



**Bald Head Woods Reserve
Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, December 12, 2023, 11:00 am**

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
Bald Head Island Conservancy (BHIC), Chris Shank	Yes
Village of Bald Head Island, Chris McCall	No
Village of Bald Head Island Public Safety	No
Natural Heritage Program, Mike Schafale	Yes
<u>Community Members</u>	
Al Buzzard	Yes
John Kinney	No
<u>Others Present</u>	
Elizabeth Pinnix, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Southern Sites Manager Morgan Penrose, DCM/NCCR Stewardship & Research Specialist Rebecca Williams, DCM/NCCR Intern Beth Darrow, BHIC Jae Kim, BHI Assistant Village	

Welcome

The southern sites manager welcomed the committee to the Fall 2023 meeting, reviewed the agenda, and led introductions.

Reserve-wide Administrative Update

The Reserve-wide Update was shared with committee members prior to the meeting. Members had no comments or questions about the updates. The update in its entirety is included as Appendix A.

The site manager provided a reminder from the Reserve-wide update:

- This is the last meeting for those LAC members that have terms expiring at the end of the calendar year. New appointments will be present at the Spring 2024 meeting.
- Staffing update: Abby Williams is the new Natural Resource Resilience Specialist located in the Beaufort office. The goal of this position is to plan and implement resilience plans for Masonboro Island, Zeke’s Island, and Currituck Banks reserve sites.

Mr. Shank asked for the status of funding on the national level – specifically regarding infrastructure and acquisition. The site manager referred to the budget in the reserve-wide update and reiterated that there is funding available for those items, and we are working on associated projects.

Site Specific Update

General site conditions and updates

Fortunately, in 2023 the site did not experience major impacts from storms in comparison to previous years. Trail maintenance was conducted multiple times in the late summer and fall in coordination with Bald Head Island Conservancy (BHIC). The reserve is extremely appreciative of the working relationship with BHIC and plans to continue coordinated field maintenance days in 2024.

Year of the Trail

2023 is deemed the [Year of the Trail by the Great Trails State Coalition](#). This campaign aims to connect people with local trails and encourage going outside and exploring. In collaboration with BHIC, specifically Jennifer Widgen, we hosted a guided hike through the Bald Head Woods trails on November 4. There were crafts and educational opportunities including [iNaturalist](#) tutorial. There were 18 attendees, and it went so well we hope to make this a yearly event.

DEQ Facilities services

There are funds available for infrastructure improvements at reserve sites through the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) facilities services team. Over the past few months, the site manager has gathered suggestions for potential updates which include replacing the wooden boardwalks, replacing parking platforms, adding additional boardwalks where applicable, updating trail steps, improving accessibility, and adding/updating signage. Facilities staff will come for a site visit in 2024. The site manager asked for additional suggestions and thoughts about this topic.

Ms. Darrow asked if there was something that could be done around the Timmons Oak to protect and improve the existing deterrent around the tree because it is a tripping hazard. The site manager assured her we have thought about the options, but it will be difficult to install anything like a platform without damaging the tree root system. The reserve will investigate other solutions.

Mr. Shank asked if the funds could be used to install forest monitoring equipment that could be used to capture the environmental conditions and have baseline data to work from. He added that we are unable to understand how climate change and other factors are impacting the forest because we lack the basic baseline data. Mr. Schafale mentioned this would be difficult because conditions vary drastically from spot to spot, and it would be a large commitment to get a result. He added he has an interest in understanding the impacts from sea spray on the forest and how the canopy gaps react in addition to edge and development effects. This could be done by deploying salt spray detectors.

Ms. Darrow mentioned investing time in recruiting specialists who can dedicate time to understanding the maritime forest. She suggested creating a research question that could potentially get more attention and attract researchers. The site manager agreed and asked the committee for suggestions on contacts for forest ecology specialists.

Mr. Shank requested a sign for trail heads that explains the conditions of the trail and what to expect when entering. He additionally asked if new signage is a topic that needs to be discussed with the Village. Mr. Kim said he would ask the Village Public Works Department. The site manager stated we would not need permission to install new signs on reserve property, but we would work with both the Village and BHIC before finalizing and installing.

Ms. Darrow asked about the repair of parking platforms at the trail heads along Federal Road and if those belong to the Village or the reserve. Mr. Kim said he would investigate and expressed concern about fixing anything further to avoid setting a precedent. There was confusion among the committee on who the parking platforms belong to. This was added to action items.

Mr. Buzzard asked if there was a possibility of putting wood chips on the trails to help keep them established as well as establishing open areas for gathering for educational opportunities.

Ms. Darrow mentioned adding small, square signs warning visitors about poison ivy and ticks at the trail heads.

The site manager thanked the committee for all the ideas and suggestions.

BHW Monitoring Plan

This topic will be discussed in depth with the monitoring group following the Local Advisory Committee meeting, but a brief overview was provided for committee awareness.

Early in October, BHIC, reserve, Natural Heritage Program (NHP) staff, and past monitoring plan participants convened to conduct vegetation monitoring in the four swale communities from the original monitoring plan finalized in 2015. This monitoring had not been conducted since 2015 due to wet conditions in the swales.

Key takeaways from this monitoring effort: Vegetation communities have changed drastically since 2015 with moderate loss of woody cover due to wind damage, major increase in dog fennel (not previously documented in these large numbers), and possibly a decline in some of the species previously present. To connect this with the water withdrawal from the Village, additional analysis and monitoring will need to take place. With only two sample sets it is difficult to identify directional trends. As a result, further discussions will take place between the monitoring group and updates will be provided as applicable.

Mr. Buzzard asked if we would begin seeing new live oak seedlings following storms in the swales. Mr. Schafale responded that that swale communities are too wet for live oaks to thrive. He also added that we know these communities changed drastically but it was not due to the production wells, but he remains cautious that this could change in situations of drought.

Mr. Shank added that we should look at extreme situations for well withdrawal and drought to get a better idea of the situation.

The site manager acknowledged the points and will follow up with the monitoring group to begin assessing the next steps.

Roundtable

None

Public comments

None

Action Items

The site manager will:

- Schedule trail maintenance days with BHIC;
- Work on infrastructure updates and keep committee in the loop; and
- Facilitate brainstorming of ideas to protect the Timmons oak.

Spring meeting: Wednesday, April 10 @ 11am

N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve Fall 2023 Local Advisory Committee Meetings Reserve-wide Update

Local Advisory Committee Membership

Thank you for your continued service to the reserve's Local Advisory Committees! A special thank you to members whose terms are expiring at the end of this year and did not reapply to serve – the reserve, as well as the division and department, are very appreciative of your service and input. Recommendations regarding community member/organization applications submitted earlier this year are in review for terms beginning in 2024.

Program Highlights

- This year the Coastal Training Program offered **workshops and partner engagement meetings** for decision-makers throughout coastal North Carolina. Multiple events served 533 professionals including real estate agents, local government staff, federal and state agency staff, and land use planners delivering science-based information to protect and manage NC's coastal resources.
- Students and educators gained **in-the-field experiences** at the Rachel Carson and Masonboro Island Reserves this year. Over 50 students participated in summer camps in partnership with the N.C. Maritime Museum and over 40 educators received free continuing education credits through the Teachers on the Estuary and Coastal Explorations programs. Students from Carteret, Onslow, and Craven Counties traversed the Rachel Carson Reserve and the Masonboro Island Explorers program hosted fifth grade students from New Hanover County in partnership with Masonboro.org and Carolina Ocean Studies.
- The reserve continues celebrating the [Year of the Trail](#) in 2023, as designated by the N.C. General Assembly. Guided hikes at the Kitty Hawk Woods and Bald Head Woods Reserves and events at the Currituck Banks and Bird Island Reserves provide opportunities for community members and partners to come together to experience these protected places while staff highlight the habitats and programs that occur at the sites. Thank you to the partners who helped make these a success! Additionally, interpretive signs were installed along trails at the Masonboro Island and Bird Island Reserves and along the Currituck Banks Reserve boardwalk highlighting the unique features of the sites, flora and fauna, ecological processes, and research conducted at the sites.
- The reserve's **Site Stewards Volunteer Program** significantly enhanced the program's capacity in managing the Currituck Banks, Kitty Hawk Woods, Buxton Woods, Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Bird Island Reserves this year. Since January 2023, over 100 volunteers have logged more than 650 hours of stewardship work at reserve sites. Site Stewards observe and record data such as site condition, marine debris, infrastructure damage, and species observed in the field and report findings back to reserve staff. Thank you, volunteers!
- The **Scuppernong Water Study Engagement** Team, comprised of the Coastal Reserve, Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership, The Nature Conservancy, and NC Sea Grant, hosted a public meeting in October to gather local knowledge on flooding to inform the development of the Scuppernong Regional Water Management Study and model funded by the Division of Water Resources; the engagement for the study is supported by NOAA Digital Coast Connects funding. Also included in the public meeting was an asset mapping exercise for Washington County and the Town of Creswell in conjunction with the division's Resilient Coastal Communities Program – these communities are just starting in Phase 1 & 2 of the program. This was done in partnership with SWCA Environmental Consultants, who has been paired with these communities by RCCP. Over 100 community members attended the meeting.
- The reserve introduced its "**Discover the NC Coastal Reserve**" tour last month which is a multi-year campaign spanning 2023-2026 to connect target audiences with the program and places with

events to be hosted at reserve sites along the coast. The tour kicked off in June with a soft launch at our Currituck Banks Reserve with a successful grand reopening and dedication of the refurbished boardwalk (watch a [short video](#) of the event). Local Advisory Committee members will be invited to the site-based events so stay tuned for upcoming event information.

- The reserve is planning a **Research Symposium** for March 20-21, 2024 to highlight work conducted across reserve sites with posters and presentations from researchers including students, faculty, partner agencies, and staff. This will also be an opportunity for the research community to network and provide input on future research priorities.

Research Fellowship Updates

- **2023 NC Coastal Research Fellow Announced**

Juan Zuluaga, a PhD student at University of North Carolina Wilmington is the 2023 North Carolina Coastal Research Fellow. Juan's research will look at how birds regulate their temperature through behaviors to cope with heat in the summer at the Bird Island Reserve. [North Carolina Sea Grant](#) and the [N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve](#) jointly fund this opportunity, which is open to graduate students across North Carolina. With funding for one year, recipients conduct research within one or more of the Coastal Reserve's 10 sites. Learn more about this year's fellow and project [here](#).

- **NOAA Margaret A. Davidson Fellows**

The [Margaret A. Davidson Graduate Fellowship](#) provides funding to graduate students to conduct research within one of the 30 reserves in NOAA's National Estuarine Research Reserve System. Fellows address a key coastal management question to help reserves, scientists, and communities understand coastal challenges that may influence future policy and management strategies.

- Marae West, NC's first Davidson fellow, completed her fellowship this fall. Click [here](#) to learn more about Marae and her work on the impacts of sea level rise on wintering populations of saltmarsh and seaside sparrows at four reserve sites (Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, Zeke's Island, and Bird Island Reserves). Congratulations to Marae!
- Daniel Bowling, a PhD student at North Carolina State University, is in the second year of his two-year fellowship and is continuing his work to assess the effectiveness of using remote sensing to monitor intertidal oyster habitat and develop a model to support future coast-wide population assessments and for Reserve sites to be able to quickly detect and respond to changes in habitat health. Daniel's fellowship will wrap up in 2024.
- NOAA is recruiting for the **2024-2026 Davidson fellow cohort**. More information on the fellowship, application process, and NC management needs is available [here](#). Applications are due **December 4, 2023**.

Staffing News

- Abby Williams joined the Division in September as the Reserve's Resilience Specialist. Abby will develop resilience plans, secure funding for, and implement projects on the ground at the national reserve sites to increase habitat resilience to ensure the sites continue to provide ecological services and protective services to the communities where they are located. Abby comes to us from the Division of Marine Fisheries where she served as the Cultch Planting Biologist and is working at our Beaufort office. This is a new time-limited position that is funded by capacity building funding provided by NOAA to the reserve through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

Upcoming Student Opportunities

Application periods for Summer 2024 student opportunities in the Northern Sites and Beaufort offices are currently open.

- Three **State of NC Internship** opportunities are available at the Beaufort office for summer 2024. Applications are due **January 8, 2024**, and more details will be available on the reserve’s website. The opportunities are focused on summer educational programming, training and stewardship, and research.
- The Friends of the Reserve (FOR) is requesting applications for the **2024 NC Coastal Reserve Undergraduate Internship**. This internship encourages promising and talented students from traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations to pursue study and careers in coastal and estuarine science by gaining professional experience working with the Coastal Reserve for the summer. The 2024 intern will work with staff on stewardship activities at the northern sites (Currituck Banks, Kitty Hawk Woods, and Buxton Woods Reserves) and will be based out of the Northern Sites Office at the National Park Service headquarters in Manteo. More details are available on FOR’s website [here](#) and the deadline for submitting applications is **January 19, 2024**. FOR is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that supports the N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve, including its sites and programs.

Federal Budget

- The budget table below is a summary of the status of the federal budget* for fiscal years 2020-2024 as it relates to the N.C. Reserve. Congress has not passed the FY2024 federal budget, and the federal government is operating under a continuing resolution based on FY2023 allocations until January 2024 when the continuing resolution expires. Thank you to the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association and Friends of the Reserve for their work to educate Congress on the value of the national system and the NCNERR.

Federal Budget Lines	FY2020 Enacted	FY2021 Enacted	FY2022 Enacted	FY2023 Enacted	FY2024 President’s Request	FY2024 House Mark	FY2024 Senate Chair Mark
NERRS Operations	\$27.5M	\$28.5M	\$29.7M	\$32.5M	\$32.5M	\$29.7M	\$33.3M
NERRS Procurement, Acquisition, & Construction (PAC)	\$4.5M	\$4.5M	\$6.5M	\$8.5M	\$4.5M	\$4.5M	\$8.5M
CZM Grants	\$77M	\$78.5 M	\$79M	\$81.5M	\$78.5M	TBD	TBD

* The federal fiscal year is October 1-September 30. The National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS) budget line provides funding to the 30 reserves within the System through cooperative agreements that are matched by the states, and supports national coordination of programs and implementation of system-wide and competitive projects. The Coastal Zone Management (CZM) grants budget line provides funding to coastal states with approved coastal management programs through cooperative agreements that are matched by the states. The Division of Coastal Management (DCM) receives funding from both budget lines to operate the N.C. National Estuarine Research Reserve (NCNERR) and N.C. Coastal Management Program. The CZM cooperative agreement that DCM receives provides funding for Reserve staffing, state site operations, and administrative support.