

# Stop mining inlets

By ORRIN H. PILKEY

North Carolina's beaches face a lot of problems including overdevelopment, rising sea level, rapid erosion rates and a paucity of beach-compatible sand for beach replenishment. But the biggest threat to our beaches may be coastal engineering consultants.

Coastal engineering consultants guide most of the decisions regarding beach management along the North Carolina coast. These consultants include the Wilmington District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who, in effect, are hired by individual communities.

The universal problem with coastal engineering consultants is they are selling a product: coastal engineering. They make money when the projects are accepted. If they don't find the truth according to their clients' needs they are out of business. The Corps' situation stems from the fact that Congress requires it to have projects (rather than a fixed annual budget) to survive.

In other words, when it comes to

coastal engineering consultants, the bottom line is the bottom line. As a result, objective science and engineering are often forced to take a back seat to profit.

This might not be too bad, if all coastal engineering projects turned out as well as the consultants claim. Time and again, after a beach has been nourished or a jetty emplaced, the project is inevitably declared a great success, regardless of the actual outcome.

By consistently downplaying — and even denying — the role of beach engineering in the degradation of the nation's beaches, the coastal engineering profession has sidetracked a much-needed societal debate about the wisdom of holding ocean shorelines in place.

For instance, North Carolina is allowing widespread mining of its inlets (including Oregon, Bogue, North Topsail, Carolina Beach, Lockwood Folly and Shallotte) for beach sand. Inlet sand is the best quality and cheapest beach sand around, although a heavy environmental price

is paid for its use because mining halts transfer of sand from island to island and causes erosion on adjacent beaches.

The Wilmington District of the Corps and the consulting companies hired by North Carolina coastal communities claim that removing sand from inlets does not create erosion problems on adjacent beaches. Yet a January 2009 document written by the same coastal engineering company that mined Bogue Inlet and proposes to do the same at New River Inlet (North Topsail Beach) stated the following: "Erosion problems at Barefoot Beach (Fla.) are caused by the same processes of other inlets along the Florida coast. A dredged navigation channel traps sediment that otherwise would bypass to the beach ..."

This company obviously recognized the hazard of inlet mining in Florida, but sings a different tune in North Carolina. Why?

The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission (CRC), the state's coastal rule-making and enforcement body,

community-by-community. The result — thousands of high rises placed immediately next to still eroding shorelines.

In North Carolina, we must put beaches first. We need to respond flexibly to retreating shorelines. We cannot put the coastal system solely into the hands of coastal engineers whose proclamations concerning costs, impacts and life spans should be viewed with as much skepticism as that of a used car salesperson.

In the future, beach nourishment sand must be taken only from sites that won't make the problem worse. And proposed appointees to advisory panels must be vetted to assure impartiality.

It's time for the state to step up and take control of our coast. The future of our beaches depends on it.

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