



**Masonboro Island Reserve
Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, November 30, 2021, 1 pm
Meeting held by WebEx**

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
NC Audubon, Lindsay Addison	yes
New Hanover County Sheriff's Office, Sergeant Steve Schmidlin	no
New Hanover County Planning Department, Dylan McDonnell	no
NC Coastal Land Trust, Mellissa Dionesotes	yes
Division of Marine Fisheries, Anne Deaton	no
Division of Parks and Recreation – Carolina Beach State Park, Chris Helms	yes
Natural Heritage Program, Judith Ratcliffe	yes
UNCW Center for Marine Science, Martin Posey	yes
Town of Wrightsville Beach Administration	no
<u>Community Members and Community Organizations Members</u>	
Neal Andrew	yes
Nevin Carr	yes
Thomas Carter	no
Dr. Lynn Leonard	yes
Dr. Zachary Long	yes
Masonboro.org, Tom Hackler	yes
William Raney	yes
Jud Watkins	yes
Ted Wilgis	yes
<u>Others Present</u>	
Richard Johnson, member of the public	
Hope Sutton, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Stewardship Coordinator & Southern Sites Manager	
Elizabeth Colhoun, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Stewardship Specialist	
Paula Gillikin, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Central Sites Manager	

Welcome – Hope Sutton

The site manager welcomed the committee to the Fall 2021 meeting and reviewed the agenda. Due to the presence of new members, each member introduced themselves in lieu of a roll call. New members for the Masonboro Island Reserve committee are Nevin Carr and Jud Watkins.

Reserve-wide Administrative Update – Hope Sutton

The Reserve-wide Update, which now includes a range of reserve activities, 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. 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.

Site Update – Hope Sutton/Elizabeth Colhoun

- *Seasonal activities*
 - **Seasonal staff** – During the 2021 season, the reserve's seasonal staff included a shorebird technician, a general field technician, the Friends of the Reserve internship award recipient, and an intern through the Department of Environmental Quality's STEP (Student Training Experience Program). The seasonal staff worked on a variety of projects, primarily focused on species of concern monitoring.
 - **Shorebirds** – In 2021, the reserve continued to monitor reproductive success of American oystercatchers (AMOY), as well as documenting nesting of Wilson's plovers and the small least tern colony in the Johns Creek area. The Reserve also continued to work with Audubon staff to band adult and fledgling AMOY to support regional conservation efforts. A delayed predation management effort was conducted late in the spring with the goal of reducing impacts to nesting birds and sea turtles. Throughout the season, 36 pairs of AMOY were monitored. From a total of 86 nests, 7 chicks were banded and successfully fledged, for a resulting fecundity of

0.19 chicks per pair, well below the goal of 0.50 chicks per pair. The least tern colony had a peak of 63 nests during late May and 50 nesting pairs of Wilson's plovers were documented.

- **Diamondback terrapins** – 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.
 - **Sea turtles** – Routine regular monitoring was conducted approximately three times weekly from May - October for nesting sea turtles. The first nest was laid May 21st and the last nest was laid August 13th. The final count of nesting activity was 24 nests and 12 false crawls, all of which were loggerhead sea turtles. Only 2 nests were lost due to erosion from high tide events, resulting in hatching success of 79%. N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) staff continue to support nest monitoring at Masonboro Island and the reserve continues to participate in the region-wide sea turtle genetics study that has been going on since 2011.
 - Related to species monitoring, the Reserve has recently installed the first Motus tower on Reserve property. Motus, Latin for "motion," signifies a network of telemetry stations that enable conservation and ecological research by providing a way to track the movement of animals across broad landscapes. Installation of Motus towers at Reserve sites adds to the network and helps to fill a gap in the region. Tracking has already been done using this form of technology with multiple species over the past year - including AMOY, marsh sparrows, and diamondback terrapins.
- *Marine debris and derelict vessel project*
 - 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 Masonboro Island Reserve. Derelict vessels have also been removed as part of this effort. To date, a total of 54.57 tons of marine debris has been removed from Masonboro Island Reserve through this effort, as well as 3 abandoned/derelict vessels (ADV). The Reserve is continuing to work closely with the NCCF and WRC to coordinate activities and address remaining ADV's within the reserve boundary. Several other derelict vessels were removed using funds from other sources and the three remaining derelict vessels in Masonboro Channel are currently on the list for removal.
 - *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 as well as 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.

Mr. Watkins asked how the camping rule would be enforced. The site manager explained that the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office (NHCSO) is the primary law enforcement agency for the site and explained that if a camper or group of campers became problematic, the reserve staff would work with the NHCSO to address the situation.

Mr. Johnson inquired about how events would be determined to be appropriate to receive an authorization and how the staff would respond to events taking place without authorization. He also asked about entities conducting multiple activities and whether they would be required to apply each time they wanted to conduct the activity, such as the Wrightsville Beach Ecotours company. The site manager explained that the staff would be reviewing applications on a case-by-case basis to determine whether any rules of use or site management policies would be violated by the proposed activity and that the key considerations will be whether the activity is compatible and appropriate for the site. For ongoing activities, there will be a yearly application requirement. Staff are in the process of talking through implementation of this rule on the sites, but the goal is to manage use and prevent resource damage rather than close activities down or cause burden on either the reserve staff or users of the sites. In the event of an activity taking place without having gone through the written authorization process in advance, the reserve's response will need to be in line with the potential impacts of the activity. For example, a music festival in progress would require a stronger and more rapid response than a group of 10 people witnessing a wedding ceremony.

- *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.

- *Sediment placement activities*
 - The Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) has requested to place material on the ocean beach on Masonboro Island between the Upper Johns Creek area and the south end of the island during the winter as part of an Intracoastal Waterway maintenance project. The project includes placement of approximately 100,000 cubic yards of beach quality sand along a 3000' linear reach of the beach. The reserve continues to work with a group of researchers from UNCW to conduct pre- and post- placement monitoring activities to provide for better understanding of the potential benefits and concerns associated with this activity. The project will be completed between November 16 and March 15 per agreement between the Corps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and the reserve. There is also a Coastal Storm Risk Mitigation project being conducted at Wrightsville Beach that will pull material from an off-shore borrow area adjacent to the north end of Masonboro Island. The reserve will not receive material as part of this project. In addition, the Corps is studying the need for maintenance of Masonboro Inlet. The material from this work is likely to be placed on the northern portion of Masonboro Island due to a recent policy determination regarding the use of material derived from inside a Coastal Barrier Resources Act area.

Mr. Raney asked whether material from the inlet can go onto Masonboro Island since both the inlet and the island are within the Coastal Barrier Resources Area. The site manager responded that under the current interpretation of the rules, this would be possible and that the Corps is conducting a study of the Masonboro Inlet to determine what the maintenance needs are and plan for future projects.

- *Permit hunt update*
 - The reserve has been in conversations with WRC staff regarding the implementation of permit hunts on several of the sites, including the Masonboro 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 is 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.
- *Nature trail signage*
 - The reserve was awarded a grant through the National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERRS) Land Acquisition and Construction Fund that will provide funding for the construction of storm-resistant research platforms to replace the current research structures at Loosins Creek and Research Creek; build walkways in the marsh to allow for ongoing monitoring activities to continue while protecting the marsh from damage; and will provide for interpretive signs at the Currituck Banks Reserve and Masonboro Island Reserve along the nature trail. The signs at the Masonboro Island Reserve will be installed along the nature trail that begins and ends at Third Beach, replacing a set of posts holding QR codes. Approximately 8 panels featuring

information about barrier island geomorphology and dynamics, habitats and organisms, vulnerability and resilience, and stewardship ethics will be designed and installed. The signs will be similar to the reserve information signs in style, following the National Park Service format, but a lower profile cantilevered design. The signage will be developed in 2022 and installed in 2023.

Dr. Leonard suggested including QR codes to link to the UNCW Coastal Ocean Research and Monitoring Program and NERRS weather and water quality data websites.

- *Acquisitions*
 - The reserve closed on one of the inholdings within the boundary in June. The parcel, donated by the Broussard/Stich/Hewlett family adds approximately 25 acres to the State ownership. The reserve gratefully acknowledges this family's generosity in making this donation to the State. The reserve continues to pursue acquisition of inholdings and looks forward to trying to make progress during the next few years with the additional funds available through the NERRS and the NC Land and Water Fund.

Roundtable

- Mr. Raney asked whether the rule comments he submitted were included in the rule language. The site manager responded that the two changes referred to in the Reserve-wide update were from his comments.
- Dr. Long asked whether the story maps discussed at the previous meeting had been released to the public. The site manager replied that they were still in the review process but the committee members would be notified when they were released to the public.
- Mr. Wilgis updated the group regarding the 3 remaining ADVs and explained that they had received a quote from the contractor. Removal of these vessels is expected to take place within the next couple of weeks. He also reported that NCCF continues to work closely with WRC to remove an additional 44 vessels using funds from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The site manager added that the new authorities granted to the WRC and a possible ordinance New Hanover County is considering will hopefully help prevent future vessels from being abandoned or becoming derelict.
- Dr. Posey announced to the group that the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan update has been approved and that it places a strong emphasis on water quality.
- Ms. Addison reminded the group that the Division of Coastal Management made a determination regarding non-motorized rafts, which are sometimes left anchored in State waters, including within the reserve boundaries. These items have been determined to not qualify as vessels and therefore do not require a 30 day waiting period before removal. Notice can be posted on the items and then they can be removed as litter. Ms. Addison also asked about the possibility of benthic invertebrate studies in conjunction with sediment placement activities. The site manager responded that this has been discussed but to date, capacity has not allowed for much to be done other than baseline sample collection.

Public comments

- None

Action Items

- Reserve staff will contact committee members during the winter to establish a date for the spring meeting.
- Reserve staff will send out a list of dates of upcoming activities discussed during the meeting.
- Reserve staff will notify committee members when the story maps are released to the public.