



**Zeke’s Island Reserve
Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
Friday, November 8, 2024 at 10:00 am
Fort Fisher State Recreation Area - Education Room**

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
Division of Parks and Recreation – FFRA, Jeff Owen, Kip Futch	Yes
Division of Archives and History, Stephen Atkinson	No
NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, Renee Weeks	Yes
Natural Heritage Program, Judith Ratcliffe	Yes
<u>Community Members</u>	
Stephen Rice	Yes
Angela Marshall	No
Jack Housenger	No
Bob Dillard	No
Georgia Busch	No
<u>Others Present</u>	
Elizabeth Pinnix, NCNERR Southern Sites Manager Morgan Penrose, NCNERR Stewardship Specialist Anna Poston, NCNERR Stewardship Technician	

Welcome

The southern sites manager, Elizabeth Pinnix, welcomed the committee to the Fall 2024 meeting, reviewed the agenda, and led introductions.

Reserve-wide Administrative Update

The Reserve-wide Update was shared with committee members prior to the meeting. The update in its entirety is included as Appendix A.

Ms. Pinnix provided a highlight from the Reserve-wide update:

- Reserve staff provided a public educational outreach opportunity hosted at the Federal Point Boat Ramp to celebrate National Estuaries Week during September 21-28. The event included hands on learning opportunities and education focused on the reserve and habitats specific to Zeke’s Island Reserve. A handful of individuals participated, and we hope to increase our visibility by offering more activities like this in the future.

Ms. Weeks asked for the Special Activity Authorization application to be shared with the group and asked for clarification when numbers reporting should take place.

Ms. Pinnix agreed to send the link for the SAA application and clarified that numbers reporting will be asked for during the application process through a required question for submission.

- The Stewardship Coordinator position that has been vacant since August 2022 was recently filled by Paula Gillikin, the former Central Sites Manager in Beaufort.
- In June 2024, an email update was sent to all special activity authorized users to inform them of two new changes:
 1. Beginning in 2025, Special Activity Authorization (SAA) applications are required to report participant numbers from the authorized activity they have applied for in the previous calendar year.
 2. Additionally, we informed applicants of a policy that states visitors at reserve sites may only keep five sand dollars each. This policy is specific to dead sand dollars, as live collection is not permitted. This policy was created as the result of complaints and natural resource pressure at the Rachel Carson Reserve but has been adopted across all applicable reserve sites and began implementation in June 2024. The goal of this policy is to ensure all visitors have the opportunity to view and collect, if desired, dead sand dollars and to ensure that sand dollars continue to contribute to the site's natural character and function.

Ms. Pinnix added that results from surveys and how the process is going will be provided at the fall 2025 meeting to check in with the committees and accept input if needed.

Mr. Futch ask how the sand dollar policy will be enforced and what is the outcome if they do not comply?

Ms. Pinnix responded that during this phase of introducing the policy we are working to educate so all are aware and will address compliance on a case-by-case basis.

The committee understood the new policy and were generally supportive.

Site Specific Update

Ms. Pinnix provided the following site-specific updates:

General site conditions

- Reserve staff have conducted multiple visits to Zeke's Island Reserve since the spring 2024 meeting. There were no significant changes in conditions to report.
- Earlier in 2024, site managers across the ten reserve sites implemented a new internal reporting tool to better track and document examples of misuse at the sites. Since beginning in January 2024, 50 total cases of misuse have been documented across the sites during this time. The highest documentation of misuse occurred at Masonboro Island (19) and Buxton Woods (12) Reserves.
 - The most common types of misuse at Zeke's included vandalism & littering/dumping including trash left and shooting reserve signs. All incidents at this time have been resolved.
 - Examples from other reserve sites include disallowed uses, such as non-permitted infrastructure built on Reserve sites, and fireworks. Documented cases of misuse include activities such as visitor use conflicts (between hunters and recreators), inappropriate visitor behavior, tampering with water quality structures, stranded vessel, encroachment, and crab pots in designated crab spawning areas.
- The Stewardship Specialist in the Wilmington office began a new fish sampling project that began in late spring 2024 and will continue seasonally throughout the year to collect updated baseline species presence data for fishes at Zeke's and Masonboro Island sites. Various techniques were used including seine and sweep nets to identify and count species present and then released. The primary species encountered were: pinfish, striped mullet, and penaeid shrimp. 24 total species were identified and the most exciting for our team was a juvenile red drum that was caught in a seine net survey! New education materials for outreach events and new research proposals are being developed via this project.

- Ms. Pinnix showed the committee a draft version of the fish guide that is being developed from this project that will be made available to the public when finished.

Mr. Rice alerted the committee that he witnessed multiple dead green sea turtles while paddling at the site in early fall 2024 in addition to gill netting activities in the Cribbings creek area. He asked about the legality of gill netting. He also asked if there had been any progress on data released from DEQ regarding fish sampling in the Cape Fear River in association with PFAS studies. He mentioned the Department of Health has not gotten back to him with his requests for information.

Ms. Pinnix confirmed that gill netting is legal but must follow rules and regulations set by the Division of Marine Fisheries, specifically reporting of take of endangered species and manning the nets while deployed and captured this report for documentation. The site manager did not have any further information regarding the fish sampling connected to PFAS in the river but will investigate and provide an update if information is gathered.

Site Project Updates

- The Terrapin Tally community science project completed its tenth year of data collection in spring 2024. This Reserve/NC Wildlife Resources Commission collaborative project aims at collecting diamondback terrapin sighting data in the state to better understand population trends and identify potential management efforts. Collectively, there were 8 days with a total of 99 data collection sessions paddled over the span of 10 sites ranging from Sunset Beach to Cape Lookout. This resulted in over 300 diamondback terrapin sightings recorded with 82 terrapins sighted at Zeke's during the event. Sighting numbers were higher in 2024 for Zeke's due to increased effort and less weather cancellation data collections sessions.
- During the closed commercial crabbing season March 1-15, 2024, reserve staff, the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), Marine Patrol, and the NC Coastal Federation (NCCF) set out to recover and dispose of abandoned and derelict fishing gear in our region. Reserve staff removed nearly 30 abandoned and derelict pots from Zeke's Island and over 230 pots total were collected by crews in DMF District 3 (Cape Carteret to South Carolina line), according to Ted Wilgis with NCCF.
- The storm resilient research platforms that will replace the reserve's two water quality structures at Zeke's have contracted to Carteret Marine Services and work is slated to begin at the start of 2025. These platforms will replace the existing structures in the basin at the Basin Trail overlook and the creek convergence area at East Cribbings which has been offline since Hurricane Florence damage.

Ms. Pinnix will provide a heads up when the project is set to begin and will send Ms. Ratcliffe the coordinates of the proposed structures for NC Natural Heritage awareness and documentation.

Roundtable

Ms. Pinnix proposed moving the Zeke's Island Local Advisory Committee meetings to a single meeting time per year (Fall), unless warranted and asked for feedback from the group. Additionally, she suggested doing an onsite activity during the spring to promote engagement of the committee and enjoy the site.

Mr. Rice loved the idea and suggested a kayak paddle that he would be happy to help organize and attend.

Ms. Ratcliffe and Ms. Weeks agreed and likes the idea of a paddle opportunity in the spring 2025.

Mr. Futch agreed and expressed it is difficult to find time in the spring due to many other obligations and visitation beginning to pick up.

Ms. Pinnix agreed to meeting in the fall for this committee, unless needed otherwise, and will work with Mr. Rice to plan a spring paddle outing as a connection opportunity for the committee and staff.

Mr. Futch reported on behalf of Fort Fisher State Park that they are still working on the logistics for a potential marsh burning project. He added it would not happen in 2024 due to the numbers of staff in the mountains responding to the damage from Hurricane Helene. He added that there is potential for early winter but will not likely happen until fall 2025 with the goal of addressing the invasive Phragmites that exists in many target

areas, improving habitat for Black Rails and burning of wrack that has been pushed in from various storm events.

Ms. Pinnix requested the location and fire plans be sent to the reserve, as adjacent property owners, prior to any activity.

Mr. Futch agreed.

Ms. Weeks reported using the Zeke's basin area for the NC Aquarium education programs/camps and reported a high number of visitors using this area. She stated it seems to be more than previous years.

Ms. Pinnix asked if there was anything that could be done to improve the area or experience for the increase in visitation.

Ms. Weeks suggested providing trash receptacles but that would introduce additional challenges on staff to monitor and maintain those.

Mr. Rice added that may increase the amount of trash you see because people begin not following "pack it in, pack it out" practices when they assume someone will take it for them. He also added that many public places along our coast offer fishing line recycling or depositories and that could be a beneficial addition.

Mr. Futch agreed with the increase in visitation at the boat ramp area and added that some do not respect the natural area so it can be difficult to manage.

Ms. Pinnix took note of this and followed up confirming the reserve would not provide trash receptacles because we do not have the ability to maintain and want to maintain the natural character of the site.

Regarding the fishing line recycling mentioned by Mr. Rice, this would need to be addressed and installed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission as they are the owner and manager of the boat ramp at Federal Point.

Ms. Weeks asked about the potential for a kayak trail at the site. She recalled this being mentioned at a previous meeting.

Ms. Pinnix responded that we are currently working on understanding the materials needed and mapping potential routes to mark for kayak trails at Zeke's as well as a handful of other reserve sites. The reserve has been gathering information from Hammocks Beach State Park and the materials and methods they used to model ours similarly to theirs.

Public comments

None

Action Items

Send committee [Special Activity Authorization link](#)

Share coordinates of water quality platforms with Ms. Ratcliffe for NC Natural Heritage records

Plan spring paddle outing for committee members