



Local Advisory Committee Meeting
Currituck Banks Coastal Reserve

December 13, 2023 – 1:00 p.m.
The Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education
1160 Village Lane, Corolla, NC 27927

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	Y
NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Jarrett Culbreath	N
NC Wildlife Resources Commission, OBX Center for Wildlife, Sharon Meade	Y
The Nature Conservancy, Aaron McCall	N
Albemarle Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP), Jimmy Johnson	Y
Natural Heritage Program, Nathan Shepherd	N
<u>Community Members and Community Organizations Members</u>	
Brett Harrison	Y
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

Site Updates (Erik Alnes)

- *Interpretive Signage Update*

Staff installed nine new interpretive signs along the Currituck Banks boardwalk. Four of the signs are mounted on the railing of the viewing platform and focus on the ecology and culture of Currituck Sound, submerged aquatic vegetation, fauna of the estuary, and storms on barrier islands. Four additional signs were installed along the forested boardwalk area, with content focusing on birds of the Reserve, maritime forest ecology, features of a barrier island cross section, and Corolla's wild horse herd. Last, a large new interpretive sign introducing the site was installed at the entrance.

- *Recent Public Events*

In June, the Reserve held a reopening and rededication event for the Currituck Banks boardwalk. The event consisted of speeches from Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Secretary Elizabeth Biser, Division of Coastal Management Director Braxton Davis, and N.C. Coastal Reserve (NCCR) Program Manager Rebecca Ellin, coupled with a tour of the refurbished boardwalk led by Site Manager Erik Alnes. This event was attended by local government officials and agency partners and showcased the exciting work that has been occurring at the Currituck Banks Reserve.

This Fall, site manager Erik Alnes visited Moyock Middle School and Currituck County Middle School for Career Café's, at the request of the County. During these school visits, Mr. Alnes shared with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders about his career, the N.C. Coastal Reserve, and the living laboratories in their backyards. It provided a great opportunity to educate the groups about the importance of the Reserve program and the rare ecological communities it protects.

- *Parking Lot Enforcement & Signs*

Illegal parking and airing down tires continued to cause traffic issues in the Currituck Banks Reserve parking lot this summer when visitation was at its highest. Staff attempt to educate misusers of the lot when on-site, but new waves of tourists come throughout the summer, limiting the effects of communication. Two-hour parking signs are visible from every parking space. Staff purchased and installed several new "no air-up / air-down" signs in hopes it alleviates some of the misuse. Options brought up by LAC members included placing "warning" notes on commercial vehicles that leave vehicles in the lot prior to towing, but it remains a tough enforcement challenge.

- *Horse Fence Update*

Staff reviewed the issues from the winter of 2022-2023 when a group of horses were bedding down in the marsh area along the southern fence line, damaging the marsh, and escaping almost nightly. The NCCR allowed the Wild Horse Fund to install a temporary electric fence while the site was closed for construction. Upon completion of the boardwalk and reopening of the site, the Wild Horse Fund removed the electric fence, and replaced the wires with nylon rope to continue to dissuade the horses from escaping.

The NCCR has plans to replace the temporary rope fence with a permanent wood fence, matching the design of the southern fence line. This will hopefully keep the horses out of Corolla Village and

be more aesthetically pleasing than the rope fence. The Wild Horse Fund agreed to pay for supplies, and DEQ staff plan to build the fence in early 2024.

- *Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Monitoring*

In 2021, staff installed three permanent transects to better understand the coverage and species composition of submerged aquatic vegetation in Ships Bay. Staff were able to obtain a baseline study in 2021. Due to capacity and weather, the transects were not surveyed in 2022. This year, there was a significant wind event leading up to the study date on September 27, and staff were only able to sample four points along each of the three transects. Although sampling was constrained to shallow points due to water turbidity, Chowan University Professor Bo Dame was able to survey additional points along the transects in October. Staff will work with Professor Dame to complete their data sets for 2023.

Of the 12 points that were sampled, staff saw an 11% decrease in overall cover, down from 53% in 2021 to 42% average cover observed at each sample site in 2023. Staff assume this is partially due to the significant wind events occurring from September 22 to 27. Significant wrack lines of SAV were observed during the 2023 study. Species composition also slightly changed. Notable changes included increases in sago pondweed relative abundance (+7%), widgeon grass relative abundance (+24%), and musk grass relative abundance (+13%). Surprisingly, Eurasian water milfoil relative abundance dropped (-7%), and only one stem was observed in the 12 sampling points. Staff will update these findings with Bo Dames' research and document for future studies.

- Jimmy Johnson requested sharing of information with APNEP, who does their own SAV research. Erik Alnes agreed to send information to APNEP.

- *2024 Coastal Reserve Undergraduate Internship*

To encourage promising and talented students from traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations to pursue study and careers centered in coastal and estuarine sciences, the N.C. Coastal Reserve and the Friends of the Reserve created a funded summer internship program. The N.C. Coastal Reserve Undergraduate Internship will assist with stewardship activities at the northern sites (Currituck Banks, Kitty Hawk Woods, and Buxton Woods Reserves), working out of the Manteo office in the summer of 2024.

The award will consist of a travel/housing stipend of \$1500 and a paid summer internship consisting of 30 hours/week for 10 weeks at \$15.00/hour. Staff encouraged LAC members to share the opportunity with candidates that may be interested in working with the Reserve. Applications for the 2024 are due January 19, 2024 (11:59 pm). Further information can be found on the Friends of the Reserve website (for-nc.org/intern).

Member Roundtable

- Sharon Meade discussed the transition of the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education from the Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) to Currituck County. She expressed interest in revamping the educational walks through Currituck Banks, but stated that there was a need for additional staffing to reconvene that program. Last, she noted significant milfoil growth this summer in Currituck Sound, and noted early migratory bird patterns.

- Mike Hoff had little to report on surrounding Refuge lands on the Outer Banks, but noted that Mackey's Island had a significant amount of waterfowl this year.
- Jimmy Johnson shared that APNEP had received \$900,000 in funding each year for the next five years, and are working to budget. Forty percent of the funds will go to underserved communities and they are focusing on SAV, oyster, and algae research projects. He also noted that APNEP has been working with Virginia to figure out what is causing algae blooms in surrounding waters.
- Brett Harrison was thanked for his five years of service to the LAC, as this was his last meeting as an appointed member.

Public Input

- No public participation.

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

- Erik Alnes will send SAV data and findings to APNEP, and set up a meeting with them to discuss how agencies could collaborate with SAV work.

Adjourn