

The **Herald-Sun** (Durham, NC)

December 3, 1999 Friday  
Final Edition

**SECTION:** EDITORIAL; Pg. A15

**LENGTH:** 597 words

**HEADLINE:** Let's not repeat New Jersey's mistakes;  
North Carolina law bans beach-destroying seawalls and sandbags but lacks the bite it needs to make the law effective

**BYLINE:** **ORRIN H. PILKEY** guest columnist

**BODY:**

North Carolina once led the nation in the effort to preserve ocean beaches for future generations. We learned from the disasters of the New Jersey shore and banned construction of beach-destroying seawalls. Five states (Maine, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas and Oregon) followed in our footsteps and more are contemplating doing so.

I took great pride in having provided some of the impetus (and research) behind those regulations. Their enactment in 1985 seemed to indicate a lot of bureaucratic courage on the part of Gov. Jim Hunt and the Legislature of the time. It looked like the beaches of future generations of North Carolinians would be preserved. How naive I was. The regulation was put in all right, but effective means of enforcing it were conveniently omitted. The laws were fig leaves for politicians and the development community wishing to appear environmentally concerned while covering up the fact that business at the beach would go on just as before, with little regard for beach quality.

A compromise was included in the seawall ban allowing temporary installment of sandbag seawalls. The spirit and the intention of the new rule was to hold the shoreline in place with the small sandbags while a building was being moved. All sandbags were to be removed within two years (a few after five years).

The sand bag removal requirement was important because sandbag walls are no different than concrete seawalls in their impact on beach width. As shorelines retreat landward up against any kind of fixed structure, the beaches narrow and eventually disappear.

Fifteen years later, our beaches are lined with hundreds of these substitute seawalls, some more than 1,000 feet long and others more than 20 feet high (the rules say they are not to exceed seven feet). A few already extend to the low tide line, removing the beach entirely. None of the walls have been removed. As for the small bags envisioned by those

who put the regulations into play, they now weigh several tons each.

Government oversight falls on North Carolina's Division of Coastal Management. This agency is perennially underfunded and annually threatened with extinction by the Legislature. The DCM is supervised by a citizen board known as the Coastal Resources Commission, a toothless organization kept powerless by successive governors from both parties.

Time and again the CRC has sided with building preservation over beach preservation and allows new seawalls to be constructed, albeit with close votes. One perennial argument is that sandbags should remain in place until we nourish the beach with imported sand. But there is no way that we can afford to nourish all or even most of the beaches of North Carolina.

At last, DCM just announced plans to order sandbag seawalls removed from the state's beaches. This means that a number of buildings, including some high rise hotels (such as the Whalebone Junction Comfort Inn in Nags Head), will have to be moved quickly or they will fall in. We can anticipate loud complaining, numerous lawsuits, long delays and much disobedience of the law.

The horse may have already escaped the barn. But a huge expression of public concern to the DCM and to legislators about the future of our state's beaches could still save the day. We've lost our beach preservation momentum, but it can be regained. The regulations are in place. Just ask our politicians to enforce them! We all owe this much to the coming generations.

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo: PILKEY

**LOAD-DATE:** August 20, 2004