

Hilton Head's preserved natural beauty is part of its brand. Can the island keep it?

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HILTON HEAD ISLAND — Neighbors said the same thing when they saw the hundreds of scrub oaks sawed to knee height: It looked like a graveyard.

Row after row of white stumps, most no thicker than a wrist, stood solemnly on the undulating ground of a rare maritime forest.

Only a few skinny pines remained at full height. Their dark, narrow trunks framed the stunning image of the Atlantic advertised on the Vrbo listing of the house opposite.

While Hilton Head property owners are allowed to prune for a view, the aggressive tree takedown on the Forest Beach dunes — under a federal conservation easement and held in trust by the neighborhood owners association — went too far, town officials determined.

It is just one example of alterations to the island's environment that are distressing residents.

At town hall meetings and on social media, they lament the loss of “Charles Fraser’s vision.” The phrase refers to the developer who created the island’s first planned community, Sea Pines, on a theory that the built environment should defer to the natural environment.

Fraser’s 1950s-era vision was so compelling, not to mention lucrative, that other developers followed suit.

Today, the preserved natural beauty of Hilton Head — dripping oaks and soaring pines, rippling ocean and rolling dunes, white egrets and purple marshes — is an essential part of its brand. Nature not only attracts roughly 3 million yearly tourists, according to a 2022 Chamber of Commerce survey, but inspires some visitors to make the island their home.

Once they own a piece of residential property, they are faced with an unusual number of restrictions.

“Most places in the country, if you want to go down and trim the vegetation in your backyard, you can just go do it. Here, you may not be able to,” said Assistant Town Manager Josh Gruber.

Whether out of ignorance of or disregard for the restrictions, some individuals take matters into their own hands. When that happens, one of the town’s code enforcement officers can issue a stop-work order and a fine for up to \$500 plus court fees, an amount capped at the jurisdiction of the magistrate court.

While a total penalty of about \$1,000 may not be much of a deterrent for most people, those who violate an environmental regulation do have to pay to mitigate the situation.

And that is the bottom line for both local and state officials: restoring what was lost.

But a vocal group of residents insist some damage isn’t repairable. When the natural environment is changed dramatically, part of what they love about Hilton Head may never come back.

Dredging the marsh

Ernie Housner fears for the Salt Marsh Conservancy.

He bought his place on Hilton Head Plantation, another community inspired by Fraser’s vision, partly for the panoramic view of brackish water sluicing in and out of the Port Royal Sound. He likes to go on his back deck, perch above the vast expanse of black needle brush, and pray.

So Housner felt extremely put out when one of his neighbors put in a dock. A long dock. With lights.

“I believe God made this piece of property for us to enjoy, and for our kids and grandkids to enjoy. And now they’re changing it,” Housner said.

Yet the dock is authorized, having met the criteria of the Department of Health and Environmental Control. Because marshes are part of the waterways they are under the aegis of the state, not the town or the property owners association.

However, what was not authorized was dredging around the dock to make a deeper channel for a boat.

When neighbors saw a backhoe scooping up sludge, their moods went from frustration to alarm.

The marsh functions not only as a beautiful landscape but also as a nursery for sea creatures, a tool to remove toxins from the water, a buffer for wind and waves, a critical stopover for migrating birds, and a sink that absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Not for nothing, it’s also good for nearby residents’ property values.

So, at the neighbors’ request, officials stopped the work, and a DHEC representative investigated.

The staff is still evaluating any impact the dredging had on the marsh grass or substrate, DHEC Media Relations Director Ron Aiken told The Post and Courier.

Meanwhile, more than 80 residents submitted a petition asking the community’s board of directors to prohibit any more docks, piers or walkways around the Salt Marsh Conservancy — and even to prohibit owners from seeking a permit from DHEC.

But Hilton Head Plantation General Manager Peter Kristian said the property owners association does not have dominion over the marsh.

What's more, he said, property owners have a right to access the water.

But even though Kristian believes he doesn't have legal standing, he's sympathetic to those who want to protect the marsh.

"It's a sanctuary to birds, alligators, all sorts of other critters," he said. "It is a unique and beautiful ecosystem. And to have it intruded on by docks is really deleterious to the whole system."

Chipping away

In a perfect world, homeowners would be apprised of the regulations by their real estate agents, and they would work only with landscapers who follow the rules.

In addition, DHEC issues a [South Carolina Guide to Beachfront Property](#), and it provides [page after page](#) about managing marshes and estuaries.

But accessing information, acquiescing to red tape, accepting inconvenience, tolerating costs, and policing violations requires a fair amount of effort.

At the end of the day, preserving "Charles Fraser's vision" can require energy that a lot of people may not be willing to invest, observed Kay Grinnell, a past board chair for The Nature Conservancy's South Carolina chapter and the current president of Hilton Head Audubon.

"We have to focus on it, and we only have so much focus," Grinnell said.

Grinnell lives on an enviable spot for a nature lover, a house that looks out on both the marsh and the Port Royal Sound. From her porch she can see red-

winged blackbirds, painted buntings and marsh wrens dart among the Spartina grass; hear the chatter of clapper rails; and watch, occasionally, bald eagles pull marine worms out of the mud flats.

“It feels like we take this wonderful nature that we have a bit for granted,” Grinnell said.

To her, the issue is not so much a dock or a dredging, or even several hundred trees coming down on the dunes. It’s the cumulative effect of all the small changes to nature.

“There’s so many things that are causing us as a community to chip away at the environment. And because those things seem little and aren’t on fire, we’re just passive about it and let them happen,” she said.

Kristian said a version of the same thing: One problem with building docks is that it invites other people to build them, too.

The president of the Forest Beach Owners Association, Jack Daly, also repeated the refrain. Daly is working on a plan to replant the clear-cut sections of the dunes with native live oaks, although regrowing a forest can take generations.

“When short-term rental owners over-prune dune vegetation and trees to create expansive beach views, they set a dangerous precedent that other short-term rental owners may feel obliged to follow,” he said.

As Daly walked home from the beach, he noticed a pickup truck and wood chipper on a different oceanfront property, leaving behind another cemetery of stumps.

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