trail may be crooked indeed.

Share the vision. In ten years enough land can be purchased and granted to make the trails distinguishable. In another ten years light weight bridges can vault every highway and be wide enough and strong enough to hold trees – like Natural Bridge, Virginia, but with man-made arches. In another ten years bridge the waters.

Build a walking and horse trail, perhaps for bikes in stretches, the length of the trail. Make the trail at least an acre wide. In some places the trail of Old Growth could be a hundred or more acres wide. But, make it contiguous – eventually.

Think of how schools for years and years can use the trails for field trips to teach ecology and natural sciences. What will happen to native animal migrations? New migratory bird sanctuaries?

Imagine how years after we are gone from God's Country on earth, our Commonwealth, and our children are gone, there will be a living legacy. Grand green belts will span our state as immutable and walled barriers to urban sprawl. Places of beauty will illustrate

what can be done to live as good stewards of nature.

Who will stop this idea from maturing like a gentle Virginia springtime? Maybe some short-sighted builders will balk. The local officials who fear losing acres from their tax base will fight it. They may not understand, or believe, the math of future tax fruits. Their small minds can be overcome by large votes. My hope is that Republicans, at least, will pick up this idea as a campaign issue. Maybe it could be a bi-partisan issue. That would be a nice change to create a public good project for The Good People of Virginia.

I'm ready to start now. I've thought about this for over a decade and pored over maps to trace the trails in my imagination. What say you to your elected officials? Start Old Growth Across Virginia now or never?

James Atticus Bowden