A Labor of Love: Land Conservation in Central Virginia

This past summer I interned with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, assisting them in the procurement and stewardship of open space land easements. There are two basic components to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF); easement donation and easement stewardship. Unlike many conservation agencies, VOF rarely purchases easements or properties therefore the vast majority of its 600,000 acres of open space land under easements were donated in exchange for tax credits.

In order for a landowner to make gift of easement VOF must inspect the property to see if an easement will be beneficial to both the landowner and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Properties along rivers, hiking trails, scenic roads, state parks, and existing easements are considered prime candidates. Properties of historical significance, farmland, and open areas in and around cities are especially desirable.

As the landowner and his or her lawyer draft the deed of easement, VOF creates a Baseline Document Report (BDR). This report records the condition of the property at the time when it was put under easement and will be used in many subsequent years as a reference document for the current state of the property. Some of the most useful components of the BDR are the special conditions map, the photo point map, and the photo album.

The special conditions map is a GIS rendering of restrictions placed on the property once it is in easement; these commonly include adequate riparian buffers and areas where building is restricted or prohibited. The photo point map and photo album
correspond with each other such that a person unfamiliar with the property could use a
GPS device to locate the place and the aspect from which a photo was taken and
thereby be able to discern any major changes to the property.

Once the terms of the easement have been decided upon, the proposed property
will be presented before a board of trustees to be accepted or deferred until a later time.
If the proposal is accepted and the deed of the gift of easement signed, the property will
be under the protection of VOF for perpetuity. From this point on, the property is under
the care of the stewardship division of VOF.

Stewardship is responsible for ensuring that property is managed to the effect of
the terms agreed upon in the deed of gift. All major changes to the property such as
construction, demolition, and timber harvests must be approved by them. Land
stewards complete visual surveys, phone surveys, and email surveys on a regular basis
and strive to have a good working relationship with their landowners. When a property is
sold, or the deed of easement amended, a more in-depth report called the Present
Conditions Report (PCR) is needed. The PCR is an updated version of the original BDR
and records the changes to the property whether it is enlarged, divided, or sold.
Additionally, stewardship is responsible for informing landowners when they are in
violation of the terms of their easement and verifying that the transgression has been
corrected. If the landowner refuses to comply, the attorney general of Virginia can be
called upon to defend the easement, however this step is rarely necessary.

I was able to help with both aspects of VOF. I would often assist an easement
person with their BDRs sometimes acting as the photographer, scribe or GPS person.
Controlling the GPS was particularly exciting because it was often temperamental and would occasionally refuse to work. In these scenarios, we would resort to drawing on a paper map rather than return to the office having wasted a day of work.

When we went out in the field, we usually devoted the whole day to two properties, three at the most. This allowed us travel time and time to properly explore the property and meet with the landowner. We were always glad when the landowner had enough time to show us around personally because it not only ensured that we would not get lost, but also gave us more insight into the landowner’s plan for the property.

Other times I helped land stewards with PCR documentation, visual surveys, and phone surveys. The PCR process was much like a foreshortened version of the BDR process because most of the groundwork had been done in the older document. Visual surveys were much simpler, requiring only a brief look over the property and no GPS data. We would sometimes do as many as twenty in a day. These days in the field were great because, even though we were driving most of the time, I was able to see so much of Virginia that I had never laid eyes on.

Phone surveys were one of my favorite tasks because they gave me the chance to improve my phone and communication skills. This task was also very rewarding because so many of the landowners were people with a passion for land conservation and were very complementary of VOF. Sometimes I would spend an entire day cold calling landowners to check up on their properties.
Working and living in Charlottesville was an amazing experience and one that I am very glad to have had. I learned a great deal about the legal aspect of land as well as conservation. My field experience bolstered my confidence in the education the Sewanee is giving me. Working in the office exposed me to an environment that I had not yet seen and am very grateful to have known before entering the workforce as an employee instead of a student intern. My communication skills increased exponentially thanks to my time with landowners and the staff of VOF.

Thanks to this internship, I intend to pursue environmental law when I have finished my undergraduate degree. Although conservation work is very rewarding, it is not a career that I think I will pursue. However, I count myself fortunate to have been able to help them preserve some truly irreplaceable pieces of Virginia and I ever so thankful that the Raoul Internship Fund saw fit to help me do so.