



**NORTH CAROLINA
COASTAL RESERVE &
NATIONAL ESTUARINE
RESEARCH RESERVE**

Masonboro Island Reserve

Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, May 25, 2022, 10 am

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
NC Audubon, Lindsay Addison	Yes
New Hanover County Sheriff's Office, Sergeant Steve Schmidlin	Yes
New Hanover County Planning Department, Dylan McDonnell	No
NC Coastal Land Trust, Mellissa Dionesotes	No
Division of Marine Fisheries, Anne Deaton	No
Division of Parks and Recreation – Carolina Beach State Park, Chris Helms	No
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	Yes
Dr. Lynn Leonard	Yes
Dr. Zachary Long	Yes
Masonboro.org, Tom Hackler	Yes
William Raney	Yes
Jud Watkins	Yes
Ted Wilgis	No
<u>Others Present</u>	
Hope Sutton, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Stewardship Coordinator	
Elizabeth Pinnix, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Southern Sites Manager	
Christy Simmons, DCM	
Michelle Brodeur, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Communications Specialist	

Welcome – Hope Sutton

The stewardship coordinator welcomed the committee to the Spring 2022 meeting and reviewed the agenda. Roll call was taken.

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 stewardship coordinator provided some reminders from the Reserve-wide update:

- Brandon Puckett started a job with NOAA's National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science in April. A search for a new Research Coordinator will be conducted following some internal human resources work is completed.
- Elizabeth Pinnix is the Reserve's new Southern Sites Manager, providing site management for the four sites managed out of the Wilmington office, including the Bald Head Woods Reserve.
- Hope Sutton continues as the Reserve's Stewardship Coordinator, coordinating the efforts of the stewardship team and focusing on program-wide initiatives, policy, and partnerships.

Site Update – Hope Sutton/Elizabeth Colhoun

General site conditions

- The site manager reported that conditions on the site during the winter and spring seasons were typical, although visitation continues to be increased from past years. On any day with good weather, it is now possible to encounter visitors on the site regardless of the day of week. The last three abandoned vessels that had become derelict in Masonboro Channel were removed from the site in December. Two vessels located within the boundary along the ICWW toward the southern end of the reserve have been reported to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) and the U.S. Coast Guard so that they can be rapidly dealt with if they become derelict.
- A juvenile humpback whale stranded on the island on March 17th. The marine mammal stranding team responded and the carcass was left to naturally break down on the beachfront. An American alligator was spotted for a few days near the middle of the island on the beachfront. Although unusual, these observations are not rare in our area and the animal moved on after a few days.

Seasonal activities

- **Seasonal staff and projects** – The site manager reported on the 2022 season's field staff. The reserve's seasonal staff includes a shorebird technician partially funded by Cape Fear Audubon, two part-time general field technicians, and an intern through the Department of Environmental Quality's STEP (Student Training Experience Program). The shorebird technician is completing productivity monitoring as in past years and contributing to state and regional surveying efforts. The STEP intern is supporting a variety of species of concern monitoring activities and conducting a project related to light pollution and sea turtle nesting. Other projects during the summer include the accessibility project being conducted by a Duke Coastal Environmental Management graduate

student and a Spanish language outreach project being completed by NOAA Educational Partnership Program with Minority Serving Institutions scholar.

- **Diamondback terrapins** – The annual Terrapin Tally was held in April and May as a fully virtual activity. The project included the same ten sites as in 2021: 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. Approximately 150 volunteers attended the training webinars held in April. A total of 79 routes were paddled over 11 data collection dates which resulted in 275 documented diamondback terrapin sightings. Of this, 25 data collection sessions were completed at Masonboro and 88 terrapins were recorded. Weather and wind conditions resulted in the cancellation of approximately half the scheduled data collection sessions. The new data collection app, an ESRI Survey 1,2,3, worked well and resulted in data collection and quality control being much more streamlined for staff.
- **Sea turtles** – Routine regular monitoring began in early May and the first loggerhead sea turtle nest was identified on May 16. Four additional nests have been identified since as well as two false crawls. 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.

Site Stewards program

- The site manager reported that a virtual training was held on May 11 to begin the training process for Site Stewards for the Masonboro Island Reserve and several other sites. Participants were introduced to this program that utilizes trained volunteers to provide site information via a phone app. Stewards learned 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. This program will increase the site manager’s knowledge of conditions on the site and add “eyes and ears” to the site. Ten people were trained to become site stewards at the Masonboro Island site.

Mr. Hackler inquired about whether the public or local advisory committee members could use the Survey 1,2,3 tool to submit observations or concerns. *The site manager responded that the tool was designed to be used by trained volunteers, but that a similar but simpler reporting tool could potentially be developed for public use.*

Rules implementation and special activity authorization

- The stewardship coordinator reminded the committee that the reserve’s readopted and updated rules became effective on February 1. The process for reviewing and granting written authorization 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 has been going smoothly. Eighteen special activity authorizations have been approved for the activities at the Masonboro Island Reserve. This process has resulted in closer communication with commercial users and strengthened engagement.

Mr. Andrew expressed his frustration that educational programs such as Masonboro.org are being asked to apply for a special activity authorization. He also inquired more about the authorization process and whether organizations will have to complete an annual process. *Staff clarified that the ILX program that Masonboro.org runs is included in the approved authorization under Carolina Ocean Studies, the commercial operation that provides the transport and educators for the program. Staff also clarified that*

the special activity authorization process does require an annual application, but that the process has been designed as a simple web-based form and that commercial entities that conduct ongoing activities will be sent a re-application reminder each year in December so that the process represents the least amount of burden for applicants as possible. Mr. Hackler commented that this process is also to help in preventing activities that are not wanted (ie. music events/concerts). He asked if this authorization process included oyster farms at the site. *Staff clarified there are no oyster farms within the boundaries of Masonboro Island Reserve.* Mr. Raney asked if all of the 18 applications that have received a special activities authorization thus far at Masonboro have been eco-tours. *Staff replied that all the activities currently authorized at the Masonboro Island site are fee-based eco-tour/educational programs.*

Sediment placement activities

- The stewardship coordinator reported that the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) placed 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. Approximately 100,000 cubic yards of beach quality sand was placed along a 3000' linear reach of the beach. The reserve continued 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 was completed in mid-February.

Ms. Ratcliffe inquired about the sand quality from this project. *Staff responded that the material was deemed to be compatible.* Ms. Leonard questioned if the new ownership change at Freeman Park would result in no further sand placement on Masonboro Island. *Staff responded that although this has not been discussed with the Corps, it seems likely that Carolina Beach will work toward having this material placed on the beach on Pleasure Island.* Mr. Andrew commented that the north end of the island should receive sand due to inlet management with the jetty construction.

- The stewardship coordinator reported that a privately held inholding on one of the dredge spoil islands within the boundary will be used for material placement this coming winter. Access to cross State property has been requested and the reserve has been in discussion with consultants representing the landowner and the Masonboro Yacht Club, who will also be disposing of material on the island, and the Corps to determine the process for use of state and federal resources and to work through the necessary steps. Some heavy equipment is currently staged on the privately held parcel in anticipation of the upcoming dike construction.

Mr. Carr stated that private landowners are having to acquire land on dredge islands to dispose of sediment from private canals and marinas due to the Army Corps of Engineers not allowing spoil disposal on dredge islands anymore. Mr. Raney inquired about where this island was located. *Staff responded that it is the last dredge island heading north on the ICWW before Masonboro Channel.* Mr. Andrew commented that there is no maintenance on the dredge cells unless it is paid for by a private landowner.

Permit hunt update

- The stewardship coordinator reported that reserve staff have had additional conversations with WRC staff regarding the implementation of permit hunts on several of the sites, including the Masonboro Island Reserve. The target start date for permit hunts is August 2023. Reserve staff and WRC staff 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 Committee members were asked to provide input on preliminary thoughts about permit hunt details, which include: no hunting on the barrier island proper - to reduce the potential for user conflicts with recreational users; either no deer hunting or no baiting and no hunting with dogs and limiting firearms to shotguns with slugs; waterfowl hunting to primarily follow the current law/season as it stands but potentially limit number of permits given out or reduce number of days; dove and rail hunting with potentially limiting the number of hunters and/or number of days; and no small game hunting. One benefit to limiting the number of days is that it would make communication with other users easier when trying to inform them about when to be on alert for hunting activity.

Mr. Watkins asked if the permit hunts were beginning in August 2023 due to the beginning of rail season. *Staff responded that August is when the digest of hunting regulations is published by the WRC.*

Ms. Radcliffe asked if hunting as it has been at Masonboro will stay in effect until permit hunts in August 2023. *Staff replied that hunting would continue to be in accordance with all state and local laws and rules until the permit hunts go into effect.*

Mr. Posey asked if it would be possible to limit the hunting season to create very specific time periods that hunting is allowed. He expressed concern about researchers and students in the marsh ecosystems at Masonboro and the user conflict between those two groups. He suggests increased communications between CMS researchers/students and NCCR staff, as well as with the hunting community, to ensure that all site users understand the other uses on the site and to help avoid conflicts. *Staff responded that the permit hunt program allows the property owners/managers to customize the number of days and the start and end dates of the hunting opportunity.*

Mr. Schmidlin encouraged staff to be sure to engage the local WRC field staff as part of the permit hunt planning process and offered to assist with publicity by sending information about the permit hunt rules to the NHC Sheriff's Office Public Information Officer to share on social media accounts.

Ms. Radcliffe reported that Natural Heritage Staff wear safety orange at all times while in the field and that communications should strongly encourage this approach as a high priority for all site users during hunting seasons.

Mr. Andrew inquired about public input about the permit hunts and if there would be a public hearing. He stated that local hunters are passionate about this activity, and he recommended talking with the public to receive input directly from hunters. *Staff responded that although there is not a legal requirement to hold a public hearing as part of the permit hunt process, the reserve had conducted a public meeting prior to implementing a permit hunt at the Rachel Carson site and that staff is very interested in hearing from hunters about this process and site-specific concerns.*

Mr. Watkins asked if limiting the type of shot allowed was being considered and suggested requiring all shot to be lead free. *Staff responded that there has been discussion of applying the limitations related to duck hunting to all hunting at the sites, given the proximity to water for any hunting activities at the site.*

Mr. Schmidlin noted that typical hunting that is conducted by running dogs is done with a shotgun.

Mr. Carr stated that if the deer hunting season is shortened with limits on the permit hunt, it may result in more hunters using the site at the same time. *Staff responded that the permit hunt framework allows the number of days hunting can occur and the number of permits that can be given out to be customized.*

Ms. Radcliffe offered the perspective that gamelands are primarily being used for hunting while these sites have other specific purposes, so the decisions around the permit hunts for some sites may not be driven by target species populations but rather the compatibility of the activity with other user activities occurring on the sites.

Mr. Schmidlin asked if there has been a study conducted by the WRC to identify the wildlife that is taken from the island and how many. *Staff responded that the current data collected by WRC does not identify the location that animals are taken specifically enough to be useful for understanding population numbers at the site level.*

Mr. Carr asked how many calls have been received expressing concerns about hunting and whether there is any documentation of recreational users being inhibited from using the site due to hunting activity. *Staff responded that there are typically a handful of calls each year and that members of the public mention concerns about seeing or hearing gunfire while being within the boundary for recreational purposes.*

Mr. Watkins stated that planning for a permit hunt approach is also underway for the Bird Island Reserve and that it is a priority to try to avoid conflicts with the town and with the increased amount of recreational use. He also encouraged requiring steel shot for all hunting, including dove and rail. He stated this would support both safety and environmental protection.

Staff encouraged committee members to provide hunters they know to contact the reserve to provide input or to forward contact information for hunters so that reserve staff can reach out to gather more information from this user group.

Nature trail signage and projects

- The reserve is working on the content and design for the new signage being funded through the National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERRS) Land Acquisition and Construction Fund. Eight panels featuring information about barrier island geomorphology and dynamics, habitats and organisms, vulnerability and resilience, and stewardship ethics are being developed. The signs will be like the reserve informational signs in style, following the National Park Service format, but a lower profile cantilevered design. Installation is planned for late 2022.
- A Chronolog, a smartphone-based monitoring and engagement tool will also be installed at the nature trail. This tool encourages site visitors to take a photo and email it to an address that feeds into an automated service that adds each photo to a timelapse video of the location. This tool is designed to provide visitors with a way to be engaged with change over time while also creating a lasting record of the site across time.
- Staff are also working with a local Eagle Scout to design and install a bench on the nature trail.

Acquisitions

- The reserve closed on one of the inholdings within the boundary in June. The parcel, donated by the N.C. Coastal Land Trust, adds 330 acres to the State's ownership.

Story maps related to the Masonboro Island Reserve are available to the public on the Coastal Reserve website. Topics include recreation, American oystercatcher monitoring and conservation, and birds of Masonboro.

Roundtable

- Ms. Addison mentioned that 4th of July holiday is an issue at Lea Hutaff & Rich's inlet and asked if assistance from the Sheriff's dept was possible.
- Mr. Raney inquired about the shorebird nesting season and how it was going. *Staff responded that 38 pairs of American oystercatchers are being monitored and that productivity has been low due to overwash and predation.*
- Mr. Carr followed up about the permit hunts and stated that he knew hunters who would probably like to provide input.
- Ms. Radcliffe asked if the new parcel had been added to the Dedicated State Nature Preserve yet. *Staff responded that this step still needs to be completed.*
- Ms. Leonard stated that UNCW plans to continue flying the island to collect geospatial data in perpetuity. She also added that some ground truthing is needed to characterize habitats and suggested that the University and the NCNERR could work together to install a network of photo monitoring stations throughout the island to gain information about habitats and change over time.

Public comments

- None

Action Items

- Reserve staff will contact committee members during the summer to establish a date for the fall meeting.
- Reserve staff will send Survey 123 (site steward form) to committee members for their use and awareness.
- Reserve staff will collect input from local hunters referred by committee members.
- Reserve staff will work with Natural Heritage Program staff to work on the dedication of the new parcel.
- Reserve staff will continue conversations and brainstorming with Dr. Leonard regarding a collaborative photo monitoring project.