

News Herald

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Letter: Park should not seek authority into the water

Why has the state park reversed a long-held position and is now pushing to control our waterways?

The state park police who raided Shell Island visitors in 2006 claimed they “owned” 400 feet into the water. Later, park management told us that was a mistake — that their authority ended at the shoreline. They said a 30-year-old Florida Cabinet letter allows limited authority only if the state explains specific management activities in a park’s 10-year management plan. They said the letter was meant only to address unique situations such as an area with an underwater feature to protect.

They wrote us a letter in 2013 saying they do not have authority into the water here.

In a 2014 public meeting, a park official said they did not plan to exert power out into our waters. In The News Herald, she said that the idea was “misinformation.”

Yet park official Gary Clark told The News Herald yesterday that the park does indeed have authority 400 feet into all of our waters around the park, but they will only take 50 feet, which they have deemed is “a fair number.”

By now you might be asking why they are behaving this way.

Seventeen days after the park told the public they would not regulate into the water, the Florida Audubon Society posted online, calling Shell Island visitors an “entitled few” who “commit outrageous abuses,” “trespass” in protected areas, and skirt admission fees. (There is no factual basis for these claims). They asked the park to “move its boundaries 150 feet into the water” and “set recreational use levels.”

Armchair environmentalists around the globe clicked a special link that sent the park service 2,869 form letters from California, New York, Oregon, Hawaii, Nicaragua, and even Kazakhstan, asking the park to regulate and restrict our access to Shell Island waters. Only 35 letters (1.22 percent) were from people in Bay County.

Six months later, at a 2015 park Advisory Board meeting, the park service reversed themselves and proposed regulating our waters. The Bay County Commission, 37 area boating businesses represented by the Marine Industries Association, the Bay County Chamber of Commerce, our elected state representatives and Friends of Shell Island have opposed this regulation.

Setting aside that the regulation is not justified and will cost taxpayers money, vague laws enacted outside the legislative process allow unelected government officials to interpret and exert power at their whim. This puts citizens in the un-American position of having to beg them to “manage” us fairly.

Chess Grandmaster (and Russian pro-democracy leader) Garry Kasparov recently wrote, “Once you give power to the government it is nearly impossible to get it back, and it will be used in ways you cannot

expect.” He should know. Let’s hope that if Kasparov ever makes it to Shell Island, he doesn’t feel right back at home again.

Attend the park’s public meeting tonight (5 p.m. at the Arnold High School auditorium, 550 Alf Coleman Road) to tell them what you think.

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Executive director

Friends of Shell Island Inc.