

SHORELINES – December 2005
As presented to the Island Review Magazine.

Another hot topic for inlets and waterways.

Our beaches and waterways perhaps represent the most prized public resource the State has to offer. Regardless of any personal biases by the author in that assessment, beaches and waterways have huge economic impacts attracting thousands upon thousands of tourists annually, drawing hundreds of millions in revenue each year, and supporting businesses that employ thousands. They collectively sustain a rich ecosystem if managed properly, and have recreational and aesthetic values that words simply can't describe. Experiencing the shades of red, yellow, and purple during a fall sunset viewed from the beach or water in Carteret County will leave just about anybody speechless.

Shoal material dredged during waterway maintenance is also an important, symbiotic type resource that can be utilized for beach nourishment if compatible with the oceanfront or estuarine beach. Even not-so-perfect dredged material can sometimes be appropriately used for upland habitat creation and other environmental restoration efforts. Another similarity beaches and waterways have is one of a legal bent as the waters and shorelines of the State are infused with important public use rights.

Of course one of the tenets of public use is that the access to water and the shore is readily available. All in all, most would probably consider the State's access network to beaches and waterways as "good" to "excellent". Of course there are problem spots but again, the overall assessment appears to be relatively positive.

There are also many examples of inter-government partnerships that have enhanced the overall access network by improving or constructing new walkways, parking lots, observation decks, or securing land, or building new boat ramps. A coastwide study completed last year by the N.C. Beach, Inlet, & Waterways Association, N.C. Sea Grant, and the N.C. Division of Coastal Management cataloged 550 public beach accesses and 6,252 dedicated public parking spaces, not counting any of those in our State and Federal parks. That's a coastwide average of almost 3.5 beach access points and 40 parking spaces per mile along the developed N.C. coast. Likewise, a quick internet search reveals there are roughly 30 boat ramps provided by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission in the State's oceanfront counties (Currituck, Dare, Hyde, Carteret, Onslow, Pender, New Hanover, & Brunswick), and 55 marinas that provide boat ramps and/or transient slips that are available to the public.

Boaters however are facing a new dilemma as coastal real estate value soars making it very attractive for owners of marinas and boat ramps to "cash-out". Subsequent redevelopment can often involve the construction of single- and multi-family units, thereby eliminating scores, if not hundreds, of boat ramps and slips in the process. This creates a squeeze play of sorts as the population along the coast increases, while water access is lost to rising waterfront property values. In the process, boat accessibility becomes more difficult for those who don't own waterfront property. This could very well impact the entire social and boating demographic from the big twin-engine cruisers, to the alumina-craft single engine style vessels.

Resolving this new type of access issue won't be easy, but some broad-brushed approaches at this point could include initiatives involving; (a) zoning, (b) acquisition, and (c) regulation.

Zoning can be politically strenuous, but overlaying marina districts or other types of land use instruments could ensure that areas will continue to be designated for water access. Acquiring (purchasing) land and property via grants and foundation-based

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assistance is another potential avenue. And finally, the regulatory aspect of boat access could be akin to those stipulations placed upon Federally funded beach nourishment projects. The premise of course is that if Federal taxpayer dollars are utilized to fund beach nourishment, then the public shall have available reasonable means of access to that particular Federally-assisted beach. Providing access and parking hence becomes a responsibility of the non-Federal partner of a given project.

Similarly, many boating channels are maintained (dredged) utilizing taxpayer dollars, and maybe a flexible formula can be developed that replaces an access requirement for reaches of waterways that are Federally maintained predicated on the beach nourishment premise and example. Just food for thought at this juncture but the water/boating access issue has been garnering considerable media attention lately – it should be easy to stay tuned to this hot issue that is at the core of enjoying our most prized public resource.



The linchpin of water access in N.C. – boat ramps such as the one depicted in this photo taken during a Spot fish run in October. N.C. Wildlife Resources Ramp at Cedar Point.