



Embargoed Until June 19, 2010

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State of the Coast Report: Travel Guide with a Conscience

OCEAN – Leave the crowds on the beaches this summer to become a Kindred Spirit, to paddle an endangered river or to explore one 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 state's southeast 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. In the case of Bird Island at the end of Sunset Beach, the fight to save the island from development lasted a decade and involved thousands of people from across the county. It ended with one of the great conservation victories in state history when the state bought the land and protected it.

Take a walk down the deserted beach to the mailbox that sits on a post in the dunes. Look for the dog-eared notebook inside. Like thousands of others of "Kindred Spirits" who came before you, you can jot down your reminiscences, your most personal feelings, your prayers. People have been doing it for almost 25 years.

The report also features another island -- tiny Permuda Island in Stump Sound in Onslow County. It, too, was slated for development. 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.

Development of a different kind threatens the Northeast Cape Fear River. Titan America wants to build one of the largest cement plants in the country on the banks of the river north of Wilmington. The company also proposes digging a strip mine near the plant for the limestone to make its cement. The mine would destroy more than 1,000 acres of wetlands.

Thousands of people have risen up against the proposals. They worry about what will happen to the river and to the people who live along it. They've signed petitions, jammed public hearings and traveled to Raleigh to lobby their legislators. The federation was among the Titan opponents who successfully sued the state to force the company to do a thorough review of the plant's environmental effects.

The *State of the Coast Report* offers places where people can see the river – the palmetto and cypress that grow along its banks, the alligators that swim in its waters and the pileated woodpeckers that nest in the forests that line its shores.

The report also highlights the Lockwoods Folly River in Brunswick County where the federation is helping residents and local governments improve water quality in the river. It is still a fetching place where you can get a glimpse of the N.C. coast that is fast disappearing. Travel to Varnamtown at the river's mouth. It is still a traditional fishing village that is home to the largest remaining shrimp-trawling fleet in the county. Everybody in town knows each other, and they're likely to serve visitors collards with their shrimp.

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 beach walk along Bird Island on Thursday, June 17. The leaders of the movement to save the island will be available for interviews. Contact Lauren Kolodij, the federation's deputy director, at 252-393-8185 for information. Her email is laurenk@nccoast.org.