

It's Up to Us

The mission of the NC Division of Coastal Management (DCM) is to “protect, conserve and manage North Carolina's coastal resources through an integrated program of planning, permitting, education and research.” This is comforting ...if only DCM was in control of North Carolina's coast.

Right now, the pace and direction of coastal development - and ultimately the future of our beaches – is controlled by a relatively small number of special interest groups, coastal legislators and “year-rounders.” Good news if you like Myrtle Beach, but bad news for the vast majority of property owners, tourists and everyone who cares about the future of our beaches.

It's clear how local interests have assumed control over the coast. It's also clear what the results have been and what the future holds if the state doesn't take back responsibly for managing its coastal resources. Here's the evidence...

Coastal legislators have made sure that DCM, the state agency with authority to enforce coastal environmental regulations, is vastly undermanned. The Coastal Resources Commission (CRC), the citizen group that adopts rules and policies to protect coastal areas of environmental concern from development, has become increasingly ineffective as coastal development interests repeatedly hinder Commission efforts. And, when the CRC does make a good decision, coastal legislators and special interests simply step in and overturn the Commission's work. For example, legislators killed a good CRC rule prohibiting swimming pools from being built close to the beach.

The most controversial coastal issue in North Carolina is beach nourishment. With a dubious history, beach nourishment is clearly not the panacea some want it to be (and want you to believe it is). The very poor quality of material placed on the beaches of Bogue Banks, for example, illustrates what we can expect when projects are done “on the cheap” with local funding. Although DCM and the US Army Corps of Engineers had authority to regulate the quality of these nourished beaches, both failed miserably. Sure, DCM cited Emerald Isle for its bad beach. But the \$1,500 maximum allowable fine was hardly a deterrent. On Oak Island, the state turned a blind eye while the Corps pumped tons of fist-sized and larger rocks on a beach supposedly being nourished to restore nesting habitat for turtles.

In the long term, perhaps the most damaging aspect of beach nourishment is the removal of sand from tidal inlets that separate barrier islands. In 2001, the Corps mined a significant amount of sand from the ebb tidal delta in Shallotte Inlet and Emerald Isle plans to mine Bogue Inlet later this year. It's a long geologic story, but inlet mining is shortsighted and will eventually lead to increasing erosion along adjacent islands.

But our coastal management problems extend beyond beach nourishment. Along the Outer Banks, the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Pea Island Wildlife Refuge have become little more than transportation corridors for State Highway 12. In Dare County, officials are inexplicably fighting replacement of the Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet and the relocation of Highway 12 away from the ocean; actions that will help preserve the integrity of the barrier island. Dare County was also strongly opposed to moving the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse – a curious position since the lighthouse was bound for disaster if left in its original location.

In some towns like North Topsail Beach, on arguably the most dangerous barrier island on the East Coast, development is occurring at an incredible pace. In other towns like Carolina Beach high-rises, which allow little management flexibility especially if sea level rise continues, are appearing. Once nourishment is no longer feasible, our beaches will either be lined with seawalls or littered with high-rises in the surf zone, such as the Comfort Inn in Nags Head or the Sea Ranch in Kill Devil Hills.

Legislators from the Piedmont and Mountains must recognize that our coast is not being well managed, step up and take responsibility for protecting our most vulnerable public trust resource. Specifically, the legislature should:

- Strengthen the CRC by changing the composition of its membership
- Give DCM more enforcement ability and stop punishing it when existing rules and laws are enforced
- Prevent the construction of high-rises along nourished beaches
- Support strategic retreat as a feasible coastal management alternative
- Be fully prepared for the formation of new inlets
- Critically evaluate the possibility of replacing portions of State Highway 12 with ferries

It is crystal clear that local interests have neither the ability nor the sense to responsibly manage our coastline. But it's happened elsewhere, and it'll happen here if we don't get a hold of the situation. It's up to our Piedmont and Mountain legislators to step up and take back our beaches.

Dr. Orrin Pilkey, James B. Duke Professor of Earth Sciences
Andrew Coburn, Associate Director

Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines
Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences
Duke University
Campus Box 90228
Durham, NC 27708-0228
Tel: 919-684-2206
Fax: 919-684-5833
<http://www.env.duke.edu/psds>