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SHEA: Keep the beaches open

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I live on the Outer Banks of North Carolina in Dare County. I was not born here. I did not grow up here. Like many other people, my first taste of the Outer Banks came by vacationing here.

During an active career, my wife and I lived in the Northeast, Canada, California and Washington State. We traveled extensively and sampled a variety of scenery and lifestyles in ten states and three European countries. We chose to retire and enjoy "The best years of our lives" on the Outer Banks.

Our decision to live on the Outer Banks would prove to be the right choice. We are now fortunate to call this vacation paradise our home and share it with our children, grandchildren and friends. Who can help but fall in love with this wonderful gift of nature? Its unique blend of clean beaches, world-class fishing, historical attractions and friendly people is almost too good to be true.

We have met many people here who also share our love and respect for nature. We were pleasantly surprised to discover a dedicated community of local people committed to protecting wildlife. They guard turtle hatchings, participate in bird census studies and clean up beach debris that washes ashore. They perform these activities without fanfare, motivated only by a genuine love of nature.

Now, this community is being threatened by a few, so-called "environmental," groups who want to deny us access to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area. This area was created as the first National Seashore for public recreational use. The founders knew that designating the area for recreation would be the best way to save and protect wildlife for future generations.

Those who would deny our freedom have little regard for the people who live and work here, and the thousands of others who visit here, year after year, to enjoy clean beaches and water. In fact, the majority of these "environmental groups" who are behind this attempted coup do not live on or near the Outer Banks.

Yet they would force their agenda on us, even though they have no vested interest in the area. They refuse to acknowledge that all of our many birds, turtles and other wildlife would not be here, if the residents and visitors had not been such good stewards of nature. This local tradition of caring for the natural resources began with the Native Americans and this heritage continues to the present day.

In 2008, a few environmental groups filed a lawsuit in Federal court against the National Park Service challenging how they managed beach access in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area. These groups see nothing wrong with using the court system to impose their will on others. They would deny everyone their right to live, work and enjoy areas established for public access and use. Because of their damaging lawsuit, Dare County was forced to sign a consent decree or face the possibility of a judge closing the beaches.

Under this consent decree, vital sections of the seashore are subject to pedestrian and vehicular closure during peak times of the year. Serious penalties, including fines and imprisonment, were put in place for violations of the consent decree.

Even a minor violation, such as vandalizing a closure sign, would be subject to the draconian measure of expanding the quarantine closure area by 50 meters (approx 156 ft) for the first offense. Further violations would result in additional space being quarantined.

Instead of investigating purported acts of vandalism and prosecuting the offender in the criminal justice system, the consent decree punishes everyone. This is not only unfair but, in my view un-American and in violation of our Constitutional rights.

What is the status of our struggle? So far this year in 2009, we have had three closure expansions because of vandalism to signs. In each case, vehicle tracks were found near the damaged signs. However, no footprints or tire tracks were observed going into protected bird or turtle nesting areas, only damage to signs. As a result, everyone is being punished with significantly expanded quarantine areas, but nobody has been charged with a crime.

If I were a suspicious person, I would ask myself, "Who has the most to gain by additional beach closures?" Obviously, the residents and visitors who enjoy beach access have the most to lose. Again, we need to ask, "Who has the most to gain?" Perhaps it is the so-called environmentalists who really have the most to gain.

Sadly, every expanded closure advances them one step closer to their apparent goal of ultimately banning everyone from the beach.

Help from people everywhere is needed to keep our beaches open. This is not just an Outer Banks problem; it is America's problem. If efforts to deny access are successful in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area, this could spread, like an ideological virus, to other beaches, parks and public lands across the nation. This is a sad case of the few trying to impose their agenda on the many. Now is the time for freedom-loving people to preserve public access to public lands.

Honest information about beach access can be found at www.PreserveBeachAccess.org. Here you can learn the history of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Recreational Area. Discover promises made to the people when the Federal government established this area for recreation. See how people and businesses are hurt by the aggressive efforts to close our beaches. You will also learn how you can help in this struggle. Please join us.

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