



**Bird Island Reserve
Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, December 1, 2021, 1 pm
WebEx**

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
NC Coastal Land Trust – Jessica Blake	yes
NC Coastal Federation – Lauren Kolodij	yes
Bird Island Preservation Society - Bill Ducker	no
Sunset Beach Police Department	no
Town of Sunset Beach Administration – Cindy Steveson	no
Natural Heritage Program – Scott Pohlman	yes
<u>Community Members and Community Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
Katie Hovermale	no
Noelle Kehrberg	yes
Jud Watkins	yes
Sunset Beach Turtle Patrol - Carmel Zetts	no
Cape Fear Audubon – Charley Winterbauer	no
<u>Others Present</u>	
June Szymanski, Bird Island Steward	
Hope Sutton, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR, Stewardship Coordinator and Southern Sites Manager	
Elizabeth Colhoun, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Stewardship Specialist	
Whitney Jenkins, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR, Coastal Training Program Coordinator	

Welcome – Hope Sutton

The site manager welcomed the committee to the Fall 2021 meeting, reviewed the agenda, and called roll.

Reserve-wide Administrative Update – Hope Sutton

The Reserve-wide Update, which includes a range of Reserve activities and information 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 some reminders from the Reserve-wide update:

- The Margaret A. Davidson Graduate Fellowship funding opportunity application period is currently open with the deadline of December 10. This will be the second cohort for this NERRS-specific fellowship program. Reserve staff have been meeting with prospective applicants and look forward to a strong group of applications to review.
- The Friends of the Reserve will again be funding an undergraduate internship award for the summer of 2022. This internship is focused on increasing diversity and providing opportunities to underrepresented populations. The 2022 intern will be working out of the Beaufort office. Deadline for application is February 6.

The site manager also shared the following news item that occurred after the Reserve-wide update was sent out.

- *New staff position approved - southern sites manager*
 - With the passage of the State budget, a Southern Sites Manager position has been funded. Reserve staff are working to define the job description and post the opening. When filled, the current Stewardship Coordinator and Southern Sites Manager will become the full-time Stewardship Coordinator for the program, allowing more time for activities that span the full network of sites, including resilience, accessibility, GIS, and a variety of administrative tasks such as updates of management plans and MOUs, pursuing grant funding for special projects, and policy work.
- *Rules implementation and special activity authorization*
 - The reserve's readopted and updated rules will become effective on February 1. Local Advisory Committees have been involved with several steps throughout this process and the final rule language will be provided to committee members and the public via the website on January 31, 2022. The purpose of changes approved through the required periodic rules review is to enhance the Reserve's ability to balance ecosystem protection and compatible traditional uses through rule clarifications, including modifications and restrictions, and the addition of the special activity authorization which addresses a significant gap in the existing rules.
 - Starting February 1, 2022, written authorization will be required for organized events, commercial activities, and other special activities or uses within the boundaries of any Reserve component not included in the primary uses of research, education, and compatible traditional uses. The rule lays out the process and conditions around special activity authorizations. The new special activity rule will help address requests received by the Reserve for special activities such as organized eco-tour trips. The rule describes the process to request a special activity authorization and also the process the division will use to review requests. This supports transparency between the applicants and reviewers. There is no fee to apply for a special activity authorization.
 - The reserve will be holding a webinar at 6 pm on February 22, 2022 to introduce the new rules and the special activity authorization process to known commercial users of the sites, including transport providers and ecotour companies.

- Other changes that were included and previously reviewed by Local Advisory Committee members include: defining traditional uses as fishing, hunting, navigation, and recreation as it is referenced in the purposes of the program; defining camping at Masonboro as being allowed for 2 consecutive nights; and strengthening and clarifying rules related to littering and vehicles.
- Other actions staff are taking to inform the public about the updated rules include: updating website, sign, and brochure language; doing website hot topic and social media posts; and sending out a press release shortly before the effective date.

Site Specific Update – Hope Sutton/Elizabeth Colhoun

- *Personal watercraft*
 - As has been previously discussed, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) has jurisdiction over personal watercraft (PWC) regulations. The reserve staff recognize that the local community has frequently observed behavior that does not meet the regulations, particularly in narrow channels on the eastern boundary and behind the island in creeks that range from 50-200 feet wide. To address these concerns, reserve staff have compiled a list of commercial users that offer jet ski/boat rentals or tours that utilize the Reserve in their operations. Packets of information that provide details about the Reserve, its rules of use, and topics of interest have been drafted and include digital and hard copy versions. Topics will include: how to be a responsible user at Bird Island, the virtual tour, and site access information. These packets will be delivered along with a letter from the Reserve that includes reminders about the regulations that apply to personal watercraft use within the reserve waters. Staff will also continue conversation with WRC staff to explore additional opportunities to improve safety and lawful behavior of PWC users.
 - Ms. Kolodij asked if local ordinances could be used to help address this situation. The site manager replied that since most of the creek and marsh system is outside of Town limits, it would have to be a county ordinance and the capacity of the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office to patrol the waters would also be limited, so continuing to work with WRC staff on this issue is likely the most effective approach. Ms. Kehrberg suggested including rental companies in South Carolina since they regularly come into the area and following up with reminders throughout the summer season.
- *Hunting*
 - The Reserve has been in conversations with Wildlife Resources Commission staff regarding the implementation of permit hunts on several of the sites, including the Bird Island Reserve. Due to the additional step of needing to adopt a new rule to acknowledge the authority of the WRC to administer these hunts on the Reserve sites, the earliest permit hunts will begin in August 2023. Reserve staff and WRC staff will continue to work through details regarding the types of animals that may be hunted, the types of firearms that will be allowed, areas of the site that may not be available for hunting, and any changes to the dates and durations for hunts. Local Advisory Committees will be asked to provide input on preliminary maps and permit hunt details at the spring meeting. In the interim, reserve staff will also begin to work on the site and boundary posting activities that will be required to support permit hunts.
- *Marine debris project update*
 - During 2021, the reserve continued to work collaboratively with the N.C. Coastal Federation (NCCF) to complete a marine debris removal project along the coast that included several of

the reserve sites, including the Bird Island Reserve. Although data for the Brunswick County portion of the project was not separated out to allow for reporting on Bird Island exclusively, over 113 tons of material was removed from the wetlands and waters in Brunswick County. This project, funded by multiple grant funds, has removed over a million pounds of debris from sensitive and important estuarine and coastal habitats.

- *Site Stewards program*
 - During the upcoming winter, the reserve will be expanding a volunteer program developed at the Rachel Carson Reserve to several other sites, including the Masonboro Island Reserve. This program utilizes trained volunteers to provide site information via a phone app. This helps the staff have more “eyes on the site” and build visibility and connections with the community. Stewards will learn about site resources, how to document plants and animals seen on site, what types of concerns to report so that site managers can respond, and how to engage the public through roving interpretation. The virtual training session will be held on April 5th from 6-7:30 pm. for the Bird Island Reserve, given the strong local group of volunteer stewards, this training will primarily be an opportunity to learn to use the reporting app and interact with volunteers from other reserve sites.

- *Terrapin tally program*
 - The annual Terrapin Tally was held in April and May as a fully virtual and Covid-friendly activity. The project expanded to include ten sites: Bird Island, Bald Head Island, Fort Fisher Recreation Area, Zeke’s Island, Carolina Beach State Park, Lea-Hutaff Island, Hammocks Beach State Park, Calico Creek, Rachel Carson, and Cape Lookout National Seashore. A total of 115 routes were paddled over 10 data collection dates which resulted in 275 documented diamondback terrapin sightings. The 2022 Terrapin Tally is on the calendar: training will be held April 7 at 6 pm and April 9 at 10 am; data collection will be April 28 – May 1, May 4-7, and May 13-15. Data collection times vary due to tide times. All of the same sites will be participating and several additional sites are being considered for inclusion. Reserve staff are working on new data collection tools that will allow for data to be submitted directly to a central data set and produce real time maps for participants to explore. Modifications to routes and improvements to the data collection and reporting tools are underway. These changes will allow participants to see a map of data as it is collected in real time.
 - On the Bird Island routes, two of which launch from the sand ramp on the mainland side of the Intracoastal waterway and two of which launch from a private dock, 14 data collection sessions were completed and 27 diamondback terrapins were recorded.
 - Mr. Watkins asked whether the new data collection tools was built on the same platform that the county uses for its online mapping. The site manager explained that both the data collection tool and the reporting dashboard are built with ESRI Arc GIS online (AGOL) applications, Survey 1,2,3 and Dashboard, respectively.

- *Signage plan*
 - The signage featuring information about the Bird Island Reserve located near the Sunset Beach gazebo has been replaced due to degradation of the sign material. Minor changes were made as part of this process. Thanks to local volunteers Bruce Hovermale, Janet Jonas, and the late Tom Vincenz for receiving and storing the panels, then installing them in the existing frames.

- Additional work on interpretive signage has been on hold while the reserve waited for the State budget process to be completed, as permission had been requested to use the leftover funds from the recent acquisition project for work associated with the site, including interpretive signage. The budget passed shortly before this meeting and this request was granted, so the group that worked together on the update for the gazebo signs will need to reconvene to determine next steps and prioritize signage needs with the hopes of being able to get some new signage in place prior to next season. The total amount of funds available is \$35, 676, exceeding what will be needed for signage, so other needs at the site will also be able to be addressed with these funds.
 - The site manager introduced the idea of incorporating a “Chronolog” into the signage at the end of Main Street. Chronolog is a concept that integrates a photo platform on site with a web tool that allows people to contribute photos into an autogenerated timelapse, capturing changes and reflecting different character of a site over time, through the seasons, and under different conditions.
 - Ms. Kolodij commented that the funding carryover from the General Assembly is very good news and reminded the group that the Bird Island Preservation Society also is willing to be involved with the signage projects at the site.
- *Accessibility*
 - During the summer of 2021, a request to access the Kindred Spirit mailbox via golf cart was received. Conversations with the Town resulted in denial of access to the beach for this purpose due to concerns about lack of authority and capacity to monitor individuals after they leave the town limits. The reserve had already been interested in doing a project to look at accessibility to the reserve sites and explore any possible opportunities. A proposal has been submitted to work with students from the Duke Nicholas School of the Environment on this project. If interested students are identified, the project would begin with the Spring semester and continue throughout 2022 and into early 2023.
 - Ms. Kehrberg explained that she had assisted with getting a visitor onto the beach in one of the Town’s beach wheelchairs during the summer and that although it was wonderful to get access to the beach this way, trying to get someone as far as the Kindred Spirit would be extremely difficult. She also expressed concern about the possibility of golf carts getting out of control and about potential damage to natural resources if access to the nature preserve was allowed as a regular activity.
 - Ms. Kolodij suggested looking into other options such as scheduled dates for focussing on accessibility.
 - Mr. Watkins suggested limiting access to battery powered golf carts if carts are to be allowed.
 - Ms. Blake provided information about the language around accessibility and talking about people with disabilities. She suggested that this is a good opportunity for all of us to learn about these issues, improve our understanding of ways we can improve our programs to enhance accessibility, and adapt our language to ensure all visitors are respected.

Roundtable

- Mr. Pohlman informed the group that the Sunset Beach West property had been officially incorporated into the dedicated state nature preserve via the action of the Council of State. Ms. Kolodij inquired whether a media event should be organized to celebrate the addition. The group felt that a media event related to the new signs when they are completed would be a better opportunity to inform the public about the addition to the site.

Public comments

- None

Action Items

- Reserve staff will contact committee members during the summer to establish a date for the fall meeting.