

Fort Fisher State Recreation Area General Management Plan



North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

Division of Parks and Recreation

Coastal Region

February 2017

I. MISSION & PURPOSE

MISSION STATEMENT:

Conservation: To protect natural diversity of North Carolina through careful selection and stewardship of state parks system lands;

Recreation: To provide and promote outdoor recreation opportunities in the state parks system and throughout the state; and

Education: To encourage appreciation of North Carolina's natural and cultural heritage through diverse educational opportunities; for all citizens of and visitors to the State of North Carolina.

Our purpose: The State of North Carolina offers unique archaeological, geologic, biologic, scenic and recreational resources. These resources are part of the heritage of the people of this State. The heritage of a people should be preserved and managed by those people for their use and for the use of their visitors and descendants.

PARK PURPOSE:

A movement to conserve and restore the area surrounding Fort Fisher, the largest earthwork fort in the Confederacy and the site of key Civil War battles, originated with the citizens of New Hanover County in the 1930s. The movement died with the onset of World War II, when the fort site once again became an active military post. Near the end of the war, the Army abandoned the site. In the late 1950s, local and state forces revived the idea of restoring Fort Fisher, and shortly thereafter the area became a state historic site. Fort Fisher State Recreation Area was established in 1986 with the allocation to the Division of Parks and Recreation of 287 acres in New Hanover and Brunswick Counties south of the Fort Fisher State Historic Site.

Management of the Lower Cape Fear Peninsula is shared among a variety of state agencies. In addition to Fort Fisher State Recreation Area, the NC Division of Parks and Recreation manages Bald Head Island State Natural Area to the south. The Department of Cultural Resources manages the Fort Fisher State Historic Site, which exists to protect and interpret the historic fort itself. The NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher occupies 29 acres adjacent to the state recreation area. The NC Division of Coastal Management manages Zeke's Island National Estuarine Research Reserve and Bald Head Woods Coastal Reserve. The NC Wildlife Resources Commission owns and manages the Federal Point Access Area, which provides a boat ramp and parking to allow boaters access to the estuary. N.C. Department of Transportation owns and operates the Fort Fisher- Southport Ferry landing on the Cape Fear River.



Visitor Center

The most popular recreational resource at Fort Fisher is the more than six (6) miles of public beach. Visitors are allowed to drive on the beach which is why this park is a “recreational” area. From the recreation area parking lot, an elevated boardwalk leads over sand dunes to the beach where walking, swimming, sun bathing, bird watching, fishing and other beach activities are all popular. A short trail meanders through the marsh, allowing hikers a chance to view sound-side flora and fauna.

Fort Fisher State Recreation contains a number of important biological resources. The loggerhead sea turtle, on the list of federally endangered and threatened species, uses the beach for nesting. The areas between and behind the dunes serve as critical nesting habitat for many colonial nesting water birds and other shorebirds. The recreation area is also an important stopover and wintering site for many migrating birds, including the endangered Peregrine Falcon and Piping Plover. A wide variety of coastal natural communities are represented here, from the remnant maritime forest of Live Oak and Yaupon, to tidal creeks and biologically - productive salt marshes.

Fort Fisher is an awe-inspiring scenic resource. Visitors can escape the stresses of everyday life, relax, and enjoy the natural beauty. Year round, visitors enjoy the aerial acrobatics of seagulls, terns and brown pelicans as they soar above the waves, or stroll along the beach and gaze upon the open ocean or miles of white sandy beach that make up this pristine shoreline. A short venture into the mudflats and marshes reveals sandpipers and other shorebirds as they search for food.

The geology in the Fort Fisher vicinity is characterized by deposits of the Pleistocene epoch, one to two million years old. Surface material consists of soils, sands and clays that overlie the much older Castle Hayne and Pee dee formations. The beach sand found here is a very fine, porous soil normally associated with Newhan fine sand. This sandy soil is a major element in the dynamic dunes and inlets that are constantly shifting and changing. An outcrop of hard, indurated coquina, or shell limestone, is located at the northern end of Fort Fisher. This is the only natural outcrop of beach rock along the North Carolina coast.

Fort Fisher, built in 1861, served to protect the port city of Wilmington from Union ships during the Civil War. Wilmington was an important port of entry for the Confederacy, especially during the later stages of the war. When Fort Fisher was captured the Confederate supply line was broken, and approximately three months later the Civil War came to an end. Although what remains of the main fort site and surrounding bunkers and fortifications are located at the Fort Fisher State Historic Site, the fort was the namesake and impetus for the protection of the general area that includes the Fort Fisher State Recreation Area.

Fort Fisher State Recreation Area exists primarily for its outstanding recreational, biological, scenic and geological resources, and also for its archaeological significance. The Division of Parks and Recreation is charged with preserving these values and providing park experiences that promote pride in and understanding of this natural heritage.

II. HISTORY

Prior to European settlement, the Cape Fear Native Americans, of the Siouan language group, lived in and around the lower Cape Fear peninsula; farming, fishing and hunting. Artifacts of the native culture, including pottery fragments, arrowheads and mounds of oyster shells, or midden piles, have been found in this area.

Early attempts at European colonization in the area were unsuccessful, mainly due to conflicts with the Cape Fear Native Americans. Pirating, common in the area during colonial times, also contributed to the struggles of early settlers. About 1730, further upstream along the Cape Fear River from Fort Fisher, the port of Wilmington was settled. Wilmington became a bustling port, particularly important for its exports of naval stores - tar, pitch, and turpentine products derived from the resin of the Longleaf Pine.

During the Civil War, Fort Fisher, built in 1861, served to protect the valuable port of Wilmington from Union forces. By late 1864, it was the last southern port open to trade. In this same year the first of two Union attacks on Fort Fisher took place. The fort held strong during the first battle and Union forces withdrew, but the Confederacy was not so lucky the second time.

In early 1865, a fleet of 56 ships bombarded the fort prior to a land assault by a force of more than 3,300 infantries. After a six-hour battle, Fort Fisher was captured and the Confederate supply line was broken. It was the largest land-sea battle fought in any war up to that time. The outcome contributed significantly to the outcome of the Civil War. Approximately three months after the fall of Fort Fisher, the Civil War came to an end.



"The Rocks" Jetty

In the late 19th century, a long rock jetty called "The Rocks" was built west of Fort Fisher to aid navigation by stopping shoaling in the Cape Fear River. Completed in 1881, The Rocks closed the former New Inlet, once used by Confederate blockade-runners to avoid the U.S. Navy, and created a lagoon, now called "The Basin". Today, The Rocks and The Basin are part of the Zeke's Island component of the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve, and 1160-acre area of outstanding estuarine and ocean resources with extensive marshes and tidal flats.

The southern tip of New Hanover County became an island (now known as Pleasure Island) in 1929 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged Snow's Cut (named for Major William A. Snow, Chief Engineer for the Wilmington District). This cut is a canal that connects the Cape Fear River to Masonboro Sound and is now part of the Intracoastal Waterway.

World War II caused huge economic and social changes in the Wilmington area as industrial development and shipyards boomed. Civilian workers and military personnel poured into the area during the war years, causing Wilmington's population to quadruple.

In late 1940, construction began on Camp Davis, located about 30 miles north of Wilmington. The base used five remote training sites along North Carolina's southern coast, and Fort Fisher became the primary firing range. The range stayed open until 1944, training many military personnel and aiding the war effort. A bunker still remains along the Basin Trail from the World War II base.

From 1955 to 1972, Robert E. Harrill, who became known as the Fort Fisher Hermit lived in the World War II bunker. He became known to the thousands of visitors who came to Fort Fisher during those years. Harrill relied on nature for much of his food, eating oysters, clams and fish as well as what he would grow. Over time, as his popularity and reputation grew, he also benefited from donations left by visitors.

Fort Fisher State Recreation Area was established as a unit of the North Carolina State Park System in 1986 when 287 acres were transferred from the Historic Site to the Division of Parks and Recreation. Today, Fort Fisher offers beach access, educational programming and many other amenities to hundreds of thousands of park visitors annually.

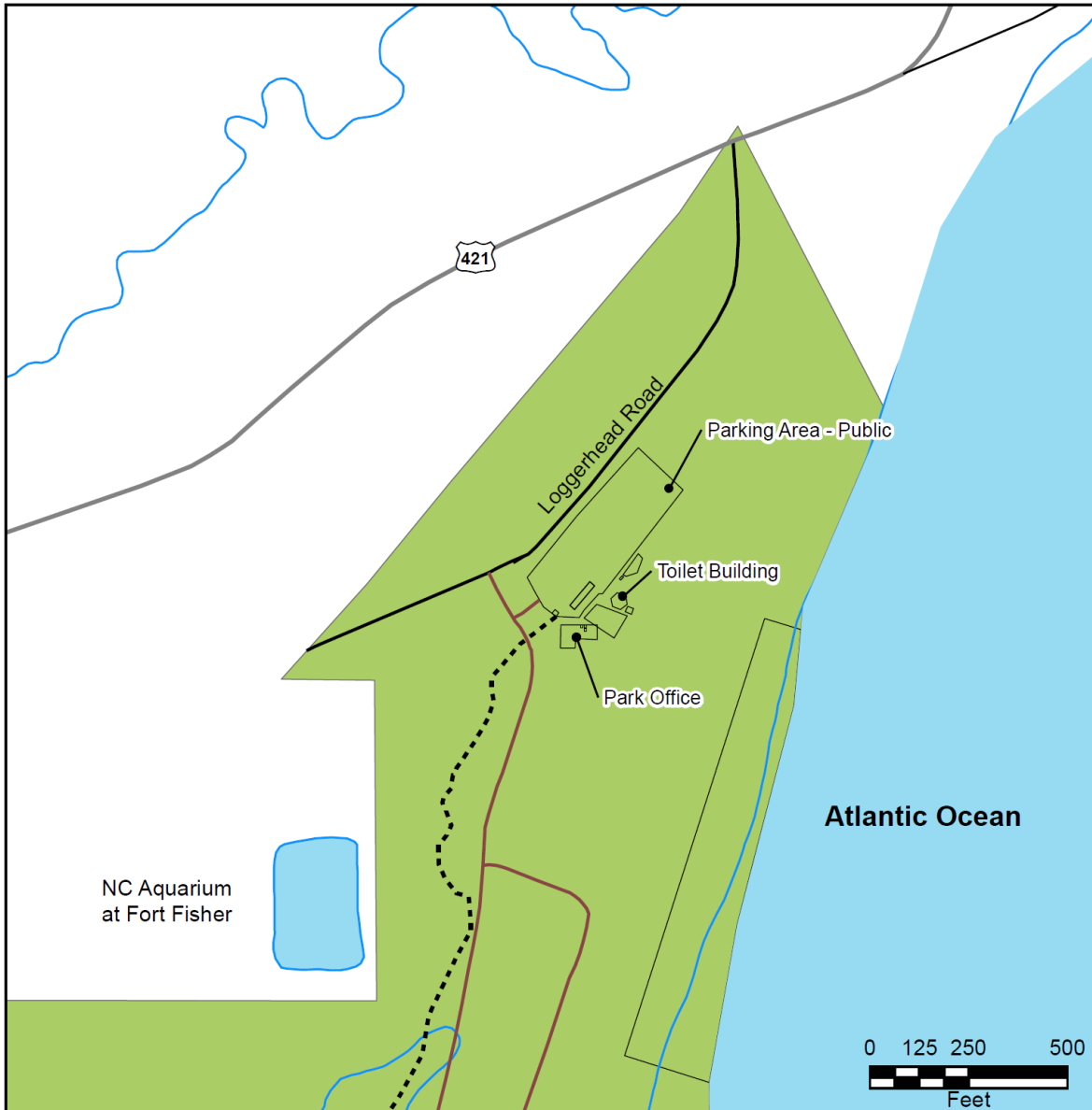
III. THEMES AND INVENTORY

Themes for Fort Fisher Recreation Area

Theme Type	Theme	Fort Fisher Significance	State Parks System Representation
Biological	None	None	None
Archeological/ Prehistoric	Campsite/Activity Area	High	Adequate
Archeological/ Prehistoric	Underwater	High	Adequate
Archeological/Historic	Public/Civic/Religious	High	Adequate
Archeological/Historic	Cemetery	High	Adequate
Archeological/Historic	Transportation	High	Adequate
Archeological/Historic	Military	High	Adequate
Archeological/Historic	Underwater	High	Adequate
Archeological/Standing Structure	Military	High	Adequate
Geological	Barrier Islands and Shoreline	High	Adequate
Scenic	Scenic Vistas	High	Moderate
Scenic	Seashores	High	Moderate
Scenic	Forests	High	Moderate
Scenic	Marsh	High	Moderate
Scenic	Islands	High	Little
Scenic	Bays and Estuaries	High	Little
Scenic	Rivers	High	Little
Scenic	Meadows/Grasses	High	Little

*See the System wide Plan for references to Theme and Inventory terms. Themes have both actual and “potential” future needs to be at a park.

FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA-
FACILITY INVENTORY

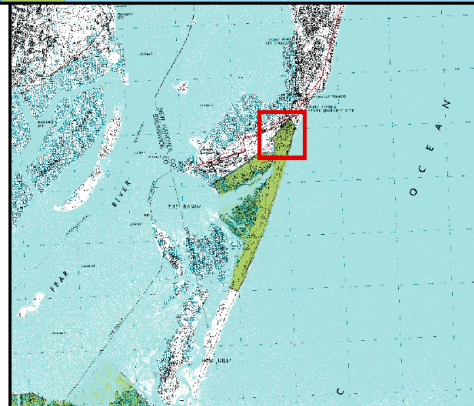


Fort Fisher
State Recreation Area
Facility Inventory

June 2016



- Existing Trail
- Road - Paved
- Road - Unpaved
- Existing Facilities
- State Parks Unit



FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA
TRAIL INVENTORY

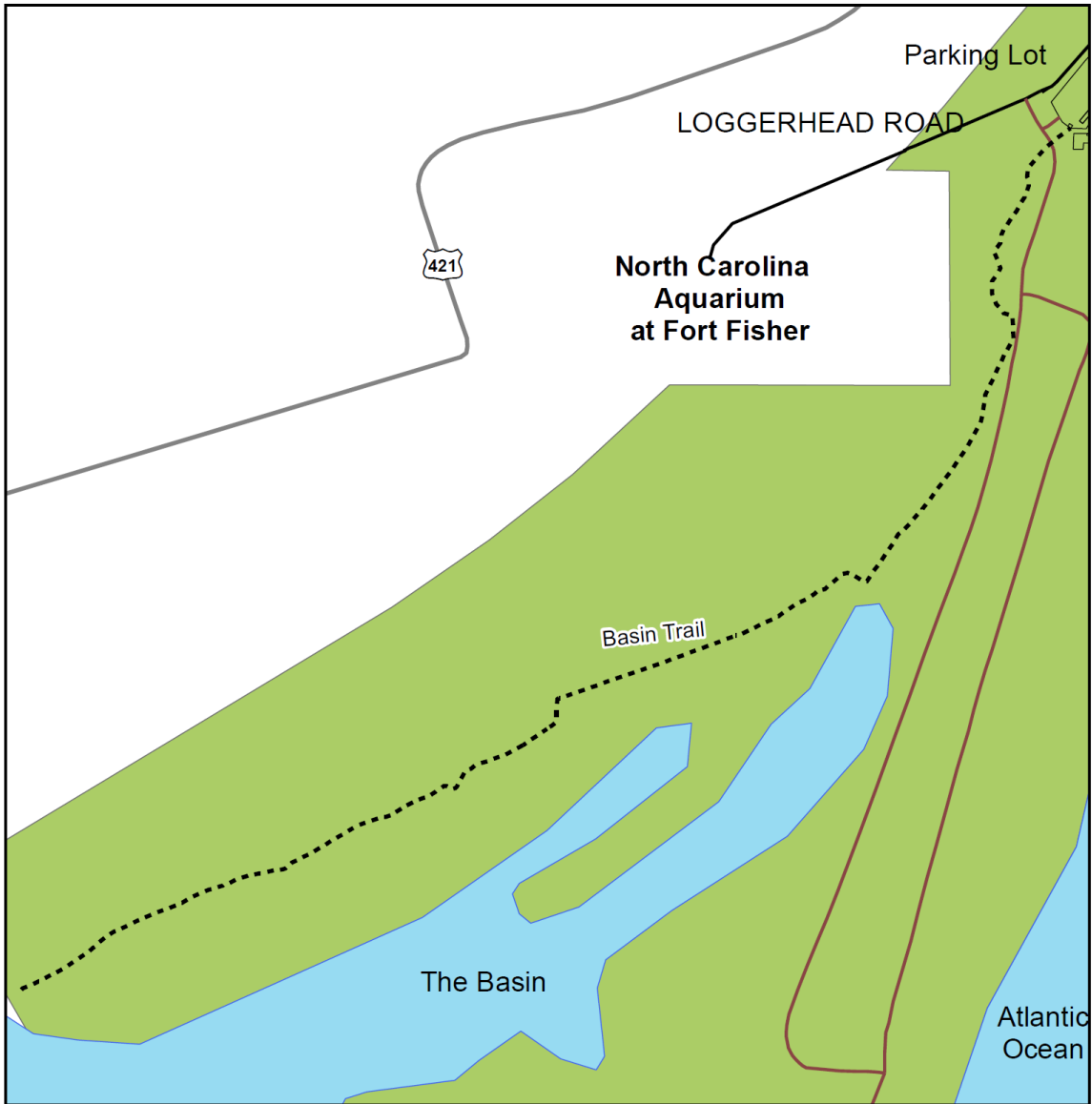
Trail Inventory	Hiking
Basin Trail	1.10
Fort Fisher SP Totals (miles)	1.10

The Basin Trail is a 1.10 mile, out-and-back trail that meanders through the marsh, allowing hikers a chance to view sound-side flora and fauna and the Maritime Forest. The trail ends at an observation deck, which is a great location for bird watching.



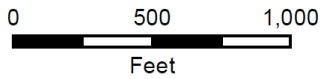
Basin Trail

FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA
TRAIL INVENTORY



Fort Fisher
State Recreational Area
Trail Inventory

October 2015



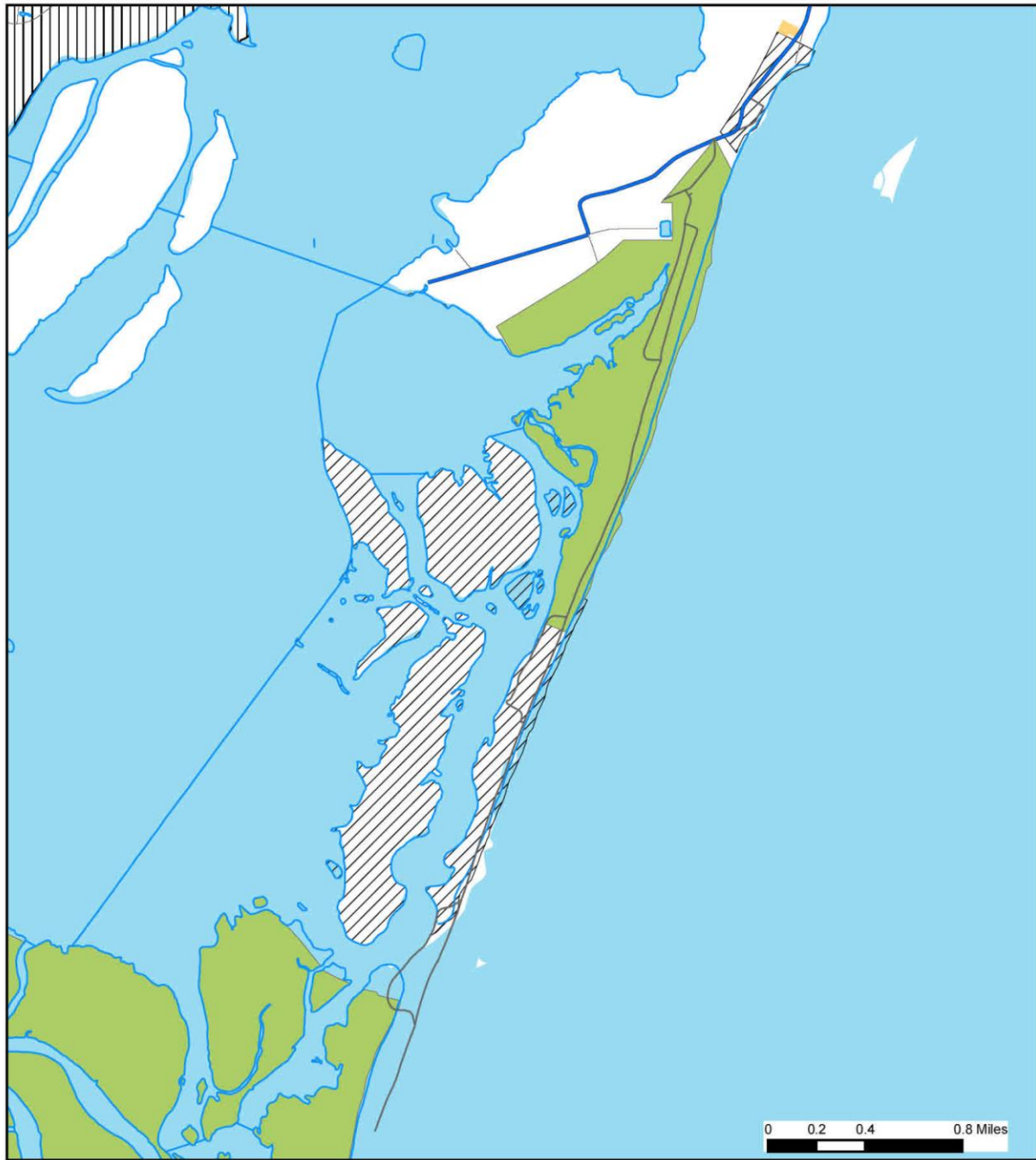
- - - - Existing Trail
- Road - Paved
- Road - Unpaved
- Existing Facilities
- State Parks Unit



IV. PLANNING



LAND PROTECTION PLAN
 FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA- NO CRITICAL ACRES NOTED



Fort Fisher SRA



October 2014

- Land Protection Plan**
- Critical need
 - State Parks Unit
 - Study area
 - Future need

Other Conservation Land

- Federal
- Other
- State



PROJECT EVALUATION PROGRAM LIST
 FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA

Project #	Project Title	Cost
1	Additional Parking with Cultural Resources	\$200,000
2	Toilet Building / Visitor Center Renovation	\$400,000
3	Maintenance - Land dependent	\$650,000
TOTAL		\$1,250,000

** Estimated project cost does not include contingencies, design fee, nor escalation.

1. **Additional Parking** – Park Planning staff and Natural Resources will investigate opportunity sites for additional parking. Site constraints include: marsh and flood zone areas due to coastal region. This parking lot would be shared with other Department of Cultural and Natural Resources, such as: North Carolina Aquarium or Fort Fisher Historic site.
2. **Toilet Building /Visitor Center Renovation:**
 This project will upgrade and renovate the toilet building to current standards. Building was constructed in 1990’s and needs to be updated to current building code standards. Scope of work also includes: upgrade of the picnic area with shelters, additional toilets, changing area, and exterior renovation.
3. **Maintenance Area** for vehicles is land dependent. Staff cannot store vehicles under any structures. Facilities managed by State Historic Sites and park staff need a joint structure to store underwater archeology equipment and chemicals.

PARK MAP
 FORT FISHER STATE RECREATION AREA

