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## Virginia to Collaborate in New Online Guide to America's Natural Places

**RICHMOND** – The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Natural Heritage Program has been selected as one of five state pilot programs to collaborate on LandScope America, a new interactive website designed to promote conservation by changing how citizens look at natural places in their backyard and across the nation.

LandScope America, a collaborative effort among NatureServe, the National Geographic Society and natural heritage programs, is scheduled to launch in late 2008. Backed by a \$5 million grant, the website will offer the public a multimedia online guide that illustrates the depth and breadth of America's open spaces and the tools needed to conserve them. LandScope America will seek to inform and inspire place-based conservation and increase the pace and effectiveness of land protection investments nationwide.

“Virginia's Natural Heritage Program is a very important piece of the land conservation effort in the state, especially in terms of our goal of 400,000 additional conserved acres by 2010,” said Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine. “The LandScope initiative will be a wonderful addition to current promotional efforts and will reach a broad audience about conservation efforts in Virginia and the rest of the country.”

LandScope Virginia, a state-level component of the larger project, will allow visitors to immerse themselves in fascinating stories, photos, video and satellite imagery about the state's lands. The website will showcase conservation priorities, maps and other rich scientific data from authoritative state sources helping the public to understand conservation issues and the need to take action.

The Clinch River valley, located in the Appalachian Mountains of southwestern Virginia, was selected as the first focus area to illustrate how the online guide will address various landscapes statewide. The region's limestone bedrock harbors more than 1,250 caves, barrens, forests and cliffs that are home to many rare plants. Its rivers and streams lead the nation in aquatic diversity. Thirty-one species of rare mussels and 19 rare fishes are found in the Clinch River alone.

“When considering where to start, picking the Clinch was easy,” said Tom Smith, director of the Natural Heritage Program at DCR. “Identified in 2002 as one of six biological diversity hotspots in the United States and wrapped up in world-class scenic beauty, the Clinch is a natural choice.”

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LandScope America will illustrate conservation priorities in the context of how the lands and waters support the needs of people and the economy. The Clinch's combination of diverse natural resources and a rich history of farming and forestry make the region an essential part of the state's natural and cultural heritage. Ongoing efforts led by DCR and The Nature Conservancy prompted the team to focus its initial attention on the Pinnacle Natural Area Preserve, a 669-acre preserve managed by DCR's Natural Heritage Program.

"With LandScope America, we have a partnership that is bringing special places like The Pinnacle into people's homes," said Bill Kittrell, director of conservation programs for The Nature Conservancy in Virginia. "Helping people understand and appreciate how much is at stake throughout the Clinch Valley will only enhance our ability to save as much as we can while we still can."

DCR brings to the initiative first-class conservation science, information technology and professional conservation expertise. The agency recently launched a free online resource called Land Conservation Data Explorer ([www.vaconservedlands.org](http://www.vaconservedlands.org)) that allows the public to map and track conservation resources throughout the state.

"We are very pleased to have DCR working with us in this effort. The agency brings an immense range of experience to the table that will enrich the overall development of LandScope America," said Mary Klein, president and CEO of NatureServe.

In addition to Virginia, other pilot states are Florida, Colorado, Washington and Maine. A preview website, launched in October 2007, is available at [www.landscape.org](http://www.landscape.org). Photos are available upon request.

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**NatureServe** is a non-profit conservation group dedicated to providing the scientific basis for effective conservation action. Representing a network of 80 natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America, NatureServe is a leading source for detailed scientific information about threatened plants, animals, and ecosystems. Visit us online at [www.natureserve.org](http://www.natureserve.org).

**Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation** works with Virginians to conserve, protect, and enhance their lands and improve the quality of the Chesapeake Bay and our rivers and streams, promotes the stewardship and enjoyment of natural, cultural and outdoor recreational resources, and ensures the safety of Virginia's dams.