



Local Advisory Committee Meeting
Currituck Banks Coastal Reserve

November 13, 2025 – 1:00 P.M.
Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education
1160 Village Lane, Corolla NC

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
Currituck County Planning Department, Jennie Turner	N
Currituck County Sheriff's Office, Terrence Sutton	N
Currituck National Wildlife Refuge, Mike Hoff	N
NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Anna Barbosa	N
NC Wildlife Resources Commission, OBX Center for Wildlife, Sharon Meade	Y
The Nature Conservancy, Aaron McCall	Y
APNEP, Jimmy Johnson	N
NHP, Nathan Shepherd	N
<u>Community Members and Community Organizations Members</u>	
Bo Dame	N
Edward Ponton	N
<u>Others Present</u>	
Erik Alnes, NCCR, Northern Sites Manager	
Steve Jarvis, NCCR, Northern Sites Stewardship Assistant	

Reserve-wide Update

Please see appendix for complete Reserve-wide updates.

Northern Sites Update (Erik Alnes)

- *Internships*

Two interns worked in the northern sites this year. This summer, the Friends of the Reserve sponsored a summer intern, Samuel Suber, that worked with the Reserve from UNC Wilmington.

He focused on re-examining a Carolina Vegetation Survey transect in Kitty Hawk Woods that was first studied in 1988. He also continued to monitor and record water quality data in Kitty Hawk Woods, installed plant identification signage, and helped with the site maintenance of the three northern sites. This fall, Madilyn Deifell worked with staff as part of her Outer Banks Field Site semester at the Coastal Studies Institute. She completed a georeferenced signage inventory of the 115 informational signs at the three northern sites, assisted staff with the ongoing submerged aquatic vegetation study in Currituck Banks, and supported the maintenance of the northern sites. Staff are hopeful to have an internship during the summer of 2026 and will share the posting with the LAC to encourage applications. Staff appreciate all the work these interns helped with this year.

- Aaron McCall asked if the Reserve had ever had a Duke Stanback internship. Erik Alnes was not aware. Mr. McCall described candidates as a science-based master's students focused on specific projects and revealed The Nature Conservancy had hosted them in the past. Mr. Alnes will check with other staff about the possibility of a future Duke Stanback internship for the Northern Sites.
- *Volunteerism*

Year to date, 46 hours of volunteerism were reported at the northern sites, with 45 of those hours being reported in the Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve. At a rate of \$33.01 per hour, our volunteers have generated \$1,518.46 in match while helping with the stewardship of the site. Staff shared feedback from volunteers, including forgetting to document volunteer hours and interest in large, organized projects. Staff reiterated the purpose of the Site Stewards volunteer program was to train volunteers to work individually, or with other Site Stewards, with the ability to call on volunteers for larger projects. Staff opened the discussion to the LAC members for recommendations on encouraging more volunteerism and lessons learned from their volunteer programs.

- Specific to the beach communities in northern Currituck, Sharon Meade and Mr. McCall mentioned it may be beneficial to advertise for volunteers on local Facebook pages – as this is a common way information is shared. Mr. Alnes agreed to investigate the option with the Communication Specialist.
 - Mr. McCall also noted that students from Appalachian State are returning in March for spring break volunteerism, and if Currituck Banks had a large project, he would be happy to let the group work with Mr. Alnes for a day or two. They agreed to keep in touch with plans as the dates get closer.
- *Visitation*

Staff maintain two counters at popular trailheads to estimate visitation. From October 2024 through October 2025, data indicates 46,664 individuals visited the Currituck Banks Reserve boardwalk: averaging 128 per day, with peak visitation observed in June and July. The boardwalk observed a 23% decrease in visitation compared to last year's data.

During the same period, 3,261 individuals visited the Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve Connector trailhead: averaging 9 visitors per day, with peak visitation observed in the cooler months of January and February. This trailhead observed a 16% decrease in visitation when compared to last year's data. While overall visitation decreased, May and July of 2025 showed the highest use per month since data collection began in 2023, averaging roughly 400 visitors during those months this year.

- *Brochure Update*

Staff revised the brochures for the northern sites, and they were reprinted this summer. Updates included corrections to contact information, logo revisions, boundary and trail adjustments to the maps, and updates to species lists. Staff are in possession of freshly printed brochures and have begun distributing them to visitor centers and partner agencies.

In addition to the brochure updates and reprinting, each Reserve website page now contains Spanish versions of the brochures. Staff continue to work on providing multilingual publications found on their websites to augment accessibility of information.

- *Research Report*

Three new research permits were administered for the northern reserves this year. These include a Formosan termite monitoring study from N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and N.C. State University (Currituck Banks Reserve), a population genetics and diversity study of yaupon holly out of the University of Georgia (Kitty Hawk Woods and Buxton Woods Reserves), and a study to advance the conservation and management of spotted turtles from N.C. State University (Kitty Hawk Woods and Buxton Woods Reserves).

Internally, staff have continued to monitor water quality and salinity (Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve), completed a replication study of a 1988 CVS plot (Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve), and continued the submerged aquatic vegetation study in Ships Bay (Currituck Banks Reserve).

Other future research ideas were offered including a box turtle study and a presence and absence study of longleaf pine populations on the Reserve.

Last, Sharon Meade shared a photo of an invasive green porcelain crab. The Committee discussed the threat of invasives to the Reserve, and the fact that that specific species has not been observed on the Reserve site, or in Currituck Sound. It has been found in Chesapeake Bay just to the north.

- *Misuse Report*

Of the 63 reports of misuse documented by managers in the 10 Coastal Reserves, 18 occurred in the northern sites. The most common types of misuse in the northern sites included littering and dumping, vandalism, illegal parking, and disallowed uses including things like ATV use, construction of permanent hunting stands, and the installation of bee boxes. 11% of the cases were elevated to or shared with law enforcement partners.

- Aaron McCall mentioned that he has seen elevated instances of car camping at Nags Head Woods. He articulated it is becoming more prevalent than encampments. Erik Alnes noted that it had not been a significant problem at the three northern sites so far.
- Steve Jarvis then mentioned three separate instances of finding undergarments adjacent to the boardwalk in the same location over the last three weeks. The Committee discussed.
- Last, Aaron McCall asked if anyone was thinking about or researching how to deal with the issue of e-bikes. Erik Alnes stated that all ten reserve sites in North Carolina only allow traditional uses of the properties, as provided in the Administrative Code, and

Reserve staff have begun drafting a policy regarding e-bikes. Committee members shared instances of e-bike misuse on the property.

Currituck Banks Reserve Business

- *Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Study Results*

The 2025 submerged aquatic vegetation study revealed the lowest total average cover since data collection began in 2021 (Total Average Cover: 2025- 37%, 2024- 54%, 2023- 42%, 2021- 52%). While there was no tropical storm or hurricane prior to surveying, a powerful wind event occurred on September 15-16 (with 30mph sustained winds, turning Ships Bay into a mud flat) may partially explain the low average cover data seen in 2025.

While overall average coverage decreased, *Vallisneria* (23%), *Stuckenia* (23%), *Nitella* (20%), and *Chara* (20%) species held the highest relative abundance among vegetation surveyed. Unlike previous years, *Najas* (water nymph) was undetected in any of the 14 plots surveyed. The invasive *Myriophyllum spicatum* (Eurasian watermilfoil) was similarly undetected in the study area.

Chara (muskgrass) increased nearly 20 percentage points in average relative abundance since 2024, while *Ruppia* (wigeon-grass) increased by 8.8 percentage points. Despite its relatively high abundance in 2025, *Nitella* (stonewort) relative abundance still declined by nearly 30 percentage points since compared to its 2024 relative abundance.

All studies were done within proximal times of the growing season: 2021 (9/27), 2023 (9/27), 2024 (9/10), 2025 (9/23). Species diversity between plots has appeared to decrease since 2021.

- Members of the LAC discussed results. Aaron McCall noted SAV studies that The Nature Conservancy is doing further south and requested the data from the Currituck study. Erik Alnes agreed he would share the data with him.
- Sharon Meade inquired about water quality data, which Reserve staff do not actively collect, but went on to reference a fish kill that occurred this past summer. She also referenced a high level of sulfur in the Sound, which was so dense it turned the Whalehead Club building black.

- *Habitat Resilience Planning*

All four National Reserve sites will undergo a habitat resilience planning exercise to develop a Habitat Resilience Plan. Starting in January, Currituck Banks will begin the process of developing a Plan. After a site visit, Resilience Specialist Abby Williams will synthesize and compile relevant research and planning tools for the Reserve, perform an analysis of habitat and shoreline change, delineate discrete priority areas that share similar habitats, risks, threats, and vulnerabilities, and synthesize this information. Once complete, Reserve staff will invite subject matter experts to a workshop to identify resilience actions and determine the feasibility of such actions. Last, the project team will consider and implement options to mitigate risks. This could be anything from tangible projects to research goals. The Reserve expects to hold the workshop with subject matter experts between June and September 2026.

- Aaron McCall asked if all sites were going through this process. Mr. Alnes clarified it is only occurring at the National sites.

- *Point of Sale Policy*

The Reserve is developing a policy that prohibits the sale of retail items, including food, on Reserve sites. This means that retailers will not be able to obtain permission to sell goods at Reserve sites through the Reserve's Special Activity Authorization process. Retail sales of goods, such as food, on a Reserve site conflicts with the principal purposes of the Reserve as defined in the NC Administrative Code. These sales are not compatible traditional uses of the Reserve, and the activity has the potential to disturb the environment and interfere with compatible educational and recreational activities that occur on the site. Traditional uses are defined as public trust uses including fishing, hunting, navigation, and recreation (15A NCAC 07O .0102 (3)). The need for this policy came about in July because of ice cream being sold from a boat at the Rachel Carson Reserve in Beaufort. The business' special activity authorization application was denied due to the above reasons. We've also denied this use in the past, when requested, before the special activity authorization process was implemented.

- All present LAC members were in favor of the policy.

Member Roundtable

- Aaron McCall of The Nature Conservancy noted that he had received contact from an individual interested in making a long connected trail through the Reserve, TNC's property to the north, up to Carova Beach. Mr. McCall and Mr. Alnes discussed the infeasibility of the idea due to the strictly hunting area on the north end of Currituck Banks, where there is no desire for trails, as well as the unexploded ordinance dangers on the properties to the north. Also, it was brought up that individuals currently have access, via the beachfront, to walk to Carova Beach. Mr. McCall and Mr. Alnes will stay in communication if this request comes up again.
- Sharon Meade of the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education requested copies of the new brochures to display in the Center. Aaron McCall subsequently requested. Mr. Alnes agreed to bring them boxes.
- Last, Mrs. Meade offered to help with any upcoming educational events. Mr. Alnes mentioned the potential for a 6th grade field trip with students from Currituck County schools. The two will stay in contact regarding plans.

Public Input

- No members of the public were present to make comment.

Final Comments, Review of Action Items, and Wrap-Up

The following action items were reviewed:

- Erik Alnes will check with other reserve staff about the possibility of a future Duke Stanback internship for the Northern Sites.
- Erik Alnes agreed to investigate the option of advertising for volunteers on local Facebook pages with the Communication Specialist.
- Erik Alnes and Aaron McCall will coordinate regarding the sharing of the Appalachian State student volunteer group during Spring Break.
- Erik Alnes will share the 2025 submerged aquatic vegetation study data with Aaron McCall.
- Erik Alnes will deliver new brochures to the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education and the Nags Head Woods office for display.
- Erik Alnes will coordinate with Sharon Meade regarding the potential 6th grade Currituck student field trip.

Adjourn

2:18 P.M.

N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve Fall 2025 Local Advisory Committee Meetings Reserve-wide Update

Periodic Rules Review for Reserve Administrative Code Rules

The Coastal Reserve's rules, 15A NCAC 07O, are scheduled to be reviewed by the Rules Review Commission in April 2026 as part of the Legislative Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules process (G.S. 150B-21.3A). This process requires that all rules are classified as necessary or unnecessary. Following input from the Local Advisory Committees and Coastal Resources Commission, all 8 15A NCAC 07O rule citations are classified as necessary in the proposed initial determination.

This **proposed initial determination is currently published for public comment September 30, 2025-December 1, 2025** on the [Department of Environmental Quality and reserve's websites](#). After the comment period ends, the Department will review all comments and make final determinations prior to submission to the N.C. Rules Review Commission for approval in April 2026.

The Division will provide an update to the Local Advisory Committees after the public comment period closes with a summary of and agency responses to the comments received during the public comment period and from the Local Advisory Committees and Coastal Resources Commission. See the memorandum emailed to committee members on September 24, 2025 summarizing committee and commission input.

Preview of items for 2026

- **Local Advisory Committee Operating Procedures Review:** Per the Operating Procedures, the document shall be reviewed every 5 years and is up for review in 2026. Reserve staff will review the document and propose changes if necessary. The Local Advisory Committees will provide feedback on the proposed changes at the spring 2026 meetings and the document will be finalized later that year. If a spring meeting is not held, feedback on the proposed changes will be solicited via email.
- **Local Advisory Committee Community Member and Organization Application Period:** The reserve will solicit applications from community members and organizations to fill vacancies on the committees in spring 2026. Newly appointed and re-appointed members will begin their terms in 2027. Appointments are made by the Secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality.
- **N.C. National Estuarine Research Reserve Management Plan Update:** The management plan is scheduled for its 5-year update as required by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and staff are working on updates to the plan now. Proposed changes will be brought to the national site Local Advisory Committees (Currituck Banks, Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Zeke's Island Reserves) in 2026 for feedback.

Program Highlights

- The Division celebrated the **40th anniversary** of N.C.'s National Estuarine Research Reserve this year, designated by the state and NOAA to protect special places in N.C. including the Currituck Banks, Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Zeke's Island Reserves. This designation inspired the state to later create the umbrella N.C. Coastal Reserve which is authorized by the N.C. Coastal Area Management Act.
- The reserve hosted its fourth stop on the **"Discover the N.C. Coastal Reserve"** tour on May 16, 2025 at the Masonboro Island Reserve. The tour began with brief remarks by Department Secretary Reid Wilson, Division Director Tancred Miller, UNCW Center for Marine Science Executive Director Ken Halanych and Bill Raney, Masonboro Island Reserve Local Advisory Committee member, followed by a boat trip to and nature walk at the site. The event highlighted how the Masonboro Island Reserve serves North Carolinians through its science and monitoring,

delivery of information to educate and inform decision making, and by providing natural buffers to waves and storms enhancing community resilience. Explore the [Discover the N.C. Coastal Reserve's Virtual Passport](#) and enjoy short videos from past tour events. Local Advisory Committee members will be invited to the site-based events so stay tuned for upcoming event information in 2026.

- Spring **student field trips** to the Rachel Carson Reserve and Masonboro Island Reserve via the Island Explorer Program were a big success and fall trips are underway.
- Reserve **summer camps** were well attended this year. Rising first through tenth graders learned about estuaries and experienced estuarine habitats and plants and animals through hands-on experiences at the Rachel Carson Reserve and in the laboratory to increase understanding and appreciation of coastal resources. Camps are conducted in partnership with the N.C. Maritime Museum in Beaufort.
- The reserve hosted a variety of **workshops** since the spring update. Participants at all workshops received continuing education credits.
 - Educators participated in a “*Teachers on the Estuary*” workshop in June, a program that is delivered at reserves nationwide and tailored to N.C. content. Participants engaged in hands-on experiences at the Rachel Carson Reserve such as measuring marsh vegetation, learned how drones are being used to inform management of coastal resources, and became familiar with our data and curricular offerings to use in the classroom.
 - The training program hosted “*Adaptation Planning for Coastal Communities*” in partnership with NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management to build skills for incorporating adaptation strategies into planning processes.
 - The training program held “*Living on a Barrier Island*” workshops for Cape Fear and Outer Banks realtors.
- The reserve was selected for **funding and participation in several NERRS Science Collaborative projects**, a program that funds applied science to meet reserve needs within the national reserve system. *Unfortunately, the funding for these projects was cut by NOAA in the latest round of budget reductions.* Staff will explore alternate ways to accomplish these important projects.
 - Justin Ridge, Research Coordinator was to lead a ~\$1M project in collaboration with Whitney Jenkins, Training Coordinator titled “Drone-Based Analysis of Intertidal Oyster Reef Condition to Enhance Fishery Management in the Southeastern U.S.”, with the 5 southeast reserves participating.
 - Reserve staff planned to participate in 3 other funded projects focused on submerged aquatic vegetation, tools to enhance utilization of NERRS science, and transferring realtor training models to other states. The N.C. training program serves as a model for realtor training within the system and would help share this approach with other reserves.
- **Public access at the Bald Head Woods Reserve** is enhanced because of a partnership with the Village of Bald Head Island. The golf cart parking platforms were improved, transitioning to a more durable and lower maintenance design that provides additional spaces for golf cart parking. Thank you, Village of Bald Head Island!
- The reserve celebrated **National Estuaries Week** September 20-27, 2025 by hosting a variety of activities in tribute to N.C.’s estuaries; thank you to all who came out to help us celebrate estuaries! Below are some of the activities that were held.
 - Masonboro Island Reserve: Site steward volunteers participated in a debris cleanup on the site’s dredge spoil islands.
 - Zeke’s Island Reserve: Staff led a public paddle trip around the site and participants learned about the reserve and participated in a community science activity – a bioblitz of the area using iNaturalist. Kayak Carolina partnered with us to provide equipment, thank you!

- Rachel Carson Reserve: Volunteers and partner agencies participated in a Bird Shoal cleanup and community science day. Participants picked up debris and used iNaturalist to practice identifying plants and birds.

Student Internships

- The reserve had a fantastic group of interns this summer in Manteo, Beaufort, and Wilmington. The students worked on a range of stewardship and research projects at sites along the coast. These invaluable experiences give the students hands-on experience in research and natural resource management and help inform their future career paths. Thank you to Friends of the Reserve, the N.C. Internship Program, and UNCW for their support and partnership for the internships.
- Student opportunities for summer 2026 in our Manteo, Beaufort, and Wilmington offices will be announced soon on our website.

Federal Budget

The budget table below is a summary of the federal budget* for federal fiscal years 2024-2026 as it relates to the N.C. Coastal Reserve.

- Congress passed a continuing resolution for federal fiscal year 2025, continuing fiscal year 2024 funding levels for fiscal year 2025. Receipt of funds was delayed several months and are now in place to fund the reserve from July 2025-June 2026.
- As Congress did not pass a budget or continuing resolution prior to October 1, 2025 for federal fiscal year 2026, the federal government is shut down until a budget or continuing resolution is passed. The President's budget zeros out the related budget lines and the Senate and House marks restore funding for the programs. Once Congress is back in session and a continuing resolution is passed, the next step would be to reconcile the budgets between the two chambers. Federal fiscal year 2026 funds would fund the reserve from July 2026-June 2027.
- 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	FY2024 Enacted	FY2025 Full Year Continuing Resolution (FY24 levels)	FY2026 President's Budget	FY2026 Senate Mark	FY2026 House Mark
NERRS Operations	\$33.3M	\$33.3M	0	\$34M	\$33.5M
NERRS Procurement, Acquisition, & Construction (PAC)	\$8.5M	\$8.5M	0	\$8.5M	\$10M
CZM Grants	\$81.5M	\$81.5M	0	\$81.5M	\$81.5M

* 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 state site reserve staffing and operations, and administrative support.