On the Cheap

Going to Pine Knoll Shores or Indian Beach this summer? Better bring your shoes if you plan on swimming since the surf zone of the nourished beach in these towns is laced with shards of jagged, broken shell. Heading to Emerald Isle? Better go soon because another bad beach, this time littered with black oyster shells and huge clumps of mud, is being constructed right now as you read this. Don't be fooled by what the local tourist offices say. The sad truth is that beach nourishment has transformed North Carolina's "Crystal Coast" into mile after mile of hard, dark gravel, mud and jagged fragments of broken shell.

So, how did this occur? Who's allowing our state's naturally sandy beaches to be defiled? What happened? The answer is simple: North Carolina's coastal management program is in shambles. Neither the Division of Coastal Management nor the Coastal Resource Commission is doing their job. But this should hardly come as any surprise since it's been a fact for several years now.

The defining moment marking the state's failure to protect our beaches came in the spring of 2001, when Oak Island was nourished to "restore sea turtle nesting habitat." The state was either unable or unwilling to stop this project, even when it became absolutely clear that large rocks and other debris were being pumped onto the beach. The result is a beach full of fist-sized cobbles and with a persistent, sheer vertical cliff - known as a scarp – up to four feet in height.

Another turning point occurred the same year; but this time the problem wasn't the quality of the beach, it was where the beach came from. In 2001, the state allowed the Wilmington District of the US Army Corps of Engineers to remove almost the entire ebb tidal delta of Shallotte Inlet in order to nourish Ocean Isle Beach. Tidal deltas are the huge bodies of sand that extend landward (flood tidal delta) and seaward (ebb tidal delta) from inlets between barrier islands. The problem with using tidal delta sand is that after mining, sand that was once transported across the tidal deltas - from island to island - will now be trapped in the newly dredged hole, causing adjacent islands to be starved of sand. For years to come, little if any sand will flow between Ocean Isle Beach and Holden Beach, it's neighbor to the east, causing erosion rates on both islands to increase (although it may be a few years before this becomes apparent). Interestingly, the erosion rate of the nourished beach will itself increase; a victim of the pit from which it was obtained.

Now the dam is about to burst as anxious coastal communities seek the cheapest means possible to protect development, and their tax base, from the inevitable:

- At least four additional inlet tidal deltas (Bogue Inlet, New River Inlet, Tubbs Inlet and Rich Inlet) are being considered for mining:

- Several communities on Bogue Banks, along with Carteret County, are actively fighting excellent federal public beach access and parking rules, just so they can pay less for a publicly subsidized beach nourishment project;
- The quality of beach nourishment projects is entirely in the hands of consulting engineers, geologists and the Corps – special interests more concerned with the bottom line than what they're putting on our beaches, and
- Tens of millions of state dollars will be required every year, year after year, not only to nourish and maintain nourished beaches, but to fix the damage caused by bad nourishment projects.

Nobody wants to go to the beach, and not be able to walk barefoot. Nobody wants to lie on sand as hard as a road. Nobody wants to wait in the blazing hot sun for a shuttle bus, just to get back to the parking lot. Nobody wants to see the beaches of North Carolina sacrificed for the sake of a small number of houses threatened by shoreline erosion. But they are, and all North Carolinian's stand to lose one of the state's most precious natural resources; the beach. Don't believe us? Just take a walk along any one of the Crystal Coast's recently nourished beaches. Oh, and remember to bring your shoes!