



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# The Coastal Program

## *Success on the South Carolina Coast*



### *Caring for Our Coastal Habitats*

#### **Sandy Island To Remain Wild**

Approximately 9,000 acres of pristine woodland along the South Carolina coast have been permanently protected thanks to the involvement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Coastal Program and its partners. Sandy Island, considered by many to be the most important piece of land on the South Carolina coast due to its unique ecology and history, is one of the last natural areas along this state's rapidly developing coastline. Until 1996, it was the largest privately owned freshwater island on the East Coast, about fifteen times the size of New York City's famous Central Park.

#### *Rich in Nature and Culture*

The forested bluffs and deep, cypress-studded creeks typical of Sandy Island have changed little with the passage of centuries. Located between the Waccamaw and Great Pee Dee Rivers near Georgetown, South Carolina, this is a place rich in wildlife habitats, including tidal freshwater forested wetlands, emergent marsh along blackwater and alluvial rivers, and a coastal maritime sandhill community that includes several thousand acres of old-growth longleaf pine. In addition to eagles, osprey, bear, deer and turkey, a significant population of the federally endan-

gered red-cockaded woodpecker inhabits Sandy Island.

About 120 people also call Sandy Island home. Many of them are descendants of slaves who worked the island's rice plantations prior to the Civil War. In 1997, an archaeological survey identified 51 sites on the island, some dating back 10,000 years, to be considered for addition to the National Register for Historical Places.

#### *Proposal Sparks Partnership*

In 1989, controversy ignited when a development plan proposed that a major arterial road and bridge be built that would split Sandy Island in half and connect it to the mainland, potentially opening the remote island up to logging and residential development. The Service's South Carolina Coastal Program, in collaboration with the Winyah Bay Focus Area Task Force (a cross-section of businesses, landowners, and agencies), identified the need to seek permanent protection of the property based on the unique natural resource values of Sandy Island. Many interests then came together to make it happen. Other partners included the Federal Highway Agency, South Carolina (SC) Department of Transportation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Marine Fisheries Service, SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, SC Department of Natural Resources, SC Coastal Conservation League, and The Nature Conservancy.

These groups joined forces with many private landowners whose love of the island's natural and cultural history was evident throughout the process. Funding for the purchase (fee-title acquisition) was obtained through a public/private partnership formed to mitigate impacts from two major highway construction projects planned for the rapidly developing Myrtle Beach area.



*Sandy Island's diverse topography, revealed through infrared photography, creates a rich variety of wildlife habitats. Photo by David Gordon/USFWS*

#### *"Welcome to Forever"*

On March 8, 1997, Sandy Island was dedicated as a Public Trust Preserve. During the dedication ceremony, the Chairman of South Carolina's Department of Transportation Commission said "Welcome to Forever" as a barred owl and a Cooper's hawk were released as symbols of the island's continuing natural state. Sandy Island is situated within the project boundary of the recently established Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge. Although no camping is allowed, the preserve is open to the public and has several boat landings and two nature trails for walking. The project is considered by many to be a model of how diverse public and private interests can form partnerships to protect significant natural resources within developing coastal landscapes.



### **Waccamaw: A Coastal Refuge**

In July 1997, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) established the Nation's 514th National Wildlife Refuge, the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge on South Carolina's upper coast. This action culminated a 3-year planning process involving numerous stakeholders, public meetings and environmental analyses. In the end, local support was overwhelming with private residents and more than 120 businesses speaking out in favor of the 49,800 acre refuge.

#### *Preserving Heritage, Habitat*

Situated in the heart of the Winyah Bay Ecosystem at the confluence of 5 major coastal rivers, Waccamaw Refuge will provide permanent protection to extensive floodplain forested wetlands that can eventually be restored to old-growth forest. The refuge is designed to protect the core of what is the largest contiguous block of freshwater tidal wetlands in the state—the woods and waters of the Waccamaw and Great Pee Dee rivers. This area is rich, not only in natural resources, but in South Carolina heritage—the area contributed significantly to the state's valuable 19th century rice industry. "It's exciting," said Joe Carter, chairman of the Winyah Bay Focus Area Task Force and vice president of the Historic Rice Fields Association, "Yet born citizens will seek those places where man's soul has always found peace...and this will all still be here. The refuge will also preserve a safe source of potable water for us and our 12 million visitors."

*Tidal forested wetland on Little Pee Dee River, Waccamaw NWR.*

*Photo by David Gordon/USFWS*

#### *Partners with a Purpose*

The protection effort's success is due in large part to close collaboration among Service programs including Refuges, Realty, the Coastal Program, and the Charleston Ecological Services Field Office. The Coastal Program provided significant technical support during the Refuge planning process, including strategic planning, biological expertise, and outreach to the local community. Under the leadership of Dr. David Gordon, Project Manager for the South Carolina Coastal Program, this program also developed and provided partners with Geographic Information System support, including imagery, maps, and spatial databases for the project area.

The Winyah Bay Focus Area Task Force, a coalition of public and private partners working to sustain the ecological integrity of the third largest watershed on the East Coast, was the leading local force in protecting this important coastal wetland complex and advocating for creation of the Refuge. Non-service partners included South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Historic Ricefields Association, International Paper Company, South Carolina Waterfowl Association, Brookgreen Gardens, and numerous private landowners.

#### *Recipe for a Refuge*

In the beginning, an outreach program was initiated to gauge support for the Refuge concept and coastal landscape conservation in general. Positive feedback from local residents urged the Service's planning efforts along. The public comment period lasted four months and included five public hearings. Ultimately, overwhelming support for the Refuge from local residents and the business community resulted in the Refuge being approved. This was a quality of life issue and the local community made a strong statement that protection of natural areas in the landscape was desirable. The Service bought property only from willing sellers at the appraised market value. The refuge will open what was mostly inaccessible private property to the public for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, hiking, canoeing and other recreational uses.

The Waccamaw NWR was officially dedicated in a public ceremony on May 16, 1998, featuring remarks by the Honorable Fritz Hollings, U.S. Senator from South Carolina, and Sam Hamilton, Southeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The first land acquisition for the Refuge occurred in December 1997, and other acquisitions will continue over the next several years.