

## SCIENCE ON THE SHORE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Orrin H. Pilkey, James B. Duke Professor emeritus Duke University

I think the management of South Carolina beaches is mishandled when objective science is not allowed into the public debate. The scientific "truth" about beaches in the Palmetto state seems to be made up of the opinion of a small number of consultants, committed to finding the "truth" only according to the needs of their clients, not the public. It is obvious that the impartial opinion of unbiased scientists is sorely needed.

A while back I met with a committee of North Carolina scientists and engineers on a panel organized by the North Carolina Coastal Resources Commission (CRC). Before us that day was a proposed "new and innovative" groin that purportedly would solve beach erosion problems. We reviewed the evidence and made a recommendation to the commission. They were not bound by our opinion, but at a minimum the CRC and the North Carolina public heard the viewpoint of an objective scientific panel before they made their decision.

The National Park Service does the same thing. They recently empanelled a committee of distinguished scientists, all from out of state, to evaluate and make recommendations on the Corps of Engineer's design of the proposed Oregon Inlet jetties on the Outer Banks.

But unlike these examples from the state next door, the OCRM (coastal management agency) in South Carolina fails to seek the counsel of objective science. In fact, its arguments to make groins (shore perpendicular walls across a beach) legal in South Carolina are scientifically unacceptable. To start building groins now would overturn the excellent laws on the books intended to preserve beaches for future generations. The Agency has gone simultaneously to the state Supreme Court and the Legislature to try and overturn a recent state appeals court decision that groins are illegal to build. The lower court of appeals decreed, correctly, that groins are a form of hard stabilization and therefore banned by state law.

Making matters worse, Chris Brooks, deputy commissioner of OCRM, is joining the chorus. In speeches around the state he is urging citizens to support groins on at least four beaches (and making questionable assertions in the process). Claims are being made by consultants (without rational explanation), that although groins can't be used on many beaches, Hunting Island is a special case. We are also told with certainty that the groins here will increase the life span of the proposed nourished beach, without causing problems on adjacent beaches and islands. The same claim was made for Folly Beach groins that are now causing erosion on downdrift beaches.

Most observers agree that OCRM of South Carolina is beyond redemption. The makeup of the panel members and its leadership assures its continued failure to take the necessary and sometimes difficult steps to preserve beaches for our grandchildren. If proof were needed of this lack of responsibility, the groin issue certainly furnishes the evidence.

I believe that the examples set by the State of North Carolina and the National Park Service may provide a partial solution to the South Carolina dilemma of poor beach management. An advisory science panel or committee should be appointed, ideally by OCRM, but if that doesn't happen, private groups such as foundations or a coalition of conservation/citizen organizations might consider doing so. South Carolina's universities have a large talent pool of excellent coastal scientists who could comment on the proposed use of groins as well as on other beach issues.

Scientific oversight is badly needed to halt the use of client-oriented consultant science in the societal debate about South Carolina's beaches. It is also needed to halt South Carolina's gradual slide into coastal management oblivion. I am not suggesting that scientists should make the final policy decisions. In a democracy that is the responsibility of an elected government. However, government decisions should be made in the full glare of good science and that is not currently happening in South Carolina.