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State of the Coast Report: Travel Guide with a Conscience

OCEAN -- Take a break from the crowded beaches this summer to spend some time on White Oak River or to hike the Croatan Forest or to explore some of the last fishing villages on the N.C. coast.

The N.C. Coastal Federation's annual *State of the Coast Report* makes it easy for tourists who are visiting the central N.C. coast this summer and for the residents who live there to visit some special natural places where they can hike, launch a canoe or kayak, look for birds and wildflowers or learn about the region's heritage.

This *State of the Coast Report* is different from the others the federation has published over the years. The reports usually tackle weighty subjects, such as stormwater pollution, global warming and beach development. The 2010 edition, though, takes on a lighter subject: travel. But it's not like the many tourist guides available each summer from Corolla to Calabash, said Frank Tursi, an assistant director of the federation and the report's editor and lead writer.

"We're calling it a travel guide with a conscience," he said.

Unlike those other guides, the *State of the Coast Report* features places that were once threatened by development and are now protected because people fought for them. Condominiums were slated for Hoop Pole Creek in Atlantic Beach, for instance. The federation fought the permits and eventually bought the land, which is now preserved as a nature trail that winds through some of the last remaining maritime forest on Bogue Banks.

Condos also were planned for tiny Permuda Island in Stump Sound in Onslow County. It was saved finally because of the indomitable will of one local woman, Lena Ritter, who organized her fellow fishermen. The island, accessible only by boat, is now part of the N.C. Estuarine Reserve program.

Other places, like those along the 48-mile-long White Oak, are protected because of the ongoing work of groups like the federation, which has helped preserve more than 4,000 acres along the river and partners with state and federal agencies and local governments to improve the quality of the river's water.

The report describes places along the river where people can launch boats, hike and even take part in the restoration of the river's marshes and oyster beds at uninhabited Jones Island. The federation preserved much of the 23-acre island in the middle of the lower White Oak after it had been rezoned for residential development. It donated the island to Hammocks Beach State Park and it is now the site of active restoration and education programs. Visitors can take part in weekly events to plant marsh grass or build oyster beds.

If a walk in the woods is more to your liking, the report recommends the Neusiok Trail in the Croatan and describes the 30-year effort by the Carteret County Wildlife Club to create the trail.

Visitors can get a taste of the coast's traditional commercial fishing heritage by visiting the eastern end of Carteret County, called Down East. In the throes of the building boom several years ago, residents there rose up to demand better planning and stricter development rules. All of the small fishing villages that make up the region retain their fishing and farming cultures. You're still likely to see men mending their fishing nets in the shade of live oak trees and crab pots stacked up at the end of docks. In Marshallberg, they're likely to sell you a hot dog in a community-wide effort to save the local harbor.

The stories behind the places in the *State of the Coast Report* provide a valuable lesson in conservation, Tursi said. "People of goodwill and good sense can win," he said. "If they band together and fight hard enough and long enough, they overcome powerful economic and political forces to protect the places they treasure. "

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Editors and reporters note: The federation is offering a cruise through the marshes of the White Oak River on Friday, June 18. Space on the boat is limited. Contact Frank Tursi for more information.