

I share a dream with most North Carolinians that our beautiful beaches will still be attractive for our great grandchildren. For a while, during the 80s and 90s, this dream appeared possible. But the new millennium is looking bad for NC's beaches.

The turn for the worse began with a 2001 Legislative Study Commission Report that set the stage for the current philosophy that preservation of shoreline property is more important than preserving the quality of our beaches. This report was unparalleled in its one-sidedness and is grossly unfair to the general public of North Carolina.

Ironically, as this report was being written, a US Army Corps of Engineers beach nourishment project was underway in Ocean Isle Beach. Done under the guise of navigation channel straightening, the Corps removed sand from the tidal delta of Shallotte Inlet and placed it on the beach. Tidal deltas, the bodies of sand found within inlets, are actually part of barrier islands and removing sand from them is certain to do damage to adjacent islands (in this case, increase the erosion rate at Holden beach).

A second policy precedent-setting event also took place in early 2001 when North Carolina got the nation's first "sea turtle habitat restoration" beach nourishment project on Oak Island. Unfortunately, the Corps could not have chosen worse sediment for this beach which is now comprised of large cobbles and rock and fronted by an extensive scarp (erosion bluff). Cobbles, rocks and scarps make it difficult, at best, for both turtle nesting and human recreation, and the state and the Corps, who issued permits for this project, should have stopped it in mid-stream. Surely, a beach designed to restore turtle nesting habitat should have been constructed of the highest quality sand, free of material that will create obstructions to nesting.

The problems continue in 2002 with the Pine Knoll Shores beach nourishment project. Again, because of a lack of diligence on the part of the Corps and state, the first two miles of this beach are made up of fragmental shell hash; impossible to walk on barefoot. The Corps doesn't seem to share our concerns since Colonel James Delony, Commander of the Corps' Wilmington District, recently declared, "what a great piece of work that's been" after viewing the project.

The rocky beach of Oak Island and the broken shell beach of Pine Knoll Shores will prove to have long-term negative impacts on beach fauna and recreation. In addition, both beaches, along with the one being constructed on Figure Eight Island, were emplaced on the upper-most part of the beach, providing maximum beach width for the least amount of sand. This is a technique that looks good at first; but you get what you pay for and the result will be very rapid erosion and very large scarps. Both beaches already have scarps in excess of 4 feet, similar in size to the one the Governor of New Jersey recently broke his leg falling off.

The town of Emerald Isle just passed a referendum allowing the town to establish tax districts so it can nourish some of its beaches. Their plan is to take sand directly from the inlet's tidal delta under the guise of channel straightening, just as was done at Ocean Isle Beach.

Topping off the bad news is the ongoing emplacement of a long sandbag seawall to protect the beach road in Kitty Hawk, NC. A sandbag seawall is no different than a concrete seawall in terms of its deleterious effects on the beach. This wall joins others already emplaced by the state in South Nags Head and Surf City.

As we view the politics, North Carolina's beaches are under the watch of an almost powerless Division of Coastal Management and Coastal Resource Commission. The Corps' Wilmington District is no help because of its irresponsibility and disregard for environmental impacts at the highest level of project management. Furthermore, a legislative committee, whose sole purpose is to review and weaken environmental protection efforts, has recently been approved by the General Assembly. Finally, there is a bill before the state legislature that will create an independent commission to control beach nourishment in North Carolina, taking the process even farther away from the people of North Carolina. This is another result of the aforementioned Legislative Study Commission.

As it stands now, the future of our beaches is in the hands of a small number of people interested only in preserving beachfront property. Sea level is rising, sand supplies are limited and beach nourishment simply isn't going to work everywhere along our high wave coast. In some places, we must move buildings back from the shoreline.

It's time to take a deep breath and do the following:

- Convene a new Legislative Study Commission or citizen panel that will objectively, fairly and broadly review the future of our beaches,
- Empower the state to establish and enforce zoning regulations that prevent the growth of "high-rise jungles" along beaches nourished with public money,
- Allow DCM to strictly monitor the quality of nourishment sand being placed on our beaches and, if necessary, stop bad projects like the ones in Pine Knoll Shores and Oak Island in mid-stream,
- Monitor sand sources to assure that sand removal for beach nourishment will not damage adjacent beaches and islands, and
- Encourage and support independent studies on the impacts of beach nourishment upon beach flora and fauna.

Nothing will happen unless the public makes a plea to its legislators to protect and preserve our state's greatest coastal resource, the beach.