

## River Section 4 – Mason Neck to Caledon



### Overview

This river section includes the sites and resources from approximately Mason Neck State Park (Fairfax County, VA) to Caledon State Park (King George County, VA). Water and land routes for CAJO, STSP and POHE along with many significant trail sites are located within this region. The area boasts conserved natural landscapes and stories reflecting American Indian history, Captain John Smith’s explorations, War of 1812 British fleet activity and American defenses, the industrialization of the United States, the Civil War and Colonial America settlement. Generally, the complex of resources provides a window into the development and evolution of the United States.

In contrast to the Route 1 and Interstate 95 corridor, this area is surprisingly rich in natural resources associated with the ecology of the tidal Potomac. The northern section includes large protected areas on the Mason Neck Peninsula along with Gunston Cove, Occoquan Cove and Belmont Bay. The southern stretch includes

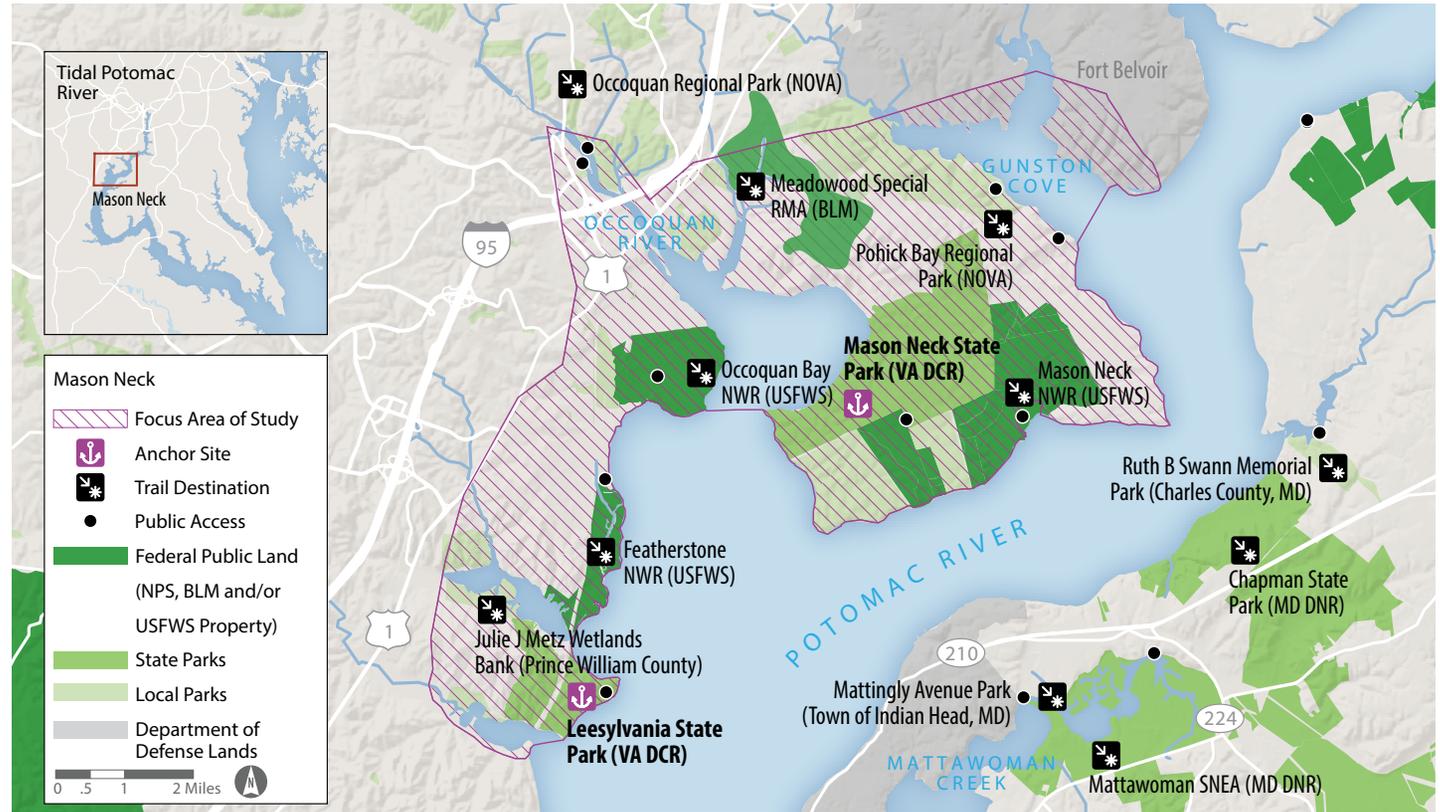
Widewater State Park, Aquia Landing, Crow’s Nest Natural Area Preserve and Caledon State Park, which together protect significant evocative settings along the Potomac and particularly on Potomac Creek. The Caledon/Crow’s Nest area is one of the best bald eagle viewing sites along the river. Across the river is the Maryland Peninsula, one of the largest identified evocative landscapes along the Potomac.

This area is characterized by a mix of protected resources, some commercial corridors, military lands and suburban residential developments. Though the river is wider here than upstream and easily accommodates power yachts and ships, it can generally be explored in paddle craft and smaller power boats. Three military bases are present — Fort Belvoir, Quantico and Dahlgren—so the turnover rate among area residents is high. The region is accessible by roadways, mass transit, water and air and has a multitude of nearby visitor support services.

Left: Mason Neck State Park (photo credit: Christopher A. Koberg)

Facilities within this river section include:

- Old Colchester Park and Preserve (Stafford Co., VA)
- Laurel Hill Park (Stafford County, VA)
- Mason Neck State Park (VA DCR)
- Leesylvania State Park (VA DCR)
- Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge (US Fish & Wildlife Service/USFWS)
- Occoquan Regional Park (Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority/NOVA)
- Aquia Landing Beach Park (Stafford Co., VA)
- Caledon State Park (VA DCR)
- Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve (VA DCR) [limited access currently]
- Widewater State Park (VA DCR) [scheduled to open for public use in 2017]
- Pohick Bay Regional Park (NOVA)
- Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area (US Bureau of Land Management/BLM)
- Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS)
- Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS) [limited access currently]



### Trail Components

The following trail components have been identified to support strategic planning within the Middle Potomac river section. Each of the focus areas described below contain anchor sites, which are viewed as first tier locations for trail development efforts as they already contain significant visitor support facilities. The next level of development would include additional trail components, such as destinations and linking routes; enhancements would occur as resources and opportunities become available.

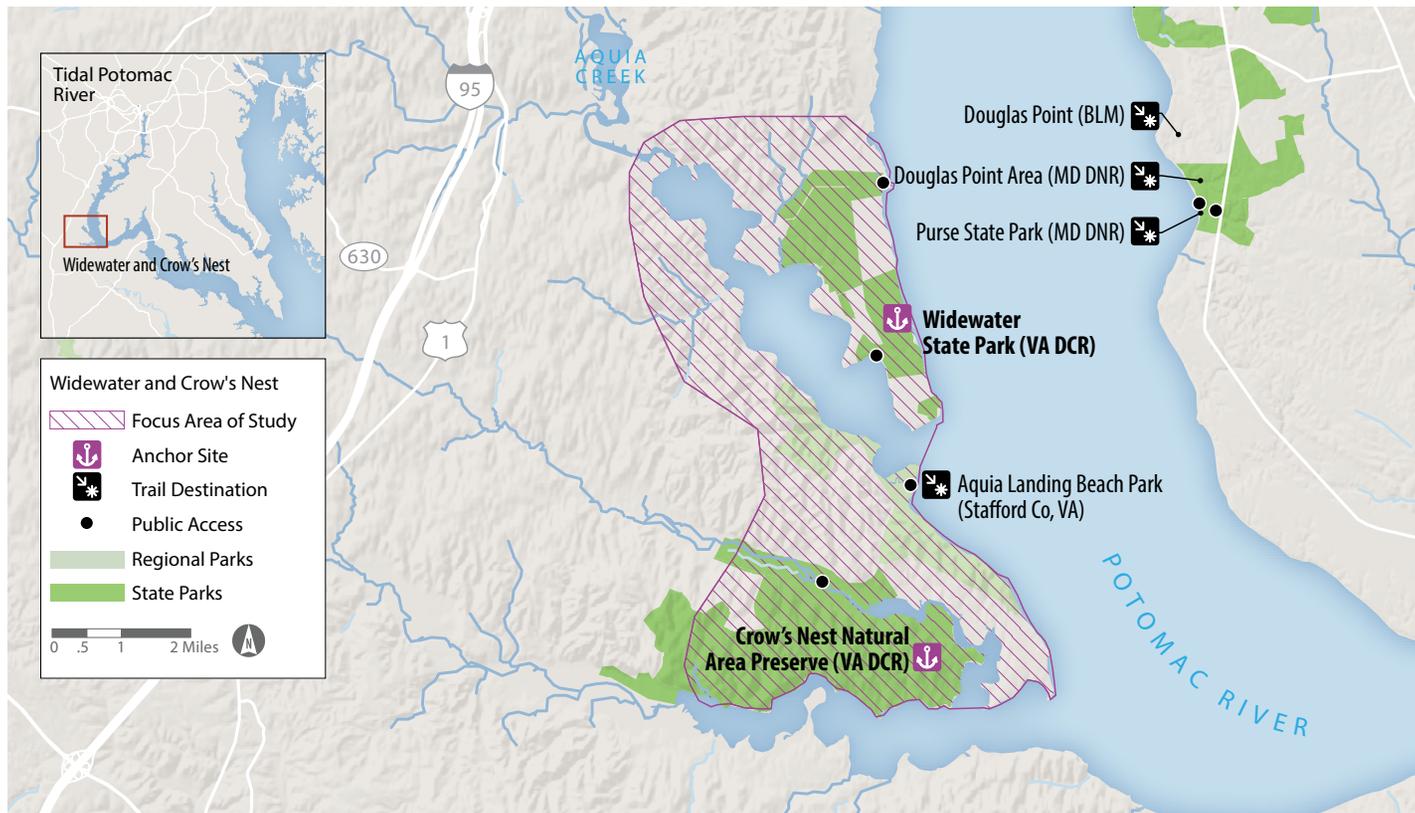
### Focus Areas

- **Focus Area #1:** Pohick Bay Regional Park to Leesylvania Park
- **Focus Area #2:** Widewater State Park to Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve
- **Focus Area #3:** Fairview Beach, VA to Caledon State Park

### Anchor Sites

Proposed anchor sites for Focus Area #1 are the Mason Neck complex and Leesylvania State Park.

- **Mason Neck Peninsula** offers an array of year-round visitor services provided by federal, state and regional agencies. This area receives heavy use and the various partners offer all necessary amenities and support facilities. Mason Neck State Park offers a visitor center, hiking trails, canoe/kayak launch, 3 miles of paved multi-use trails and connections to many of the other sites on the peninsula.
- **Leesylvania State Park** (VA DCR) is rich in Civil War history. The site offers a visitor center, hiking trails overlooking the Potomac and Occoquan Bay, picnic facilities, a beach, a fishing pier, a boat ramp, a soft launch and a store/snack bar. A marina caters to both sailboats and motor boats.



**Anchor Sites (continued)**

For Focus Area #2, the proposed anchor sites are \*Widewater State Park and Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve (\*once Widewater is developed and opened in 2017).

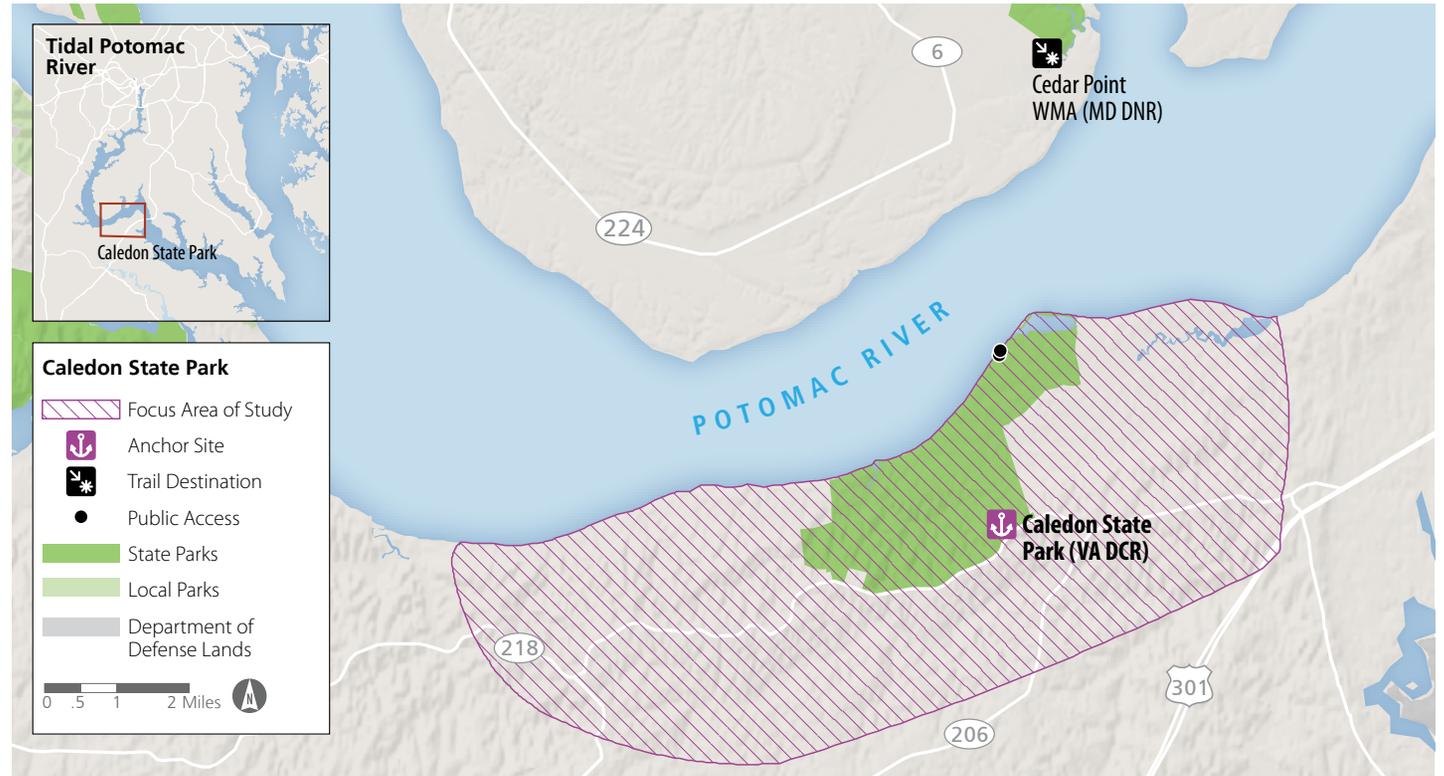
- **Widewater State Park** (VA DCR) is under development. Visitor support facilities will be installed to provide opportunities to explore the river, as well as some of the evocative creeks and settings around Crow's Nest. The Master Plan calls for water- and land-based interpretation and year-round public access. River and boat-in camping along the Potomac will be available via a reservation system, and a visitor center is planned near Aquia Creek.

- **Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve** (VA DCR) offers limited access currently. A soft launch access site on Accokeek Creek, accessed from the Brooke Road parking lot at Crow's Nest, opened in early 2015. A water trail that is under development will start at this location and terminate at Boykin's Island within the preserve. The soft landing site scheduled for Boykin's Island will also provide access to the preserve's land trail system. Currently, Stafford County has received a grant from VDOT to improve the 1.5 mile entrance road to an existing 16-car capacity parking area located within the preserve interior. The road improvements, which are being handled by VDOT, are expected to be completed in late 2015 or early 2016. Once improvements to the access road are completed, this parking lot will provide access to 12 miles of trails for visitors to Crow's Nest. It is anticipated that Crow's Nest will draw significant visitation due to its close proximity to the Fredericksburg/Northern Virginia metro area.



Top: Crow's Nest State park (photo credit: VA DCR)

Bottom: Widewater State Park (photo credit: VA DCR)



**Anchor Sites (continued)**

For Focus Area #3 the proposed anchor site is Caledon State Park.

- Caledon State Park (VA DCR)**, reclassified from a natural area to a state park in 2012, offers a staffed visitor center and gift shop, along with special events and interpretive programming. A network of trails provides access to the Potomac River and boat-in camping is available via a reservation system. The park and surrounding areas support one of the largest (summer) concentrations of bald eagles on the east coast, which are attracted to the park's pristine old growth forest.

**Trail Destinations**

Aquia Landing Beach Park; Pohick Bay Regional Park; Laurel Hill Park, Meadowood SRMA and Occoquan Regional Park serve as key destinations. Also, Barnesfield/Wayside Park (King George Co.), located adjacent to Route 301 at the base of the Governor Harry W. Nice (Route 301) Bridge, features a visitor center (leased to the Dahlgren Heritage Museum), beach access with informal hand carry launch, restrooms and picnicking facilities. It is in close proximity to a full range of lodging and food services associated with the Dahlgren Naval Weapons Laboratory.

Top: Caledon State Park (photo credit: NPS Chesapeake Bay Office)

Bottom: Fairview Beach, VA (photo credit: NPS archive)

### Linking Routes

A small portion of the Potomac Heritage Trail is located within the Mason Neck complex. Prince William County has significant trail sections on the ground and is working with VDOT to install POHE wayfinding signs along the route throughout the county.

The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, managed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, celebrates the diversity of birds, fish, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates throughout Virginia's 43,000 square miles of habitat. The Coastal Trail consists of 18 trail loops to explore - including the Mason Neck Loop, Prince William Loop, Fredericksburg Loop and Northern Neck Loop within this river section study area - that feature great opportunities to view nature and wildlife along the Potomac River and other sites within the region.

The Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail (DRHT) is a privately owned and maintained trail that is available to the public via a permitting system. The Occoquan Water Trail explores the tidal estuaries and upper reaches of the Occoquan River as it extends 40 miles inland from the Potomac River Water Trail beyond the Mason Neck peninsula.

The Potomac River Water Trail extends from Washington, D.C. to the mouth of the Potomac. The associated map and guide, broken into six distinct sections, provides information regarding area history, public lands/points of interest and amenities, including restaurants and lodging.

### Support Services

The towns of Lorton, Occoquan, Quantico and Woodbridge offer significant visitor services and are within close proximity to the Mason Neck complex. Fairview Beach, a small river-front community located between Crow's Nest and Caledon, has multiple marinas and restaurants that are accessible via land and water.

## Key Stories and Associated Resources

The following key stories associated with CAJO, STSP and POHE themes are relevant to the various trail components in this river section:



### Captain John Smith Chesapeake NHT

(Smith's explorations, American Indian cultures, natural history of Bay)

- Smith traveled up the Potomac on his first voyage (June - July 1608) but recorded little about this period. Later, when describing encounters on the Rappahannock River, he referred to meeting an Indian named Mosco while on the Potomac. Mosco purportedly acted as a guide for Smith's crew and aided in persuading the chief of the Patowomeck tribe to lend men for a trek up Aquia (Quiyough) Creek to find a metallic ore (which later proved to be worthless).
- Indian communities in this area tended to be established along creeks, such as Aquia and Potomac. Smith mapped several Indian communities in the area, including Paspatanzie, Mattacunt, Patowomeck, Pamacocack, Quiyough and Tauxenent. The site of the latter can be determined from the Occoquan River based on its characteristic siting.
- Mason Neck and Caledon were first protected to help conserve and restore the American bald eagle; eagles and great blue herons are frequently seen nesting in these areas today.
- The preserved lands on Mason Neck and at Caledon State Park and Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve offer the opportunity to tell the natural history of the area and provide information on Virginia Indian lifeways.
- Smaller inland creeks such as Gunston Cove, Belmont Bay, Occoquan Bay, Powells Creek, Aquia Creek and Potomac Creek offer excellent opportunities for small boat or kayak/canoe use and for exploring settings that evoke much earlier time periods.

**Features that support these stories include:** Leesylvania State Park (prime fishing site dating back to pre-European contact); Mason Neck State Park; Mason Neck NWR, Featherstone NWR; Caledon State Park; Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve.



Top: Fishing at Leesylvania State Park (photo credit: Virginia Outdoors website)

Bottom: Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge (photo credit: American Towns website)



### Star-Spangled Banner NHT

(military events, individual contributors, Bay region as hub, icons of war)

- An area known as Kettlebottom Shoals, located along the bend of the Potomac River between the Maryland Peninsula and Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve, proved to be difficult for British vessels to navigate when loaded down with plunder collected from raids at Alexandria.
- More research is underway to identify sites significant to British fleet movement through this area en route to Washington.

**Features that support these stories include:** Kettlebottom Shoals, STSP information panels at Crain Highway Visitor's Center



### Potomac Heritage NST

(meeting ground of conservation ideas and practices, five physiographic regions, crossroads of opportunity, development of U.S. Republic)

- Superb examples of Tidal Potomac ecology and ecosystem conservation and restoration can be found along this stretch of the river.
- A (state) rare natural community – a Coastal Plain Depression Swamp – is located in the center of Old Colchester Park and Preserve (west of Meadowood SRMA). This 140-acre park includes the Colonial-era port town of Colchester.
- This area reflects the evolution of the United States, including the Colonial era, George Washington, tobacco farming, and 19th/20th-century industrial periods.
- The preserved lands on Mason Neck and at Caledon State Park and Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve offer the opportunity to tell stories of Colonial development.
- Mason Neck State Park supports one of the largest great blue heron rookeries in Virginia with over 1,400 nests.
- Some sites within this river section once supported robust commercial fishing operations.
- Because Aquia Creek sandstone is easy to shape and was mined within 45 miles of Washington, D.C. (at Wigginton's Island quarry located on Aquia Creek, now Stafford County's Government Island Park), it was selected as the primary building material for use in Washington's government buildings, specifically in the White House, the Capitol, the Treasury Building and the Patent Office (now the National Portrait Gallery) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

**Features that support these stories include:** Gunston Hall (home of George Mason) circa 1775; Leesylvania (commercial fishing hub); Wigginton's Island quarry at Aquia Creek (now Government Island Park)

Top: Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge (photo credit: Prince William County Conservation Alliance website)

Bottom: Pohick Bay Regional Park (photo credit: NPS archive)

## Proposed Trail Enhancements and Implementation Strategies

In addition to the cross cutting strategies which apply to all river sections, this river section provides or has near-term potential to provide a wide variety of desired visitor experiences for different types of trail users. Providing optimal trail-related visitor experiences in a way that highlights this area’s resources, primary features and key stories could best be achieved as follows:

Site	Trail Component	Action	Description	
<b>Focus Area #1 - Pohick Bay to Leesylvania Complex</b>				
<b>Mason Neck State Park</b>		Anchor Site	Enhance Visitor Center Exhibits	Visitor Center exhibits at Mason Neck State Park could be enhanced with information related to the national trails. Fundraising efforts are underway to complete the exhibit plan for the visitor center. NPS/other partners could potentially assist with funding a portion of the overall exhibit and promote the trails and trail themes.
			New Trail Itineraries	Itineraries could be developed or expanded for both guided and self-guided trips along Kanés Creek and Belmont Bay.
			Develop Boat-in Primitive Campsites	The potential exists to develop primitive boat-in campsites at Mason Neck State Park for use by paddle craft. Depending on eagle nesting and nest locations, these sites may need to have restricted use periods once developed.
			Develop Stories Related to the Trails	Outfitters, summer camps and paddling club members currently providing paddling tours and utilizing the launch sites at Mason Neck State Park could incorporate CAJO, STSP and POHE stories into their trip itineraries. NPS staff could assist tour leader staff in becoming “Certified Trail Ambassadors” to ensure the trail-related information being shared is accurate and of high quality.
			Enhance Electronic Kiosk	Information regarding bicycle and paddle routes for day trips could be developed and provided at the park's electronic kiosk.
			Connecting Trails to Other Major Properties	Key sites within the Mason Neck complex could be connected by a multi-use non-vehicular trail that could support enhanced interpretive and recreational opportunities. The third phase of the trail connecting Gunston Road Elementary School to Route 1 is in the planning stage and may require additional funding for implementation.
<b>Leesylvania State Park</b>			Develop Trail Itineraries	Itineraries could be developed or expanded for both guided and self-guided trips along upper Powells Creek.
			Develop Stories Related to the Trails	Outfitters, summer camps and paddling club members currently providing paddling tours and utilizing the launch sites at Leesylvania State Park could incorporate CAJO, STSP and POHE stories into their trip itineraries. NPS staff could assist tour leader staff in becoming “Certified Trail Ambassadors” to ensure the trail-related information being shared is accurate and of high quality.
			Primitive Paddle in Camping	Explore incorporating water-to-land primitive campsites could be explored.
			Enhance Electronic Kiosk	Information regarding bicycle and paddle routes for day trips could be developed and provided at the park's electronic kiosk.
			Provide Training for Watermen Tours	Explore potential to work with watermen in this area that may be interested in participating in the Watermen Heritage Tourism Training Program. Share NPS/approved written scripts to develop custom Watermen Heritage Tours if appropriate.
<b>Occoquan Regional Park</b>			Develop Stories Related to the Trails	Private outfitters currently offer boating and paddling tours along the various trails in this area. NPS staff could assist the leaders of these sites/organizations to become “Certified Trail Ambassadors” to ensure the trail-related information being shared is accurate and of high quality.
			New Access Sites on Occoquan River Water Trail	Additional access/launch sites could be developed along the Occoquan River Water Trail (through a combined effort of NOVA and the NPS Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program).
			River Festival Trails Promotion	Tying in trail themes of CAJO, STSP and POHE to the Occoquan River Festival could bring more attention to the Trails.
<b>Pohick Bay Regional Park</b>			Provide Interpretive Panels	Interpretive panels highlighting each of the parks in this river section could give context to how the individual sites fit into the larger stories of CAJO, STSP and POHE, as well as refer visitors to additional significant sites in the area. Touring itineraries could be developed or expanded to help visitors reach key park sites, river access points, and other trail-related points of interest.
			Primitive Paddle in Camping	Incorporation of water-to-land primitive campsites could be considered.
<b>Meadowood SRMA</b>			Provide Interpretive Panels	Interpretive panels highlighting each of the parks in this river section could give context to how the individual sites fit into the larger stories of CAJO, STSP and POHE, as well as refer visitors to additional significant sites in the area. Touring itineraries could be developed or expanded to help visitors reach key park sites, river access points, and other trail-related points of interest.
			Connecting Trails to Other Major Properties	Key sites within the Mason Neck complex could be connected by a multi-use non-vehicular trail that could support enhanced interpretive and recreational opportunities. The third phase of the trail connecting Gunston Road Elementary School to Route 1 is in the planning stage and may require additional funding for implementation.
<b>Old Colchester Park and Preserve</b>		Trail Destination	Interpretive Opportunity	Archeological investigations have been underway for several years on a significant Indian community. Additional studies could be undertaken and findings preserved for interpretive purposes.

Site	Trail Component	Action	Description	
<b>Focus Area #1 - Pohick Bay to Leesylvania Complex</b>				
<b>Mason Neck NWR</b>		Trail	Provide Interpretive Panels	Interpretive panels highlighting each of the parks in this river section could give context to how the individual sites fit into the larger stories of CAJO, STSP and POHE, as well as refer visitors to additional significant sites in the area. Touring itineraries could be developed or expanded to help visitors reach key park sites, river access points, and other trail-related points of interest.
		Destination	Primitive Paddle in Camping	Incorporation of water-to-land primitive campsites could be considered.
			New Access Site	A new water-to-land-only paddle-in access site could be considered along the refuge shoreline.
			Develop New Trail Linkage and Access	Plans to link the existing Woodmarsh Trail to Sycamore Point by opening up the Sycamore Road, adding a new observation Platform on the bluff and provide a trail to the beach could be considered.
			Partnership Opportunity	Opportunities to leverage federal, state and local participation in USFWS programs, such as the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, could be explored. Shared goals of conservation, stewardship and urban outreach could be enhanced by forming partnerships.
<b>Occoquan Bay NWR</b>		Trail Destination	Provide Interpretive Panels	Interpretive signs, reflecting the natural and cultural richness of the area, could be installed at key wildlife viewing sites and boat launch areas. Guided tours highlighting the region's wildlife could be expanded and/or developed.
<b>Featherstone NWR</b>		Trail Destination	New Public Access Sites	Plans exist to install two new observation platforms, one on Farm and one on Neabsco creeks. Also, a water-to-land access point is proposed for Occoquan Bay. A dock for fishing and wildlife observation is proposed along with three additional fishing areas.
<b>US Route 1</b>		Linking Route	Varied Driving and Bicycling Itineraries	A driving guide or App highlighting Route 1 could be developed to guide visitors to a variety of opportunities, points of interest, visitor services and water access areas.
<b>Potomac Heritage Trail</b>		Linking Route	Utilize Virginia Railway Express (VRE) Stations	VRE stations in southern Fairfax and Prince William counties provide connections to trail sites via POHE. VRE stations may add more connections to trail sites and could be willing to provide national trail information on-board. Existing VRE stations could potentially become major points of entry into this area for bicyclists, particularly if Capital Bikeshare is expanded into southern Fairfax.
<b>Focus Area #2 - Widewater State Park to Crows Nest Natural Area Preserve</b>				
<b>Widewater State Park</b>		Anchor Site	Park Planning and Development	Communication with the park's master plan team and phased development should include CAJO, STSP and POHE trail-related themes to ensure the visitor experience includes exposure and inclusion of the national trails.
			Campsite Development	In addition to the primitive paddle-in campsite under development for permit-holders and groups, consideration could be given to other overnight and related visitor facilities.
			Park Development	Water access facilities including paddle launches, picnicking, and other related facilities are currently in the construction planning phase. Once developed these will provide key facilities in support of the Trails. A powerboat launch on the Potomac is planned but no funding has been allocated.
<b>Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve</b>		Anchor Site	Water to Land Access Facility	A new soft landing could be developed near Boykins Island on Potomac Creek within Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve to allow for water to land access at the site.
			Develop Paddle Itineraries	Itineraries could be developed or expanded for both DCR-sponsored and self-guided trips along Potomac and Accokeek Creeks.
<b>Aquia Landing Beach Park</b>		Trail Destination	Provide Interpretive Panels	Interpretive panels highlighting each of the parks in this river section could give context to how the individual sites fit into the larger stories of CAJO, STSP and POHE, as well as refer visitors to additional significant sites in the area. Touring itineraries could be developed or expanded to help visitors reach key park sites, river access points, and other trail-related points of interest.
			Primitive Paddle in Camping	Explore incorporating water-to-land primitive by permit-only camping for Aquia Landing Beach Park to support the Trails.
<b>Focus Area #3 - Fairview Beach to the US 301 Bridge</b>				
<b>Caledon State Park</b>		Anchor Site	Enhance Visitor Center Exhibits	Visitor Center exhibits at Caledon State Park could be enhanced with information related to the national trails. NPS/other partners could potentially assist with funding a portion of an exhibit that promotes the trails and trail themes.
			Enhance Electronic Kiosk	Information regarding bicycle and paddle routes for day trips could be developed and provided at the park's electronic kiosk.
			Enhance Water Access	Consider developing a car-top launch with parking to encourage park to park connectivity for the Potomac Water Trail.
			Connect with Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail (DRHT)	Provide a connecting route between the Park and the DRHT; also explore the future management and operation of the trail as a potential unit of the park. This could serve as a component of the POHE and provide a potential link from the State Park to the Barnesfield Park in Dahlgren.
<b>Fairview Beach</b>		Support Services	Water Craft Rentals and Orientation Signage	Opportunities to offer or expand boat, canoe and kayak rentals could be considered. Where appropriate a kiosk or other signage could be installed to interpret trail stories and connect with other sites.