

# A NATURAL ALLIANCE

**Environmental educators share common goals. Now they share ideas, too.**

**BY SCOTT HARPER THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT**

NORFOLK — The world of environmental education is not just about classroom frogs and awe-struck students. It often is about desperate pleas for grant money.

About scrambling to finish a museum exhibit. About dreaming up something meaningful for 5-year-olds more interested in cotton candy or just going home.

There are hundreds of such educators in Hampton Roads – tour guides at the Virginia Zoo, outreach coordinators for government agencies, a costumed princess for the Elizabeth River Project.

Two years ago, they were a mess. They competed hotly for grants. They didn't talk to one another. They stepped on one another's curricula and recycled old presentations.

Much of that has changed, however, with the creation of the Hampton Roads Alliance for Environmental Education, a group that relies on e-mails and ego-less cooperation.

The coalition started with zero members in 2003, pushed to 25 the next year, and at its annual meeting last month counted 125 partners – from NASA to Nauticus, the Virginia Native Plant Society to the Virginia Association of Science Teachers.

“We were shocked a group like this didn't already exist,” said Robin Dunbar, who dresses up as Princess Elizabeth, tiara and royal gown included, and teaches students and civic groups about the history of the Elizabeth River and its ongoing cleanup. All with a faux English accent.

It was Dunbar who launched the group two years ago. She was running out of time to piece together something for Earth Day and contacted the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center for help.

After a brief conversation with a coordinator there, she soon realized that this region of scenic waterways, nature sanctuaries and historic parks had no network for professional educators. So she organized a meeting, and a wellspring gushed.

“It's been very exciting to see,” said Holly Carson, environmental educator for the Norfolk Environmental Commission. “It's like we all had the same goal, but everyone was afraid – or didn't know how – to contact each other.”

Former Gov. Jim Gilmore created a separate state office for environmental education in 2001. Part of its job was largely to do what the Hampton Roads alliance is doing now – bring people together, share information, help train educators, seek grants. But budget cuts have hampered the office, though it now is back to four employees.

Ann Regn is the office's director. She touts the Hampton Roads group as a model for what other regions in Virginia should strive for. Educators on the Eastern Shore, in Richmond and in Southwest Virginia are talking about starting similar organizations, she said.

“They’re sharing staff and money and resources,” Regn said, “and that’s what we’ve been urging for years. It’s encouraging to finally see it take hold.”

One driving force behind a recent boom in environmental education is a mandate in the state’s Standards of Learning curriculum for “a meaningful watershed experience.” That means schools are being pressed to find and organize an outdoor, on-the-water trip for their students, to see firsthand how a natural system looks and how it’s supposed to work.

Teachers are calling on government agencies, environmental groups and local museums to help them design trips. Dunbar said science teachers from Chesapeake have been in contact with the Hampton Roads alliance seeking ideas.

The alliance has no bylaws, communicates mostly by computer, and its steering committee “meets every month or so, whenever,” Dunbar said.

At one recent meeting, at the Ernie Morgan Environmental Action Center in Norfolk, five educators sat around a table and discussed ideas for next year. If they couldn’t agree, the idea was cast aside.

One issue centered on an offer from Adams Outdoor Advertising to let the group use some of its billboards for free when they’re not covered by ads from paying customers.

The committee – Martin Fisher from Nauticus, Jill Bieri from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Aimee Hadfield from the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission and Carson and Dunbar – agreed to splash nature photographs on the donated space. A simple message such as “Keep It Clean” would accompany the photos.

“I like it,” Hadfield said. “It’s cool.”

Meeting adjourned.



**MARTIN SMITH-RODDEN/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE PHOTO**

Robin Dunbar, right, dresses up as Princess Elizabeth to teach students and civic groups about the history of the Elizabeth River and its ongoing cleanup.