

VIII. OPERATIONS ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

Division of Parks and Recreation staff identified the major park issues facing Fort Fisher State Recreation Area at the initiation of the general management plan process. The issues have been divided into three categories: natural resources (see Chapter VI), capital improvements (see Chapter VII) and operations. This chapter identifies park operations issues and makes recommendations for addressing them during the next five years.

Operations issues for Fort Fisher State Recreation Area that are of significant concern are:

1. Lack of Housing
2. Lack of Parking and Facilities
3. Improve Management of Bald Head Island State Natural Area
4. Staffing Needs
5. Vehicular Beach Access
6. Hunting at Hermit's Creek

LACK OF HOUSING

Background

In order to provide effective protective services to the visitors, natural resources and facilities of any state park or recreation area, the Division of Parks and Recreation provides on site housing at the vast majority of park areas. This is necessary to provide prompt and continuous coverage by trained rangers who respond to medical emergencies, provide visitor assistance, deter and investigate unlawful activities and respond to natural threats such as wild fire and severe weather.

Staff housing is currently unavailable at Fort Fisher. The park is visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. The public has limited, overnight four-wheel drive access to the beach, and the beach area is especially susceptible to vandalism and resource damage. Disabled vehicles present a problem, particularly with rising tides. In the absence of ranger staff, the need for housing is heightened.

Unfortunately, there is no suitable site for staff residences at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area and park staff is usually unable to find affordable housing on Pleasure Island. With staff forced to live so far away, extended response times hamper efforts to provide the necessary services described above. High property values at the beach are also having an increasingly negative effect on the recruitment and retention of park personnel.

Recommendations

In the absence of a suitable residential site at the park, the Division should investigate the feasibility of acquiring existing housing in the nearby communities of Kure Beach and Carolina Beach. Housing costs will be more affordable away from shore and the homes would be less susceptible to damage from storms and continuous exposure to the salt spray. Fort Fisher staff should remain aware of housing opportunities in these communities and advise Division management. Two residences are necessary to provide minimal, effective coverage, and these should be located as close to the state recreation area as possible to reduce response time.

If at some future time land adjacent to Fort Fisher State Recreation Area becomes available, the Division will consider its acquisition for ranger housing. The Division will also investigate the possibility of establishing a long-term lease for ranger housing at the nearby federal recreation area.

LACK OF PARKING AND FACILITIES

Background

Annual attendance at Fort Fisher State Recreation and the nearby aquarium is approaching one million visitors. The only parking area at the recreation area routinely fills to capacity on weekends during late spring, summer and early fall. Visitors arriving after the parking area fills have parked along the roadsides within the park, resulting in increased congestion and the likelihood that pedestrians could be struck by motorists. There is inadequate staff to control parking on the busiest days.

Although the park attracts numerous school groups and thousands seeking the recreational opportunities of the region's only publicly owned beach, picnicking facilities are inadequate. Currently, 10 picnic tables are crowded into a small open space at the visitor center. The area has no shade and is inadequate to accommodate the school groups and large numbers of visitors regularly visiting the park.

A picnic shelter was previously provided near the swimming beach, but it was destroyed by a hurricane. Additionally, the outdoor shower located at the restroom/changing building is inadequate to accommodate the large crowds.

Recommendations

Parking should be limited to the existing area provided. Three additional seasonal employees are needed to assist rangers with traffic and parking, to limit parking to the designated parking area, and to control vehicular access to the beach.

Additional picnic sites and a covered area should be provided for picnicking. Operations staff should determine the feasibility of expanding the covered deck space at the park office and contact appropriate state agencies to obtain permits to rebuild the destroyed shelter. Also,

operations staff should consider the feasibility of using a portable or mobile shelter for picnicking, as any permanent structure is very susceptible to storm damage. Major maintenance funds will be used for these purposes. Operations staff will also determine the feasibility of expanding outdoor showers and take appropriate action utilizing major maintenance funds if necessary.

IMPROVE MANAGEMENT OF BALD HEAD ISLAND STATE NATURAL AREA

Background

Encompassing more than 1200 acres, Bald Head Island State Natural Area is contiguous to Fort Fisher State Recreation Area. The state natural area is a part of the N.C. State Parks System and is the responsibility of the Division of Parks and Recreation. Through provisions of a Memorandum of Agreement with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), the WRC manages the marsh area and the staff at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area manages the balance of the acreage along the ocean beach. The state natural area has been declared a National Natural Landmark and it has also been classified an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society.

Unfortunately, this significant site is not receiving effective management. Fort Fisher staff is involved in management of the state recreation area and is unable to devote adequate attention to the state natural area, and WRC staff have not allocated sufficient time to manage the marsh area. The boundary of the area managed by the Division of Parks and Recreation is unmarked, making it very difficult for Fort Fisher rangers to enforce laws and regulations along the undetermined boundary. A squatters' fish camp exists within the state natural area, but it is unclear if park staff has jurisdiction to remove the structures, or if the WRC must act to do so. The National Park Service in their annual evaluation has referenced the limited management of the area by park staff, and this is threatening the continued classification of the area as a National Natural Landmark.

Recommendations

Division staff will review the Memorandum of Agreement between the Division of Parks and Recreation and the WRC to clarify management responsibilities for the state natural area and determine if revision and/or continuance of the MOU are desirable. Division Land Acquisition Program staff will conduct property research to establish a definitive boundary for Division law enforcement purposes.

Rangers will also remove the squatters' fish camp once it is confirmed it is within their jurisdiction to do so.

STAFFING NEEDS

Background

In considering that nearly a million people visit Fort Fisher State Recreation Area and the nearby aquarium annually, and that the acreage managed by recreation area staff is elongated and covers several miles of shore, dunes and marsh, the existing staff is inadequate to effectively manage both the recreation area and state natural area. The staff also aids in management of the adjacent Zeke's Island Estuarine Research Reserve.

Due to inadequate staffing, requests for interpretive programs are not always met, parking is allowed to exceed design capacity, trained staff is not always present when the park is open, and minimal attention is devoted to management of the Bald Head Island State Natural Area. In addition to the existing demands on staff, collection of the beach access fee instituted in 2004 puts additional demand on staff.

Recommendations

Establish one new ranger position to better meet demand for interpretive programming, to become more deeply involved in the natural resource management of the park and state natural area, and to have a ranger present more often whenever the park is open. Even with an additional ranger, rangers will not be present continuously during the fall and winter when the park is open 24 hours a day.

To assist with the new responsibilities to control beach access, and to improve the ability to be more effective in accommodating large crowds, three new seasonal positions should be established. One six-month assistant park ranger, one nine-month general utility worker and one three-month (14 week) general utility worker are recommended.

<u>Current Staff</u>	<u>Existing Number</u>	<u>Staffing Needs</u>
Park Superintendent I	1	
Park Ranger II	1	
Park Ranger I	2	1 ranger
Maintenance Mechanic II	1	
General Utility Worker	1	
Office Assistant III	1	
Assistant Park Ranger	1 6-mos.	1 6-mos.
General Utility Worker	1 9-mos.	1 9-mos.
		1 3-mos.
Park Attendant	1 6-mos.	
Refreshment Stand Manager I	1	
Refreshment Stand Clerk	1	
Chief Lifeguard	1	
Lifeguard	4	
Peak Load Lifeguard	1	
Peak Load Office Assistant	1 6-mos.	

Peak Load Park Attendant	1 6-mos.
Peak Load Refreshment Stand Cl.	2

VEHICULAR BEACH ACCESS

Background

Historically, visitors have had unrestricted vehicular access to the southern tip of Pleasure Island. Unrestricted access continued after the establishment of the Fort Fisher State Recreation Area and Bald Head Island State Natural Area.

In recognition of the need to restrict vehicular access as a means to protect the sensitive environment and wildlife of the island spit, vehicular access progressively became more controlled by identifying and posting nesting areas for shore and water birds. As the need to expand control became apparent, additional areas were posted as closed to vehicles.

Realizing that the presence of vehicles on the beach interfered with nesting activities and life processes of sea turtles and shore and water birds, several of which are classified as threatened, the Division of Parks and Recreation closed the beach to vehicles during overnight hours beginning February 1, 2004. This action, combined with the establishment of a vehicular beach access permit and fee, stimulated considerable public debate and resulted in legislation that mandated park hours and provided vehicular beach access by permit only per the following schedule:

September 15- March 15	open 24 hrs
March 16- March 31	8 am-7 pm
April 1- May 31	8 am-8 pm
June 1-August 31	6 am-9 pm
September 1- September 14	6 am-8 pm.

The legislation further directed that a comprehensive study be performed to receive public comments, determine economic and biological impact of vehicles on the beach as well as the demand for this recreational activity. UNC-Wilmington conducted the study, completing it in February 2005. The study, *An Assessment of Ocean Beach Vehicular Use at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area*, provided information for vehicular access demand, biological impacts and economic impacts. It found that nighttime use is a relatively small component of overall vehicular activity; that rare species at Fort Fisher must be protected; and that the local economy will be affected to a minor degree by nighttime restriction during March 15 through September 15. For these reasons, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources concluded that the current Fort Fisher State Recreation Area management policy is affirmed by the results of the study.

Recommendations

In accordance with the Beach Access Management Plan adopted by the Division in April 2004, the Division acknowledged the need to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the

plan for managing vehicular beach access. The evaluation is necessary to determine that the appropriate balance is being met in protecting the unique environment and wildlife of the park and in meeting public demand for vehicular access to the beach.

The Division of Parks and Recreation should re-visit the Beach Access Management Plan when the general management plan is updated to review the effectiveness of the plan in maintaining the aforementioned balance given the dynamic nature of the park environment.

HUNTING AT HERMIT'S CREEK

Background

While hunting is prohibited at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area, it is allowed in adjacent marsh areas. Of particular concern is an area known as Hermit's Creek. The four-wheel drive beach access road and a trail for the park run within 25 yards of Hermit's Creek. Visitors to the nearby aquarium also use this area for outdoor recreation and nature study. The open-water area is used by duck hunters, creating a hazardous situation for unwary park visitors. The Division of Parks and Recreation would be able to resolve this unsafe situation if it were granted jurisdiction of the submerged lands and open waters of Hermit's Creek.

The open waters and marshes adjacent to the park, particularly the Hermit's Creek area, are believed to be state owned. This area also is adjacent to the Zeke's Island Estuarine Research Reserve. In a letter dated July 12, 1994, the Attorney General's Office determined that state-owned submerged lands could be allocated to the Division. This has been done at Goose Creek State Park to resolve similar management problems. The Division in 1999 requested to the State Property Office that the submerged lands of the Hermit's Creek Area be reallocated to it for management, but this has not yet been done.

Recommendations

The Division will pursue its request for reallocation of the Hermit's Creek area from the mouth of Hermit's Creek eastward, including marshes and several small creeks that branch off Hermit's Creek. If reallocation is not granted, establishment of a safety zone may serve as an alternative that would protect park and aquarium visitors. The Division will also contact aquarium staff to seek their support for reallocation or safety zone establishment. The Hermit's Creek area is also adjacent to the Zeke's Island Estuarine Research Reserve, and the memorandum of understanding with the Division of Coastal management should be review and revised, if needed.

01/07