



Virginia Master Naturalist Program Certification and Enrollment Changes

August 2020

Virginia Master Naturalist State Program Office

Background

We recognize that, because of COVID-19, many VMN volunteers have not been able to do the kind or amount of volunteer work that they may have planned for 2020. While there are many possible activities and projects that can be done from home, there are other activities (like educational programs and tabling at festivals) that have been greatly limited. In addition, we recognize that our volunteers may have unexpected responsibilities related to families or jobs this year.

We want all Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer activities to be truly voluntary, and we want to avoid creating pressure on any of you to meet volunteer commitments that you may have made before the pandemic. We gathered input from our sponsoring agencies, some chapter leaders, leaders of other VCE volunteer programs, and other states' Master Naturalist program leaders. As a result, we are instituting the following guidelines and changes to our processes for this year. For now, these changes only apply to the timeframes described below. We will reassess the situation in 2021 and communicate new guidelines at that point.

VMN Enrollment and Certification

1. **Staying a VMN volunteer in 2021:** VMN volunteers who are currently enrolled now may remain enrolled in the program at the start of 2021, regardless of the number of hours of volunteer service contributed in 2020. In other words, if you are worried about being made “inactive” at the end of this year because you could not perform volunteer service in 2020, that no longer needs to be a concern.
2. **Maintaining Certified VMN status for 2021:** Currently enrolled VMN volunteers who have (a) previously attained the Certified Virginia Master Naturalist status in any year, **or** (b) been part of the program since 2018 or earlier but never Certified can earn Certified VMN status for 2021 by completing 20 hours of volunteer service and 4 hours of continuing education in 2020. This is a 50% reduction from the normal 40+8.
3. **Earning First-time Certification:** Currently enrolled VMN volunteers who took basic training courses in 2019 or 2020 **and** who have not yet completed the requirements for Certified Virginia Master Naturalist status will still have to complete 40 hours of service and 8 hours of continuing education to earn their first-time Certified Virginia Master Naturalist status, but **they will have an extended time frame to complete those requirements**. Each chapter can work with its recent trainees to determine what that time frame should be, but we are suggesting an extra 6 to 12 months to complete the requirements. This means that a person who graduated from basic training in November 2019 would have until sometime in the second half of 2021 to complete the 40+8 (compared to the normal deadline of November 2020.) Each chapter will work out a plan based on their schedule and situation, so if you fall into this category, please contact your local chapter leaders.

VMN Recertification Pins

In regards to our 2021 recertification pin, we have made the difficult decision to take a year off. This pin would have been the one normally distributed in early 2021 based on hours volunteers completed in 2020. We have two main reasons for the decision. First, we believe it is very important to reduce pressure on volunteers to perform service this year. We know that some volunteers would be overly stressed about trying to get that pin. The Certified VMN title does not seem to create the same sort of motivation, which is why we feel comfortable having the 20+4 hour requirement to earn the status, even without the pin. Second, we are sustaining a significant budget cut due to COVID-19 impacts on our state agency sponsors. This cut has meant developing a new, very slim budget for the state-level operations of the VMN program that has reduced staff time, reduced costs of supplies, and other cuts. While we are increasing our fundraising goals and grant submissions to help fill the gap, we feel that any additional resources we bring in need to be used on our highest priority needs, which are staffing costs rather than supplies. We know that this is a disappointment to some of our volunteers who really enjoy having that special 'bling', so please know that we didn't make this decision lightly. Instead, we are going to work to recognize all our VMN volunteers in other ways this year. We hope that you understand, and we hope to return to having an annual recertification pin in 2022!



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