

Year in Review

Four major goals were highlighted and distributed by the Coastal Federation in the 2000 State of the Coast Report. The goals were originally established to help citizens evaluate the effectiveness of our political leaders. Unfortunately, we've seen few tangible products from leadership so far. However, here's what the Coastal Federation, citizens and other environmental groups have accomplished over the past 12 months.

Protect and Restore Coastal Water Quality and Habitat

■ The Estuaries and Clean Waters Act of 2000 was passed by Congress on October 25, 2000. The legislation set a national goal of restoring one million acres of estuarine habitat by the year 2010 and authorizes \$275 million of federal matching funds over five years for estuary restoration. Six years ago NCCF helped form a national coalition of 11 nonprofit coastal groups called Restore America's Estuaries (RAE) that developed the proposed act, and then worked for its adoption.

■ Shellfish beds were offered protection when 1,991 acres next to the North River were purchased by the NCCF in November 2000 with a \$1,071,000 grant from the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF). Major portions of the property will be restored to wetlands, developing one of the more significant forested wetland restoration projects in the nation.

■ In January 2001, the NC CWMTF provided \$2.1 million to purchase a 780-acre parcel along the White Oak River between Swansboro and Stella in Carteret County. Options are being explored for the best protection of the relatively pristine river, while offering opportunities to leverage additional funding for future waterfront property purchases.

■ In partnership with Restore America's Estuaries, NCCF is helping to create a National Strategy for Coastal Habitat Restoration. Staff developed and submitted the blueprint for the southeastern US including NC, SC, GA FL, PR and the US Virgin Islands.

■ NCCF began an effort with the Croatan National Forest to coordinate activities among environmental and governmental groups to designate the White Oak River as Wild and Scenic.

■ NCCF is working closely with state agencies to develop habitat protection plans for the 2.2 million acres of coastal and marine waters that serve as nursery grounds for the State's commercial and recreational fisheries. The 1997 Marine Fisheries Reform Act provides a new mandate for environmental regulators to work together to carry out Coastal Habitat Protection Plans (CHPPs). The CHPP process was mandated by state law to



The North River will be one of the largest wetland restoration projects in the nation.

protect wetlands, spawning areas, shellfish beds, submerged aquatic vegetation, nursery areas and threatened/endangered species. Plans for the Chowan River and coastal ocean are being created now.

■ In July, NOAA announced a \$3.4 million restoration grant to be distributed through Restore America's Estuaries. NCCF will receive \$325,000 over three years to conduct restoration projects. A portion of these funds is being used to initiate a cost-share program for coastal waterfront property owners, offering grants to conduct natural erosion control projects.

■ \$2.4 million was approved by the CWMTF for the

town of Emerald Isle's \$4.8 million project that involves buying 40 acres of undeveloped barrier island property to treat stormwater. The Carteret County vacation spot is often flooded after heavy rains. It must now raise the remaining funds from local sources.

■ CWMTF announced approval of a \$1.25 million proposal submitted with the Neuse River Foundation to acquire a conservation easement around Gum Thicket Creek on the Neuse River in Pamlico County. This acquisition is part of an overall development plan for an open space subdivision designed to protect water quality and habitat in the Neuse River.

■ NCCF worked to obtain an important change in the way the State evaluates and rates shellfish waters. The Division of Water Quality revised its methodology for determining which shellfish waters will be listed on NC's 303 (d) list of impaired waters. The new system will result in more accurate reporting of water quality problems. As an example: the White Oak River will increase from 9,000 impaired acres to 28,058. This list is prepared by the State every two years and sent to the EPA for approval.

Develop, Promote and Achieve Environmental Law and Order

■ In November 2000 the NCCF was approved by the Water Keeper Alliance to license three CoastKeepers. These full-time professionals will serve as public advocates for coastal waters within their regions all along the NC coast. NCCF is the only organization in the nation to be granted coast-wide licensing.

■ Ted Wilgis became NCCF's first CoastKeeper and began duties as the Cape Fear CoastKeeper in January. Headquartered in the Wilmington field office, Ted focused on monitoring of the Oak Island Sea Turtle Habitat Restoration project along with other renourishment projects.

■ The Southern Environmental Law Center filed a lawsuit on behalf of the NCCF and the NC Shellfish Growers Association against Holly Ridge Associates in early 2001, claiming that drainage ditches were polluting Stump Sound – an area known for its productive oyster beds. (Citizens are allowed to sue suspected polluters





Bobby Kennedy (second from right) launched NCCF's CoastKeeper Program in May.

under the Clean Water Act if the citizens believe the government isn't adequately enforcing the law.) In August this year, the US Environmental Protection Agency stated that Holly Ridge Associates LLC violated the federal Clean Water Act with its draining of 1,262 acres of swamp in Onslow County.

■ In February the NC Ports Authority announced that El Paso Merchant Energy plans to site a liquefied natural gas terminal on Radio Island in Carteret County. NCCF is encouraging public participation in workshops and hearings. While conducting research on the proposed



Students continued to expand the shellfish beds at Hoop Pole Creek.

terminal, NCCF staff discovered documentation of the presence of a unique butterfly on the island. The status of the butterfly is being researched by scientists, and depending upon the outcome of this research, the presence of the small brown butterfly may alter future development on the island.

■ Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. officially launched the CoastKeeper Program at the Center for Marine Science on May 3, generating statewide and national coverage of NCCF's new program which will provide regional CoastKeepers and citizen volunteers to monitor the state's coastal waters.

■ With funding from the Educational Foundation of America, NCCF hired its second CoastKeeper for the Cape Lookout region. The Keeper will begin work January 2002 and work with citizens between Camp Lejeune and Cedar Island.

Develop, Promote and Achieve Cost-Effective Land Use Practices

■ "After the Perfect Storm" – A Coastal Stormwater Management Workshop was conducted by Tom Schueler, Executive Director of Center of Watershed Protection, at UNC-Wilmington on October 25. This workshop was part of NCCF's effort to alert citizens and government officials to the legal mandates of the EPA Phase II NPDES Stormwater Program.

■ The Southern Environmental Law Center filed a petition on behalf of NCCF and the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association with the NC Division of Water Quality in November. The petition requested that a Phase I storm water permit be issued prior to the construction of a ten million gallon a day wastewater treatment system in East and West Brunswick County. This request will serve as a major precedent to help shape the future of stormwater management along the coast nationwide. The project remains under review by the State.

■ At their May meeting, the Coastal Resources Commission voted to send the draft CAMA land use plan rules to public hearing. The new rules are simpler, require a land suitability analysis to determine areas that are most and least suitable for development, and offer different levels of planning for communities that take into consideration growth rates and whether or not a planning jurisdiction has fragile coastal resources. NCCF staff served on the committee to revise the rules. Public hearings were held through October.

■ Natural alternatives to bulkheading were promoted by the Coastal Federation, and a total of six shoreline restoration projects were completed. In addition, students continued to enhance the oyster beds at Hoop Pole Creek. Nine other projects are underway up and down the coast.

■ NCCF has developed a model Phase II NPDES Stormwater Permit for coastal communities. The model permit is written so that a local government can use it as a template to submit application for permit coverage.

Keep Our Beaches Public and Unspoiled

■ An invitational workshop on May 7 and 8 was organized by NCCF to discuss the status of scientific knowledge regarding beach renourishment. The workshop brought together more than 75 scientists, engineers, economists and policymakers to examine and discuss scientific findings and research gaps regarding renourishment of NC's beaches. A position paper is being produced for distribution.

■ NCCF along with other environmental groups opposed the Beach Preservation & Restoration Act (HB 418) that



Bird Island has biological, educational and recreational values of statewide significance. Photo by CONRAD H. LOWMAN.

would establish a Beach Preservation and Restoration Commission to administer beach renourishment projects and create a dedicated Beach Preservation and Restoration Fund. NCCF and others believe that the bill duplicates the authority of the Coastal Resources Commission and would stimulate wasteful spending on projects that do not meet long-term standards set by the US Army Corps of Engineers.

■ The NC Division of Coastal Management, the NC Coastal Land Trust and NCCF submitted a joint \$1.5 million request to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund to help purchase Bird Island near Sunset Beach in Brunswick County. NCCF has worked with the Bird Island Preservation Society for nine years to deter development of the pristine island that is home to 13 species of birds and animals that are rare, endangered or deemed to be of special concern. The island is one of the few remaining undeveloped barrier islands in the state and has a price tag of \$4.2 million.

