

Assembling the Puzzle of Eagles Island

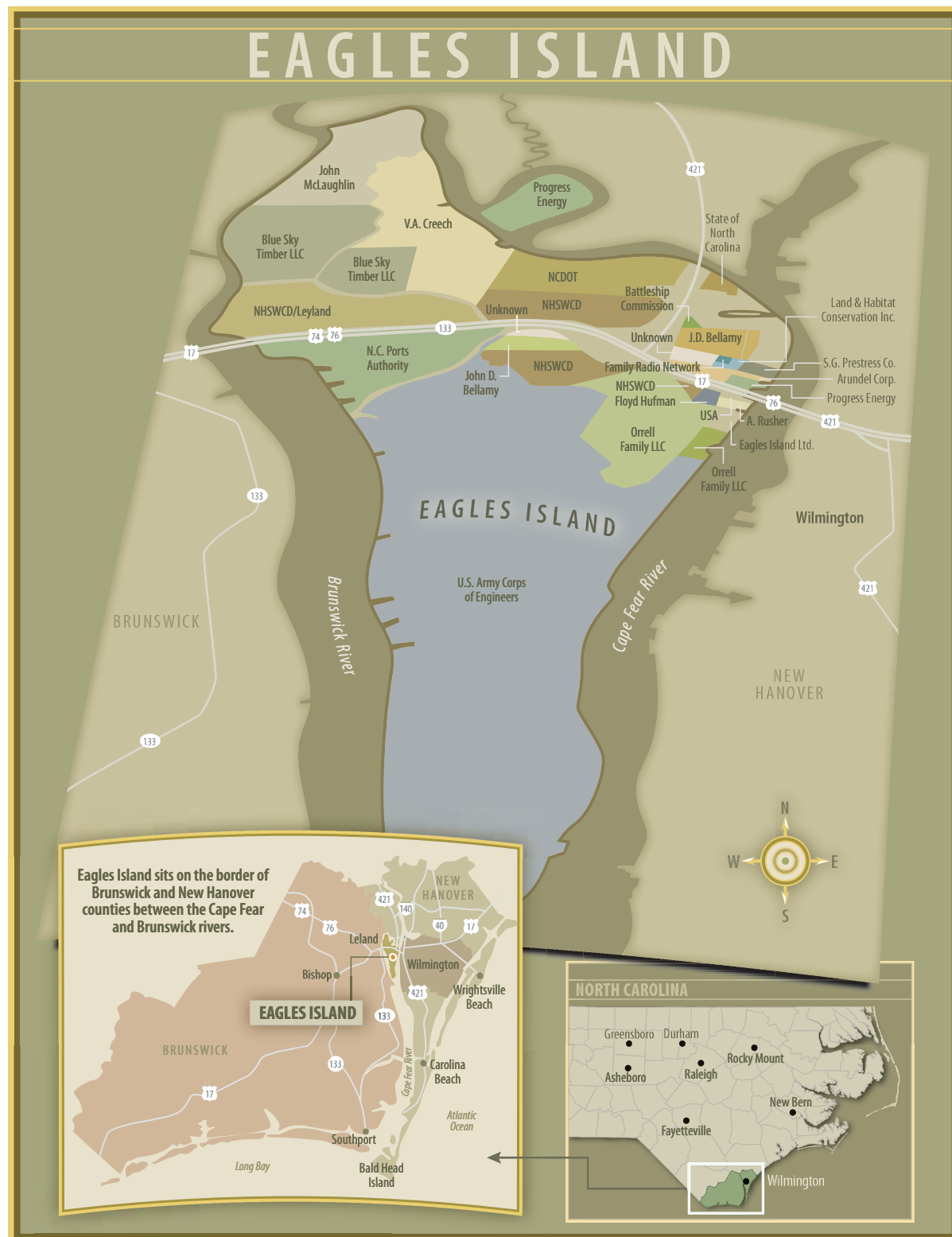
A grassroots coalition came together to take on the difficult challenge of protecting an island adjacent to Wilmington from development. Their efforts could become a model for others to follow.

Thousands of people pass through Eagles Island daily. But during their hectic commute, whether to the east or west along U.S. 74-76, or north or south along U.S. 421 on this patch of marshland between Brunswick and New Hanover counties, most drivers have neither the inclination nor the ability to pay much attention to the expanse of serenity stretching far to the north and south from the busy thoroughfare.

U.S. 74-76 roughly bisects Eagles Island into northern and southern halves, and the island is further divided by U.S. 421, which forms a junction with U.S. 74-76 at the eastern side of the island. The highways cut the 2,100-acre island into smaller chunks, while still other divisions are formed by the various creeks and navigation channels cutting through the island's truly unique marshes. But it's the patchwork of property lines that creates the biggest obstacle to those who seek to preserve the island and protect its natural and historic treasures for future generations to enjoy, whether they are viewing it through a windshield, over a spread of duck decoys or from a boat.

Undaunted by the jigsaw-puzzle look of Eagles Island's property lines, a loosely associated group of agencies, entities and individuals has been quietly doing just that. To those who know the island well, it's a natural paradise, not simply a wet, mosquito-infested wasteland to be taken for granted or ditched, dug and destroyed. All but unnoticed, the Eagles Island Coalition has been patiently piecing back together the jumbled-up picture of Eagles Island, one piece at a time.

WRITTEN BY MIKE MARSH ■ ILLUSTRATED BY TIM LEE



The north end of Eagles Island is a patchwork of tracts owned by more than two dozen private citizens, corporations and governmental agencies. The south end is owned mostly by the federal government.



MIKE MARSH



MELISSA MCGAW / NCWRC



MIKE MARSH

At left, Cape Fear Riverkeeper Doug Springer gives a boat tour of the island. Center, some of the major players in the conservation of Eagles Island: Marilyn Meares of the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, author Mike Marsh, biologist and grant writer Dawn York and Springer. At right is one of the island's many canals once used for agriculture or other commerce decades ago.

Putting together the big picture

Marilyn Meares has been the leader of the Eagles Island preservation effort for eight years. Her involvement in the preservation project was serendipitous, with the first piece of the puzzle falling into place by accident.

"I was the District Conservationist for the USDA Soil and Water Conservation District," Meares said. "Now, I work for the USDA-NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Service) but as a Resource Coordinator with Resource Conservation and Development, which takes in a five-county area. Now, I work with municipalities and groups rather than individual landowners as I did in the beginning. David Greene was on the New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District (NHSWCD) board. He was having a conversation with Whitey Private and asked why he didn't give 3 acres he owned on the island to the district. But Whitey indignantly said it was 53 acres, not 3 acres."

Private did donate the 53 acres of spoil area near the center of the island to the district in 2002. Once NHSWCD owned the first 53 acres, Meares said Bruce Watkins, who was working as a consultant with N.C. Coastal Land Trust at the time, told her other pieces would fall into place. "Bruce was

right," Meares said of that conversation. "I thought we could use it for education or something else. I became optimistic that we could really bring many of the rest of the island tracts into public ownership."

The next big island piece was acquired through a local realtor named Paul Nelson. As real estate prices boomed, the owner of the 158-acre George Madison Tract decided to sell it. "In 2003, an anonymous donor gave half the \$120,000 purchase price of the 138-acre George Madison Tract, and the Town of Leland gave the other \$60,000 after the town officials learned about it through an article in the local newspaper," Meares said. "Now, NHSWCD co-owns the tract along with the town."

In 2003, Eagles Island property owner Joan Grainger heard about the preservation effort and simply donated two tracts she owned, totaling 54 acres on the south of U.S. 74-76, the opposite side of the highway from the first two acquisitions.

A very large piece of the puzzle was acquired when the 242-acre V. A. Creech Jr. Tract was purchased in 2008. I knew V. A. Creech Jr. from past business dealings and, as one of the coalition members myself, approached the landowner to negotiate a

purchase contract. But the property was already under contract to another potential buyer. That contract with the original buyer was never executed, so a contract for sale of the property to the NHSWCD was negotiated.

"We held meetings to discuss the possibility of having private donors contribute to buying the Creech Tract," Meares said. "But eventually, we acquired it through a grant provided by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Trust Fund (NCNHTF) in 2008."

For technical reasons, a county agency could not take ownership of the property since it was purchased with the NCNHTF monies. Therefore, the title was transferred to the North Carolina Division of Soil and Water Conservation, rather than the county conservation district.

The Creech Tract served to bring together the various parcels already owned by coalition partners. While the initial tracts had road frontage, making them very important, the Creech Tract was significant because it doubled the size of coalition-owned properties and tied them together.

Until this point, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission had expressed little interest in helping the Eagles Island preservation effort because there was no readily

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identifiable boundary and the parcels were not large and contiguous. But the large contiguous acreage brought together with the acquisition of the Creech Tract brought a heightened awareness of the possibilities, and commission biologists agreed to meet again with coalition members to explore the possibility of creating a game land or other management possibilities.

“From the outset, preserving traditional uses such as hunting, fishing, nature observation, boating and paddling was a primary goal of the coalition,” Meares said. “But until we had a large contiguous area under public ownership, there really was not very much to manage.”

Another large tract owned by Blue Sky Timber LLC was put up for sale. But, like the Creech Tract, it was under contract to another buyer.

“We began negotiations to acquire the 238-acre Blue Sky property,” Meares said. But every time we tried to acquire the property, it went under contract again. Our timing was always off, it seemed.”

But persistence paid off, and the Blue Sky Timber tract is currently under contract to NHSWCD. Funding is scarce, but Meares is hopeful of obtaining another grant. So far, mini-grants for appraisals and environmental assessments have been funded for the other tracts through the N.C. Clean Water

Management Trust Fund. But larger grants for the price of any tract have been very difficult to secure. The alphabet soup of agencies and entities involved shows the Eagles Island effort is truly a who’s who of local, state and national agencies, organizations and dedicated individuals.

Bringing groups and funds together

On Oct. 8, 2008, several coalition members boarded *Lorelei*, a tour boat owned by Doug Springer, the Riverkeeper for Cape Fear River Watch. *Lorelei*’s passengers included Bill Hart, supervisor of NHSWCD; Jennifer Braswell, director of community conservation for NHSWCD; Bill Farris, Leland town manager; Neil Brooks, Leland’s manager of parks, recreation and environmental programs; Tony McEwen, representing U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre; Tancred Miller of N.C. Division of Coastal Management; and Dawn York, who received a TogetherGreen Fellow grant involving Eagles Island from Audubon North Carolina.

“Today we are bringing interest groups together,” Meares said. “The Blue Sky grant application was written through Tancred Miller’s office, and Doug is new to River Watch. Our next challenge while continuing to acquire easements and properties is putting together a cohesive management plan, which includes more of the southern part of

the island. If we get the money for the purchase of the Blue Sky Tract, the coalition will have put together most of the island north of U.S. 74-76 and west of U.S. 421. We want to include at least Audubon, Natural Heritage and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission in future management discussions. I envision it as a really special place people can be proud of because it’s the front door to Wilmington and Leland. We hope to get a piece of high ground for building an educational center. Securing funding is the most important thing for the Blue Sky piece because our contract runs out in June 2009. If we can’t get a grant by then, we are hoping the contract date can be extended.”

Meares applied for a Coastal Estuarine Land Conservation Grant through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). She said the Eagles Island-Blue Sky Timber grant application was ranked 15 out of 46 applications and was the only one ranked from North Carolina.

“There’s only \$15 million available, and if funding for the first 14 projects will take \$20 million, the Blue Sky Tract purchase won’t be funded,” Meares said. “Unless Congress puts more money into the grant process, we may not see that money this year. We’ve also made a grant application to the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund.”

New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District Leads Eagles Island Preservation and Management Effort

Bill Hart, supervisor of the New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District, explained why and how NHSWCD became involved with the Eagles Island project:

“Soil and Water Conservation Districts are special purpose districts the General Assembly authorized,” Hart said. “We have a responsibility for conserving the soil and water resources of the state. Historically it’s been a farmer-oriented program, providing technical assistance to farmers since the 1930s. It was an exercise in local governments putting programs in place on the ground. But as North Carolina has become more urbanized, especially in densely populated counties like New Hanover, our role is shifting more to programs like backyard conservation programs, runoff control and other urban problems rather than agricultural problems. Of course, other districts may still deal with agricultural

cost-share programs and other similar programs because they still have agricultural lands.”

NHSWCD operations are funded mainly through City of Wilmington stormwater taxes, grants from New Hanover County and a share of the state agricultural cost share programs.

“The driving force for the district’s involvement with Eagles Island, other than the first piece of private land essentially falling into our laps, is protecting the gateway to the city. As long as the district owns the land on both sides of U.S. 74-76, there won’t be any billboards or other human presence. We recognized it was an extraordinarily unique ecosystem that also makes outdoor recreational opportunities immediately available to the city of Wilmington. Now we actively pursue properties and engage other property owners regarding the management of the island.”

“Eagles Island has the largest area of tidal freshwater marsh in North Carolina. I would like to see it looked at as a really special place that people are proud of. It’s right outside Wilmington’s front door and is extremely important not only for recreation and natural history, but for its cultural history.

– Bill Hart

The N.C. Department of Transportation, N.C. State Ports Authority and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are other government agencies that own Eagles Island properties. Most of the high ground is on the east side in New Hanover County, while most of the lowlands are located on the Brunswick County side. Touching the northeastern extent of coalition properties is the N.C. Department of Transportation tract that coalition members are hoping can be brought into an overall management plan. Adjoining coalition property on the northwestern corner is a privately owned tract that is the only remaining tract (aside from the Blue Sky Tract) located north of U.S. 74-76 and west of U.S. 421 that is not under public ownership. The coalition plans to contact the owner to see if that property can be acquired, placed under an easement, or otherwise protected under a mutually beneficial management plan.

Dawn York may be the coalition’s latest torchbearer, lighting the way where Meares once began stumbling toward success by essentially groping in the dark after acquiring a single piece of property. York works as a coastal biologist for a company called Coastal Planning and Engineering that primarily manages beach nourishment projects and is also on the board of directors of Cape Fear River Watch. After an initial meeting with Meares and Springer four years ago, she secured the Audubon grant through the organization’s TogetherGreen Fellow program. The grant provided \$10,000 plus a weeklong training seminar, with implementation of York’s project by August 2009.

“I am working on a long-term conservation management plan for the entire island for the first time,” York said. “It’s a natural progression because the land had to be acquired first. I recently contacted the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers and they are keenly interested in being involved. The Corps has an ongoing maintenance dredge spoil operation associated with the Wilmington Harbor project and their property is very significant from a wildlife standpoint. Their spoil areas attract many species of waterfowl, shorebirds and other wildlife.”

York said her desire to become involved as a volunteer was inspired by the efforts and success of others, making her want to take on the personal challenge. She had also once performed studies on the Cape Fear River in

the vicinity of Eagles Island as a University of North Carolina graduate student, bonding her inextricably to the river and the beauty of Eagles Island.

“I’m very excited because I thought the biggest challenge would be the Corps,” York said. “But they have been very willing to cooperate and they were also looking for an answer to the long-term management of their property as well as environmental impacts.”

York has also spoken with representatives of the N.C. State Ports Authority, which has a large piece of property of approximately



Names of Eagles Island Coalition Members Make Alphabet Soup

Initially, and unofficially, called the Society for the Preservation of Eagles Island, a grassroots group of private citizens interested in preserving Eagles Island formed for the purpose of obtaining some financial backing from those individuals. Later, the society became what is now referred to the Coalition for the Preservation of Eagles Island, expanding to include many agencies and groups. Included in the coalition are New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District, N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR), N.C. Division of Soil and Water Conservation (NCDSWC), Cape Fear Resource Conservation and Development (CFRC&D), Town of Leland, Audubon North Carolina, N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund (NCCWMTF), N.C. Natural Heritage Trust Fund (NCNHTF), N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC), N.C. Coastal Land Trust (NCCLT), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Cape Fear River Watch, Inc. (CFRW), Land Management Group Inc., Sierra Club, Lower Cape Fear River Program/UNCW Marine Science Center, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

Other property owners and potential coalition members include N.C. Department of Cultural Resources (NCDCR/USS Battleship North Carolina Memorial), N.C. State Ports Authority (NCSPA) and N.C. Department of Transportation (NCDOT).



119 acres on the western side of the island, south of U.S. 74-76 and across the Brunswick River from the Town of Belville.

“The State Port representatives said they may use their property on Eagles Island as a mitigation site for work done in the future construction of a new State Port container facility proposed for Southport,” York said. “But as with the NCDOT mitigation site, it can still be considered in an overall management plan for the entire island.”

Bill Hart concurs with York’s vision that the next challenge is forming a cohesive management plan for the entire island. “We would like to incorporate the entire island in the plan including the southern part, which is currently owned by many other people and businesses,” he said. “Eagles Island has the largest area of tidal freshwater marsh in North Carolina. I would like to see it looked at as a really special place that people are proud of. It’s right outside Wilmington’s front door and is extremely important not only for recreation and natural history, but

for its cultural history. Some restoration could be done, as well as building a welcome center or educational center perhaps on the Battleship Memorial property . . . We could originate paddle tours of the island and erect camping platforms and otherwise improve access.”

Hart said the cultural history is written in the old docks, pilings, boilers and hulls sticking up along the island’s eastern waterfront across the Cape Fear from Wilmington. Side by side with the looming U.S.S. North Carolina and active tugboat and other current maritime operations, the relics constitute an important part of Eagle Island’s irresistible drawing power.

“This was the world capital of the naval stores industry,” Hart said. “It was also the center of a very strong rice industry. Both of these industries relied on black slave labor, which is an important part of our history and deserves documentation and preservation. Without slave labor, these industries could not have existed. (See “Carolina Gold,” Jan. 2001.) Erecting replicas of the old buildings might be a way to preserve their contribution and history before it is lost. The Eagles brothers, for whom the island is named, had

a royal charter to occupy the island in the 1700s and they made the first significant changes to the landscape by constructing dikes, water control structures and ditches for rice culture.

“Since then, the island has hosted Civil War boat works and other ship building activities, a mothballed fleet of World War II Liberty Ships, as well as current ship maintenance, dredging operations and tourism facilities. There was also a railroad on the island. There have been several proposals for intensive, high-rise residential developments across the Cape Fear River from Wilmington’s downtown and this type of development must be carefully considered because of its potential impacts on wildlife and archaeological resources.”

The Town of Leland may seem an unlikely partner, until the observer takes in the scenery from the center of town. Leland Town Manager Farris said his town, like Wilmington, considers Eagles Island its front yard.

“Marilyn Meares’ group had some money for buying property and were looking for support,” Farris said. “The council ultimately became involved and was very glad to have helped protect this unique resource. The overall management of Eagles Island is an important component to Leland’s proper management and development. Our ownership stake is certainly an asset because it gives us a place at the table we may not have necessarily had in the overall management plan. Most of the island is in Brunswick County, so we annexed the property we co-own with NCSWCD, making them part of the town of Leland.

“From my personal perspective, when you actually look at Eagles Island from a water’s eye view, it’s simply breathtaking and it’s all right here in this highly urban area,” Farris said. “The town recently built a public access area on Sturgeon Creek, which gives easy access to the island. Eco-tourism and heritage tourism are part of the town’s development strategy and we are extremely happy to have such a splendid resource so nearby.”

Mike Marsh, a freelance outdoors writer living in Wilmington, is a frequent contributor to WINC.

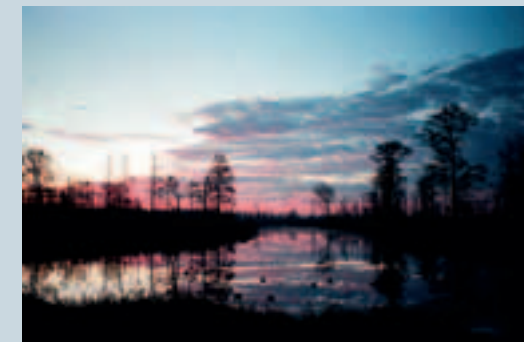
A Personal Perspective

One morning during the winter of 1991–92, I was hunting ducks in the marsh complexes of Eagles Island. As the daylight sifted through the Spanish moss-draped cypress trees, I was amazed at the incredible splendor of the sunrise. The sunlight and clouds above and their mirror images reflecting off the water where my decoys were set held me spellbound. I had seen thousands of sunrises, but never one with such resplendent color.

Through a bit of research, I learned that the heightened colors of pinks, oranges, blues and grays had been created by the particles and gases ejected into the atmosphere by an eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which is located in the Philippines. The next day, I returned with my camera. Becoming an outdoor writer and photographer at that time was just an idea, no more than a hazy pipe dream. But my wife, Carol, without my knowledge, entered the photo in the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department’s photo contest the following spring. The photo received first place, and was honored by hanging in a Southport art gallery during the town’s annual Robert Ruark Festival. That beautiful photo, “Sunrise on Alligator Creek,” became the cover art of my first and favorite book, “Quest for the Limit, Carolina Hunting Adventures.” A large print hangs in my living room, where it continues to inspire all who view it.

As the coalition member most familiar with the island’s intricacies and subtleties through many years of navigating its hidden channels in small boats, I submitted lists of wildlife species I have observed for various grant applications. I also personally approached V. A. Creech Jr., who generously agreed to sell his property to the New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District so it could be preserved and protected for the public to enjoy in perpetuity. Michael Murchison, a Wilmington attorney, acted as the closing attorney at no charge. He is one of many individual volunteers who are making the preservation of Eagles Island a reality.

—Mike Marsh



MIKE MARSH



THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE ARCHIVES

In the 19th century, ditched-and-diked rice fields were common on Eagles Island and many other sites along the Cape Fear River.