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***Virginia Master Naturalist Program to Brighten Skies, Expand Horizons***

*VMNH sponsored initiative ready to expand.*

**MARTINSVILLE, Va.** (September 21, 2006) – Residents of the Martinsville-Henry County area are about to get their chance to keep the region green and clean. On September 28, the Virginia Master Naturalist Program will present to the community the vast benefits that a local chapter could bring to the region’s environment and natural resources. The open meetings will take place at the Virginia Museum of Natural History Research and Collections Center at 1001 Douglas Avenue in Martinsville. The first meeting will be held at noon and the second will be held at 6:30 p.m.

“The Virginia Master Naturalist Program caters to a wide range of people,” said Dr. Dennis A. Casey, VMNH director of education and public programs. “It’s not only for those who have a strong interest in the conservation efforts of our region, but it’s also for those who love the outdoors and nature in general.”

The Virginia Master Naturalist Program is a statewide corps of volunteers providing education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities. Interested Virginians become Master Naturalists through training and volunteer service.

“Master Naturalist volunteers not only educate the public, they actually get involved with hands-on stewardship activities, such as creating wildlife habitat,” said

State Forester Carl E. Garrison III. “By improving the state of our natural resources, all of our citizens reap the benefits of a better healthier Virginia.”

Starting in 2006, the program began with 10 charter community chapters. In 2007, the program hopes to expand into 10 more communities. Martinsville, Roanoke, Smith Mountain Lake, and Halifax County are among a long list of communities vying for new chapters.

As a partner of the program, the Virginia Museum of Natural History would serve as an adviser to local residents who wish to take leadership of a local chapter. The museum is also available to host a local chapter for meetings, to provide opportunities to coordinate training seminars, and to help facilitate natural resource stewardship projects; both locally and on a statewide level.

The program is closely modeled after other extremely successful naturalist programs, such as the one in Texas.

“Virginia’s master naturalist program was formed with the help of a steering committee, which patterned our program after the Texas program due to its success in achieving high levels of volunteers involvement in a variety of activities including citizen involvement in scientific research, education, and stewardship,” said Michelle Prysby, Virginia Master Naturalist Program Coordinator.

Locales already with chapters include Wytheville, Blacksburg, Lynchburg, Virginia Beach, Alleghany Highlands, Williamsburg, Albemarle County, Fredericksburg, Ashland, and Leesburg.

Partners of the program include the Virginia Museum of Natural History, Virginia Tech’s College of Natural Resources and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Virginia Department of Forestry.

Interested residents of the region, including the counties of Henry, Franklin, Patrick and Pittsylvania, and the cities of Martinsville and Danville, should contact Dr. Dennis Casey at 276-666-8620 or [denny.casey@vmnh.virginia.gov](mailto:denny.casey@vmnh.virginia.gov).

## **ABOUT THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**

The Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville seeks to increase understanding of and appreciation for the natural history of the Commonwealth through education, research, collections, publications and exhibits. The museum – an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution – is accredited by the American Association of Museums, a distinction earned by fewer than 10 percent of museums in the United States. A new, \$28 million museum currently is being built in Martinsville. When fully completed in early 2007, the new museum will offer five times the exhibit and public space of the current facility.

The museum is a member of the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Virginia Association of Museums, Heritage Preservation, and an agency of the Secretary of Natural Resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia. With over 22 million objects in its collection, the museum reaches nearly 1 million people annually through on-site and traveling exhibitions, classroom outreach programs, the museum's Web site, public events and publications.

The museum is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sundays from Noon to 5 p.m. Members are always admitted free. Admission is \$7 for adults; \$6 for senior citizens and youth 12-18; \$5 for children 3 to 11; and free for children 2 and under. For more information about membership or volunteer opportunities, please call 276-666-8600 or visit the museum's Web site at [www.vmnh.net](http://www.vmnh.net).

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