

January 27, 2015

**Friends of Shell Island submits the following input to the St. Andrews State Park Unit Management Plan update:**

### **Shell Island is Important to Bay County's Economy**

Shell Island is a competitive advantage for the \$1 billion Panama City Beach tourism industry. Its 14 miles of beaches, snow-white sands, crystal clear waters and easy access provide a natural magnet for thousands of visitors choosing Bay County as their destination over other Gulf Coast areas. The island is ranked No. 10 out of the top 40 area attractions reviewed on TripAdvisor and rates a five out of six-star ranking. Unlike man-made attractions such as shopping malls or golf courses, Shell Island is a unique natural feature unrivaled by competing destinations.

Water-based activities on St. Andrew Bay and around Shell Island are marketed as premier attractions by area lodging establishments. More than 30 different businesses are exclusively devoted to getting visitors out on the water, in a symbiotic partnership with the businesses that provide lodging, shopping and dining. Jet-skiing, snorkeling, beachcombing, boat rentals and picnicking are just a few of the activities enjoyed at the island. Additionally, many out-of-town residents choose to launch from or keep their boats at local marinas due to the unique recreational opportunities Shell Island provides.

Since Shell Island is more than seven miles long and remains uninhabited in most sections, there is room to grow visitation. The position of Friends of Shell Island is that the state, federal and local governments should promote responsible visitation to Shell Island, and not discourage it.

### **The Public is Increasingly Concerned About Access to Shell Island**

The following actions by various government entities have caused the local public (and visitors from elsewhere who frequent this area) to become increasingly concerned about their access to the island and thus more vocal and involved:

- The 2006 State Park Police raid on Shell Island visitors.
- Discussions between various government personnel and water-based vendors in 2012 and 2013, in which the vendors were incorrectly told that the park "owns" out 400 feet into the water.
- The actions by Tyndall Air Force Base on Shell Island land to increasingly block off large sections of the island from public access and the installation of large signs implying that visitors can only enjoy the island at the invitation of the base commander.
- The increasing presence of water-based police patrols and detention and searches of civilian boaters by the US Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security and Tyndall Air Force Military Police which appear redundant to the existing FWC patrol presence.
- The stated intention of Tyndall Air Force Base to enact a vast new unprecedented security zone around all of their shoreline, including their Shell Island and Crooked Island properties, whereby Tyndall Military Police would patrol and perform surveillance on boating citizens in the guise of "looking for threats", and who would request to search citizens' boats. This restriction would encompass over 8,000 acres of the public's

waterways and would give the base commander the power to close down entire sections of the public's waterways at any time and at his/her discretion.

- The patrolling of civilian boaters off State Park property (not Tyndall property) by Tyndall Air Force Military Police.

- The increased size each year of the marked-off bird nesting areas on park property in places that were historically used for recreation.

As a result, we would recommend that the State Park take into consideration the extreme sensitivity and opposition the boating public will have towards any additional government restrictions or patrols that might affect them via the updated Unit Management Plan. We also recommend that only bird nests are marked as off limits, and access limited only to the extent the protection is needed. Any additional land that does not have bird nests should be accessible by the public. When the nests are not present, the barrier fencing should be removed to allow access by the public to these areas.

### **The Role of the Audubon Society Should be Balanced with that of Island Visitors**

In accordance with Chapter 258, Florida Statutes, "It shall be the policy of the Division of Recreation and Parks...to contribute materially to the development of a strong mental, moral, and physical fiber in the people." One of the State Park's most active stakeholders, the Florida Audubon Society, violates the spirit of this policy by showing on their website inflammatory and false accusations against the visitors to Shell Island - in an unethical manner. The fact that the State Park system has partnered with the Florida Audubon Society on various projects gives the impression of a strong relationship. This impression can harm the reputation of the State Park system and further inflame tensions with local citizens, given the disparaging and false accusations made about them by Audubon.

Additionally, Friends of Shell Island's position is that more weight should be given to the voices of the citizens who visit the park the most. Thousands of citizens visit the island each year for the recreational purposes of swimming, picnicking, hiking and sightseeing. We know of no tours or field trips that the Audubon Society conducts (none can be found on their website or in materials they distribute) with the exception of a volunteer visit by boat for two or three people during the Christmas Bird Count each year. Conversely, it is estimated that 75% of boaters spend their money in Bay County specifically in order to visit Shell Island. Fishing around the island is also one of the most popular sports for recreational boaters. There is no other natural attraction in Bay County that draws boaters as Shell Island does. Over \$ 100 million is spent in the local boating industry, and jobs created by the recreational boating industry and it's customers' attraction to Shell Island are comparable to or greater than those of Eastern Shipbuilding, one of the county's largest employers.

Page 3 of the current Unit Management Plan states that "In the management of St. Andrews State Park, major emphasis is placed on maximizing the recreational potential of the recreational area, however, preservation of natural resources remains important." We understand that the Audubon Society's interest is in "preservation" at Shell Island. However, we believe that at least half of the State Park's employees are already being

paid to work on conservation, therefore any additional input from the Audubon Society can be considered redundant.

We recommend that during the Unit Management Planning process, significantly more weight be given to those of us who frequently visit the island for recreation versus those who do not. We specifically recommend that the office of planning revisit the makeup of the Advisory Board for this upcoming Unit Management Plan and give it a more balanced weight towards those whose interest in the island includes the actual visitation to it and who make up the recreational component of interests in the park.

We also recommend that the "Park Goals and Objectives" section which begins on page 4 of the current plan be updated to more correctly reflect the importance of the recreational component of the park's mission. Our recommendation would be to have "Recreation" be the first goal, instead of the third goal as it is now, and that it contain statements that acknowledge recreational needs of boaters, and Shell Island's importance to the local economy.

#### **Water-based Businesses Provide Welcomed Services to Boating Visitors**

The free market has allowed for many creative ways in which water-based businesses provide welcomed services to boating visitors at Shell Island and provide jobs in the local economy. Friends of Shell Island's position is that the free market provides the best opportunities for businesses to meet visitors' needs at Shell Island, and that further regulation of these businesses is not required.

#### **Friends of Shell Island is a Non-Governmental Organization that can Partner with the State Park**

Friends of Shell Island is a local 501c(3) NGO similar to the Friends of the St. Andrews State Park or the Audubon Society. We are made up of thousands of highly motivated local volunteer citizens who love Shell Island and want to preserve it for the recreation of generations to come. We offer our partnership with the St. Andrew State Park and the Florida Park Service to assist in your efforts.