

Friends of Shell Island
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Advisory Board for the St. Andrews State Park Unit Management Plan
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Florida Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard
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March 17, 2016

To the Advisory Board for the St. Andrews State Park Unit Management Plan,

The State Park has proposed to grant itself a new “management authority” 50 feet out into the waters around all of the park’s shores, including those of Shell Island as a part of this plan update. Friends of Shell Island strongly opposes this regulation. It is being pushed by an agenda-driven organization with a conflict of interest that has been given overly favorable weighting on this board. It is an unnecessary regulation on Florida citizens. It has not been justified. It is vaguely worded in a way that will invite abuse of power. The Bay County Commission, 37 area boating businesses, Bay County Chamber of Commerce, and our elected state representatives have also opposed it.

The only board member that has lobbied for this additional regulation is the Florida Audubon Society. This heavy advocacy is being given an outsized and unfair weighting on this advisory board and constitutes a conflict of interest for the Audubon Society.

The Audubon Society is being paid by the DEP under a \$1.3 million contract to study birds along Panhandle beaches, and their reports to the funding source state that they have singled out Shell Island as a problem in which boaters are difficult to monitor and “control”, and they speculate that the boaters “disturb” shorebirds. This organization fundraises by describing situations of concern and calling for money to “help the birds.” They have misrepresented conditions at Shell Island to further their efforts to lobby the state park to restrict visitor access.

The fact that the Audubon Society is being compensated to manage and study the birds in this park creates a conflict of interest that puts Ms. Julie Wraithmell (Audubon Contract Manager) in a position in which her input to management actions within the Park that could benefit her and her organization materially, as well as potentially impact study findings that could influence future contracts with

the Florida Audubon Society. Standing Watch, a boating advocacy organization based in Naples, Florida, has asked the DEP Office of Inspector General to investigate this conflict.

The subject contract is being funded from BP oil spill recovery funds, and the Audubon Society states in its contract RFP response document that “success of this five-year project will inform funding decisions under RESTORE” (also a BP oil spill funding source) and that, “the vision that National Audubon Society has articulated for the Gulf of Mexico under the RESTORE act includes a perpetual management fund for beach-dependent birds...”

Because of these statements, Ms. Wraithmell’s input to park management on the Advisory Board could not only benefit the vendor (Audubon) on the current contract, it could benefit the vendor for their stated goal of long-term funding beyond the expiration of the current contract.

“We are not contemplating extending park authority out into the water around Shell Island, unless we hear from you that you want it,” said park official Sine Murray at a public meeting on Dec. 3, 2014, to hundreds of area citizens who attended in order to oppose regulation on their waters. The News Herald quoted Ms. Murray in their article on December 4 as saying that the idea was “misinformation.”

Seventeen days later, a post went up on the Florida Audubon Society’s “Take Action” webpage, calling Bay County boaters an “entitled few” who “commit outrageous abuses,” “violate park rules,” “trespass” in protected areas, and skirt admission fees at Shell Island where birds nest. They accused island visitors of causing nest failure and called for the park to move its boundaries 150 feet into the water and “set recreational use levels” which they claimed will protect birds. (There is no factual basis for these claims.)

Armchair environmentalists around the globe clicked the link, sending the park service 2,869 form letters from California, New York, Oregon, Hawaii, Nicaragua, Trinidad and even Kazakhstan, asking the park to restrict our access to Shell Island waters. Twenty-four letters were from birdwatchers in New Jersey and 217 were from Canada. Only 35 letters (1.22%) were from people in Bay County.

At the July 15 Advisory Board meeting, we were formed into committees and each committee developed recommendations for the park. Julie Wraithmell became spokesperson for her committee, and added without permission of the other members the recommendation, “Given management authority over submerged lands, seagrass beds closed to boat access, but open for snorkeling.” At least two members of Group 4 will testify to this. On February 17, 2016 we sent an email to Daniel Alsentzer and Sine Murray asking that this input be redacted from plan minutes and other documents.

Ms. Wraithmell has used her position to bypass the advisory board committee process in an e-mail sent to Daniel Alsentzer on August 10, 2015 asking, "Did you receive my request that we discuss extending the boundaries of the park 250 feet into the water?" Daniel responded that yes, and they were planning to propose it at the next meeting – and they did – on August 19. This email communication occurred despite Sine Murray telling me that there were no communications between the Audubon Society and DEP about this proposed regulation outside the Advisory Board.

Standing Watch has called for Julie Wraithmell to be removed from this Advisory Board, and any input that the Audubon Society has had due to Ms. Wraithmell's participation be expunged from the record and discarded from the proposed St. Andrews State Park 10-year unit management plan.

The Audubon Society's involvement in performing this shorebird study at Shell Island will allow it to help DEP publish a study unfairly blaming boaters for "disturbances" of shorebirds, and further push its agenda to enact policy that will restrict boaters from the island. It will also help the Audubon Society materially, as they have stated, by allowing it to lobby for more contracts via funding sources from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

We have obtained a report written by a highly credentialed bird biologist that explains why the study is biased, flawed and should be terminated and the data discarded. We will provide this report upon request. We sent a letter yesterday to Parks Director Donald Forgione asking DEP to take these actions.

Finally, we would like the board to know that this flawed and biased shorebird study also calls for Audubon Society and park personnel to surveill visitors to Shell Island with high-powered lenses, recording alleged instances of "disturbance" based on their bias towards "controlling" visitors to the island.

The surveillance is intrusive and disrespectful to the state park's visitors. Yesterday we also sent a complaint letter by four different parties to the parks Director. These parties explained the reasons why they resent the intimidation tactics and intrusion into their privacy. For the sake of the state park's relationship with the public alone, this activity needs to cease. The letter is attached.

Regards,

Stephanie Somerset, Executive Director
Friends of Shell Island, Inc.

Cc: Gary Clark, Deputy Secretary, Department of Environmental Protection
Donald Forgione, Director, Division of Parks and Recreation