

## ***Friends of Dragon Run Hosts International Conservation Professionals on Dragon Run***

Friends of Dragon Run (FODR) hosted conservation professionals from seven countries on June 30<sup>th</sup>. Ten participants of William & Mary's Institute for Integrative Conservation (IIC) "Conservation Catalyst" program attended the event along with three IIC members. The day on Dragon Run was the final event of the participants' three week stay in Virginia. The Catalyst cohort included representatives from *Amboseli Ecosystem Trust* in Kenya, *Botswana Wild Bird Trust*, *Conservation International* locations in Cambodia and Singapore, *Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency* of South Africa, *Living Desert Museum* of California, USA, *Mbhashe Municipality* of South Africa, and the *Mongolian Conservation Initiative*.

The (IIC) Conservation Catalyst is an integrative conservation leadership program for early and mid-career conservation professionals. The program's goal is to build a global network of professionals practicing *integrative conservation*; innovative, collaborative, and inclusive conservation that seeks human and ecosystem wellbeing in tandem. In June, the IIC welcomed its first cohort of Conservation Catalyst Fellows, who participated in an immersive summer residency at W&M. Workshops and discussion sessions throughout the program focused on self-reflection, individual empowerment, communications, innovation, entrepreneurship, and strengthening of conservation networks to position participants to excel at conservation in their home countries.

This summer's program culminated fittingly with a day-long paddle and hiking excursion on the Dragon Run, a remote stretch of Virginia swampland on the Middle Peninsula; identified as one of the most ecologically significant areas of the massive Chesapeake Bay watershed. Friends of Dragon Run guides, captivated the group with the lore and natural history of Dragon Run. Many attendees experienced their first times on a water craft during their Virginia stay, and all were amazed with the natural beauty and unspoiled ecosystem of the Dragon. The FODR volunteers described some of the keystone species they would see on the trip and their guests saw first-hand obvious signs of beavers, woodpeckers, and some very old bald cypress trees. For some of the participants who have few trees in their home countries, it was incredible to see such an old forest. The participants shared with FODR volunteers the conservation issues in their home lands and the FODR members described their mission and programs.





Listed below are some quotes from those who attended the event:

*“A paddle down Dragon’s Run was one of the memorable highlights of my trip to Virginia! Thanks to Jeff and his team of wonderful Friends of Dragon Run, we paddled safely down the river, past impressive beaver dens and dams, through the reeds, and among the towering Bald cypress trees and their sky-facing roots. It is great to know that the resident turtles, dragonflies (and their molts), damselflies, beetles, and raptors overhead that we saw call this magical place home,”* stated Catalyst participant, Frances Loke. *“Having mostly kayaked in the sea, it was refreshing to learn to paddle in the shallows and observe nature up close with friends. A true gem! Thank you, Friends for all that you do to protect and educate about the Dragon Run.”*

*“We are so thankful to Friends of Dragon Run for their stewardship of this important conservation area, and for the time they spend carefully guiding and educating small groups like ours on hikes and paddles”. – Robert Rose, IIC Executive Director*

*“It was a wonderful end to our trip. It felt like a safari on the water, learning about the old trees, the very beautiful prothonotary warbler, which followed us for a while as we paddled along the peaceful waters of the Dragon, and most amazing for me was how incredibly smart and important the Beaver is to the ecosystem of the Dragon. Just amazing. Incredible place to spend the day.” – Tjipo Umakaone Keaikitse, Catalyst Participant*

*Anita Hagy Ferguson, one of the program managers at William and Mary who participated in the event said: “Thank you so much for the day on Dragon Run. I still see the swamp when I close my eyes. It is such a mesmerizing, special place.”*

*Jack Kauffman, one of the FODR volunteers said “I learned a great deal from the guests about the difficulty they have in promoting conservation efforts. In Kenya for example, people are most concerned with where they will get their next meal. It’s difficult to get those same people and the politicians they elect to focus on conservation issues”.*