

## **Paradise**

Kecoughtan Indians, at times a part of the great Powhattan Confederacy, roamed the forests and meadows of today's Sandy Bottom Nature Park in search of deer, turkey, river otter and beaver. These animals provided the hunters and their families with food and clothing. Abundant nut-bearing beech, hickory and oak trees, as well as blackberry and blueberry bushes also contributed to the Native American's diet.

In 1607, European immigrants settled around Hampton and built houses and roads. Big Bethel Road, built in the early 1700s, connected a travel route between Newport News and Yorktown. Gradually, the Native Americans were driven from their old hunting grounds. Although areas of the Hampton Roads Peninsula played significant roles during the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, no major battles were fought on the present park site. The site, never developed for urban purposes, retained its natural state until recent times. From the 1860s until the early 1950s, property owners farmed the land and harvested its trees for timber production.

As the population of the Hampton Roads Peninsula and Tidewater area grew, it became necessary for the Virginia Department of Transportation to build more roads. The once pristine forests and meadows where animals lived, Native Americans hunted, colonists settled, and soldiers walked were mined for sand and fill to supply new roads.

## **Paradise Lost**

The site was transformed in the 1950s, when the Virginia Department of Transportation started mining sand needed for the construction of interstate highways. The pits formed from the mining operations, filled with rain and ground water to create the Sandy Bottom Lake.

After the Virginia Department of Transportation abandoned the mining pits in the 1970s, the property was abused by unconcerned citizens. They created crude roads as they sought access to the Crystal Lake swimming hole or when they used the secluded areas for dumping trash. The property's trees, bushes and other vegetation died as roots were severed and soil compacted. Mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian populations declined with the ever-increasing level of human intrusion. The area's wetland forests were dying a slow and painful death.

But now, over forty years after the destruction began, there is a ray of hope, and recovery begins...

## **Borrow Pit to Natural Treasure**

Recommendation to the Hampton City Council by the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, March 1989:

"We believe the area represents a unique opportunity to conserve a portion of Hampton's vanishing open space and to retain a unique natural setting with the combination of natural and man-made lakes, plus undisturbed, vegetative woodlands."

When the City of Hampton approached the Virginia Department of Transportation with a park plan, VDOT deeded 250 acres of their old mining pits to the city with the understanding that the wetlands would be saved and developed. Over the next few years the city acquired almost two hundred additional acres from private land owners.

Sandy Bottom Nature Park was born.

The City of Hampton and its City Council, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and the citizens of Hampton proposed the property be used as an environmental education center and native wildlife preserve for the enjoyment of all who visit here.

## **Paradise Regained**

The Sandy Bottom Nature Park is designed to enhance and protect wildlife habitats and to provide visitors with a chance to learn about its unique environment. The park is also a destination for those visitors simply interested in enjoying the outdoors through boating, fishing, hiking and other activities.

To accommodate both human and wildlife needs, the park is divided into four separate areas: The Human Activity Area; the Interpretive Area; the Wildlife Management Area; and the Wildlife Core Area. The Nature Center, amphitheater, recreational and camping facilities on the eastern side of the park make up the Human Activity Area. In addition, picnic areas, boat rentals, fishing, a playground and hiking trails are located there.

Much of the park's 456 acres is composed of wetlands. In the Interpretive Area, visitors can stroll along trails and boardwalks and observe nature with little impact on the plants and animals that live there. Outdoor classrooms, observation platforms and an observation tower give visitors first-hand experience in observing the complexity of these habitats in action. There are also trails in the Wildlife Management Area, but many areas at the park need extra protection. For instance, access will be restricted in this area when animals are mating and raising their young, and the Wildlife Core Area, a safe haven for animals, is not accessible.

However, other areas of the park are open year round, including the Interpretive Area trails, Nature Center, recreational areas, and camping facilities. Keep a lookout for signs advising you of these restrictions, and play an active part in protecting these fragile habitats.