

A Bad Day at the Beach

The future of North Carolina's beaches, your beaches, is currently in the hands of a well-organized, politically-savvy coalition of "beach preservation associations," high-powered lobbyists, coastal engineering firms, developers, consultants, property owners and state legislators. This coalition has a considerable financial interest in seeing that nearly every mile of every "developed beach" in the state is engineered and artificially stabilized. And it is determined to make it happen.

These special interests care nothing about the long-term preservation of our beaches or the sustainability of our natural coastal environment. They are interested only in protecting hotels, motels, condos, investment properties and the tax base: the status quo. In so doing, our beaches will be ruined for generations to come. A brief examination of two North Carolina beaches illustrate this point.

On Oak Island, five-foot vertical beach cliffs (scarps) and extensive piles of rock litter the beach recently constructed by the Corps for the sole purpose of "restoring sea turtle nesting habitat." Considering that sea turtles have difficulty traversing sand scarps greater than 18 inches in height, that the rocky beach is much different in composition than the native beach and that the final cost is expected to be \$4 million more than originally predicted, it will interesting to see if this beach - justified, funded and constructed as a habitat restoration and enhancement project - will ever meet its intended objective.

In Pine Knoll Shores, on Bogue Banks, huge quantities of sharp shell fragments – difficult to walk on barefoot - had been pumped on over two miles of beach until a group of concerned scientists spoke out, forcing the contractor to take sediment from a different location. Although the project's sponsors and director repeatedly stress that a thorough environmental review was completed, subsequent problems with sediment compatibility, storms, tires from artificial reefs and sea turtles mean that less "sand" of lower quality will be placed on the beach.

Speaking of turtles, this is the same project that killed four endangered/threatened sea turtles in a 24-hour period last December. Tim Kana, president of CSE and project director, recently admitted, "no one lost more sleep over this than me." Even so, Kana asked that the National Marine Fisheries Service allow his project to "take" additional sea turtles so it wouldn't be shut down. His request was recently denied. Mr. Kana's actions, along with statements made by the lead project engineer, show a blatant lack of concern for threatened and endangered marine species and bring into question CSE's ability to adequately protect North Carolina's coastal environmental resources.

The troubles encountered in both beach fill projects illustrate what is happening, and what will continue to happen, to North Carolina's beaches. While they are of concern to those paying for them, they should also be of concern to all North Carolinians who, by law, are the rightful owners of the beach.

There are many other issues and problems surrounding beach management in North Carolina in general, and beach fill projects in particular, that can and should be explored including the questionable use of USDA hurricane recovery funds for beach nourishment along Bogue Banks, the inappropriateness of using sand from tidal deltas for beach fill, the inequitable distribution of costs and benefits associated with federal beach fill projects, the long-term environmental impacts of beach fill projects, sediment compatibility issues and the threat of seawalls, jetties and groins.

Perhaps the single most important issue at hand is the disproportionate influence of special interests on coastal management in the state. The question all North Carolinians should be asking is, "who's making the decisions that will affect the future of our beaches?" It surely isn't the NC Division of Coastal Management or NC Coastal Resources Commission, the state agencies entrusted with managing our coastline. Whether it's a lack of strong leadership, political pressure, ineffectiveness or some combination of factors, the state appears unable - or unwilling - to halt the manipulation and eventual destruction of our beaches by private interests.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that we don't want the future of our beaches to be decided by a minority of interests whose primary motivation is money. If it were, over 120 miles of North Carolina's beaches would be stabilized, first through beach fill and eventually with seawalls. Before we know it, the beach will be gone. The bottom line is that North Carolina is not fulfilling its legal obligation to protect and preserve the beach – arguably the state's most valuable public trust coastal resource - for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.