

Once-bustling Eagles Island now plays conservation role

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Photo by Mike Spencer

Wooden pilings along the banks of Eagles Island rise from the Cape Fear River in Wilmington on Thursday. The Eagles Island Coalition is dedicated to efforts to conserve and manage the natural and cultural assets of Eagles Island and provide educational and recreational activities.



EAGLES ISLAND | A hotel, a baseball park and even luxury condominium towers have been proposed to be built there in recent years. And a century ago, Eagles Island was a bustling hub of commerce full of docks, warehouses and shipyards.

But besides mosquitoes and how quickly they can drive across it, most people today probably don't give the largely undeveloped island that separates Wilmington and Brunswick County much of a second thought.

And that's fine with the Eagles Island Coalition, a partnership of municipal agencies and nonprofit organizations that has drafted a conservation plan to manage the island so it remains – well – a lot like it is now.

That doesn't mean there won't be change, especially as saltwater intrusion and potentially sea-level rise change the environmental makeup of the marshes that constitute much of the island.

But the plan proposes to largely manage the island as a natural asset for the region while also protecting and acknowledging its rich historical and cultural importance.

"We want to let people know what's out there, what the island has to offer and what it's meant to the history of this area," said Niel Brooks, chairman of the coalition and Leland's parks director.

For example, more than 30 wrecks – from barges to steam ships – and remnants of several dockyards line the island's shoreline between the Battleship North Carolina and the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge.

Phil Prete, another member of the coalition and Wilmington's senior environmental planner, said the document has no statutory authority and doesn't preclude development on the 3,100-acre island. But it does lay out a vision for managing the island's environmental, historical and cultural resources.

"The idea is to look for development compatible, complimentary to what's there now," Prete said.

The management plan also aims to protect, survey and interpret those cultural and historical remnants before they are lost – like the rotting hull of the tug Isco, slowly sinking into the Cape Fear River's muck, across from Chandler's Wharf.

"Mother Nature tends to reclaim that which is not being used," Brooks said.

Among the coalition members is the Battleship North Carolina, which also is one of the few developed areas on the island.

"I think the ecotourism focus of the coalition as well as the environmental sensitivities the group promotes is something our visitors appreciate and respect," said battleship director Capt. Terry Bragg, ticking off the wildlife that can often be seen around the World War II memorial that's moored across from downtown Wilmington.

The battleship is in the midst of planning a major project to ring the 44,000-ton vessel with a cofferdam, which would allow hull repairs to be conducted. Plans also call for a memorial walkway around the ship and construction of nature trails.

Bragg said the project fits the goal of the coalition's management plan – passive development that enhances the visitor experience while also protecting the environment.

"We're a property owner, not just an office or government agency, so we also want to take a long at the long-term vision for the island and we think this project does that," he said.

As literally an island of open space between two rapidly urbanizing areas, Eagles Island provides critical habitat for a slew of rare and endangered animal and plant species. That list includes the Rare skipper and Dukes' skipper butterflies and the Carolina bishopweed and White doll's daisy, all of which are "species of concern" found in the island's tidal freshwater marshes.

That rich diversity of flora and fauna, in turn, attracts kayakers, birdwatchers, hunters and fishermen to the island.

The genesis for the conservation management plan came a few years ago when the state and New Hanover soil and water conservation districts acquired more than 600 acres on the island with the intent to turn the area into a nature preserve – a move that requires a management plan. It was then decided to give the conservation guide an island-wide scope.

Brooks said the management plan is something the coalition hopes the island's stakeholders can build upon.

"It's a guidebook for folks," he said. "It's not binding, but a document that's meant to help guide the future of what we want to see happen on the island."

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