VNRLI Class of 2022 Graduation
Letter for an “A” for Virginia

One of our early homework assignments was to write a letter to our faculty, describing why we earned an A in VNRLI. We projected ourselves into the future, and imagined what goals and milestones might be accomplished by implementing skills we learned throughout the course. It was a good exercise in intention setting and holding ourselves accountable. Thus, we collectively wrote a Letter for an “A” for Virginia, to express our hopes and vision for the Commonwealth as VNRLI graduates. We also acknowledge our two fellows from Maryland; while the letter is Virginia-focused, many themes in this letter span jurisdictional boundaries.

Dear Virginia,

As 2022 VNRLI Fellows and residents of the Commonwealth, we express gratitude for your vast natural and cultural resources. Across your 27.4 million acres¹ you provide forest, agricultural lands, inland waters, and coastline that furnish us with food, materials, energy, recreation, inspiration, and income. Once your rich deposits of coal, and now increasingly your winds and sunlight, power our homes and businesses. More than 32,000 plant and animal species contribute to your beauty while aiding in water purification, climate regulation, and numerous other ecosystem services worth an estimated $18 billion annually². Your Southern Appalachians, including the Clinch River, represent one of six biodiversity hotspots in the United States as diverse ecologies, geologies, and climates intersect within your boundaries³.

Culturally, you have many told and untold stories that inform our past human history. Indigenous peoples have inhabited your lands for at least 12,000 years. Their influence and presence is still felt today and is reflected in the names of many of your rivers, towns, the Chesapeake Bay, although officially only 11 tribes⁴ have state recognition and 7 tribes⁵ federal recognition. Jamestown marks the oldest English permanent settlement in the Americas. It is also the site where 20 enslaved Africans stepped onshore in 1619, beginning 246 years of slavery. The first major battle of the Civil War began in Manassas, and four years later, Lee’s army surrendered in Appomattox. In 1951, Barbara Johns bravely led her classmates to strike for equitable education for Black students in Prince Edward County, supporting a broader movement to end racially segregated schools.

We recognize the great responsibility we have to sustainably steward these diverse natural and cultural resources for future generations, and we can point to examples of success. As of June 2021, over 4 million acres, ~16% of your total land area, is protected by federal, state, local, and non-profit groups.⁶ Forty-one State Parks, 46 Wildlife Management Areas, 26 State Forests, 22

¹https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsm8_037652.htm
²http://www.landscope.org/virginia/plants-animals/Species%20Lists/va_endemics/
³http://www.landscope.org/virginia/overview/
⁵https://www.epa.gov/tribal/federally-recognized-tribes-epas-mid-atlantic-region
National Parks, 2 National Forests, and 66 State Natural Area Preserves provide affordable access to nature across the Commonwealth. The restoration efforts of the Elizabeth River Project and their partners have brought a once “dead” river back to life. We are revitalizing former mined lands and brownfields to generate economic development and produce renewable energy in the coalfields region, helping diversify the economy, create new jobs and clean up contaminated lands. In 2019, Governor Ralph Northam established the Virginia Council on Environmental Justice to help ‘protect vulnerable communities from disproportionate impacts of pollution’, and the voices of marginalized communities are further being uplifted by inspiring leaders, like Queen Zakia Shabazz and the Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative, Sheri Shannon and Southside ReLeaf, and Lou Ann Wallace and the Clinch River Valley Initiative. The Rappahannock Tribe recently reacquired 465 acres of sacred ancestral homeland, a rallying example of the landback movement in Virginia. In 2020, Virginia adopted major provisions of the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act, helping lower and middle class citizens prevent the involuntary loss of family land.

Indeed, our many successes across the Commonwealth are encouraging, but we know there is more work to do. The latest State of the Bay report gave the Chesapeake Bay a grade of D+9. While Virginia is currently on track to meet its 2025 pollution reduction targets, efforts must accelerate across the watershed in order to ultimately achieve those goals.10 Habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation are the biggest threats to Virginia’s biodiversity,11 highlighting a need to increase focus on smart development and green infrastructure practices. Dichotomies between rural and urban community types present challenges. For example, the majority of energy sources in the Commonwealth originate from rural southwest Virginia12, yet higher usage rates in more populous and industrial regions of the state13 are often hundreds of miles removed from the communities most directly impacted by energy production. Residents, businesses, NGO’s, and local and state governments will need to continue leaning into these energy challenges to meet our future energy needs by creating reliable, affordable and responsible energy sources.

We also need to do better by Virginia’s people. Hampton Roads is the second largest population center in the U.S. at-risk to sea level rise.14 Climate change is altering coastal communities and working waterfronts at an accelerated rate; we must implement adaptive strategies to build resilience and preserve the livelihoods, homes, and ecosystems in Virginia’s coastal zone. Historically redlined neighborhoods continue to struggle with access to resources. Successful grassroots initiatives work to alleviate some of the long lasting impacts of past racist housing

8 https://vaunitedlandtrusts.org/
11 http://www.landscape.org/virginia/threats/
12 https://energy.virginia.gov/geology/EnergyResources.shtml
policies; however, systemic issues are pervasive and require comprehensive policy change. Environmental justice communities, such as Brown Grove, Pine Grove and Union Hill,\textsuperscript{15} deserve fair, equitable treatment and meaningful participation in shaping policies affecting residents’ well-being. Progress that has been made builds momentum to carry forward our work towards an equitable Virginia; examples include Juneteenth, now a state and federally recognized holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States. Plans to build a water pumping station at Rassawek, the Monacan Indian Nation’s historic capitol, were abandoned and alternatives were pursued by the James River Water Authority,\textsuperscript{16} after working with advocates and the Monacan Nation. Efforts are being made by groups like Descendants of Enslaved Communities at the University of Virginia to tell complete histories that inspire other entities to present whole and inclusive historical narratives.

Fortunately, our time at VNRLI has equipped us with invaluable principles and tools to meet these challenges. We know that change often takes time, but is not impossible with patience and persistence. And so we will practice the following: we will invest in the critical task of relationship-building. We will meet people where they are and seek first to understand. We will actively listen. We will leave our comfort zones to grow. We will normalize mindfulness and emotional intelligence to promote a more balanced approach to self-management and interpersonal interactions. We will use trauma-informed practices to engage in conflict transformation and collaboration. We will surfacing underlying interests, rather than focusing on positions, in order to build trust among stakeholders and consensus around solutions. We will base decision making on diverse forms of knowledge and value systems, including Traditional Ecological (or Indigenous) Knowledge and multicultural perspectives. We will weave equity and inclusion into decisions and policy implementation. With these principles and practices, and with the support and growth of VNRLI alumni, we are confident that we can each be leaders for ourselves, our communities, our workplaces, and our Commonwealth.

We envision Virginia as a leader that unites and values all communities in proactively planning for the future, while doing what we can to correct errors of the past. We foresee an inclusive, accessible decision-making table with seats for everyone, where all invited are comfortable to sit and share. We see a future where improving environmental health works in tandem with improving economic health. Our leaders recognize that involving stakeholders in policy-making is time well spent, builds trust, and leads to better outcomes for all. In our vision, Virginia is a beacon for protecting biodiversity; habitat and species are conserved for their inherent value as well as for enjoyment, inspiration, and ecosystem services. Agencies, universities, communities, and businesses partner together to develop effective strategies to combat climate change and protect vulnerable populations. People from Virginia’s varied geographic regions and community types understand each other’s strengths and challenges. A spectrum of interests remain, but there is a collective sense that the Commonwealth is improved by these differences and that embracing multiple perspectives helps to resolve conflicts and achieve better outcomes for all Virginians. Finally, the painful and harmful elements of our history are acknowledged and accepted as a part of Virginia’s identity, and we work through those harms together towards

\textsuperscript{15} https://mappingforej.berkeley.edu/virginia/
\textsuperscript{16} https://www.southernenvironment.org/news/rassawek-saved/
collective healing. In this way, we hold space for the past while cultivating a forward-looking future that is inclusive and celebrates our diverse ideas, experiences, and customs.

When this vision is reality, we as leaders have rightfully earned an A. And what about for you? What does deserving an A look like? Whether you consider yourself a visitor or have called this place “home” for generations, we are all nourished by and responsible for the wellbeing of this land, the natural resources, wildlife, and the people that make up Virginia. What is your role in this interconnected vision? What words, actions, and energies will you cultivate? May we step forth together, united in the dream of a flourishing future.

Your stewards,

VNRLI class of 2022