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Boaters blast Shell Island proposal

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — Boaters who frequent Shell Island say they are concerned regulations being discussed by park officials could all but end the public's enjoyment of the destination.

As part of a 10-year update of St. Andrews State Park's management plan, state park officials have proposed extending the area where state park rules would apply by as much as 150 feet out into the Gulf waters surrounding the western half of Shell Island, excluding the residential subdivision in the middle of the island. Also being discussed is the concept of implementing a new restricted area that would encompass Shell Island's western half except for a thin stretch of land facing the pass and the subdivision in the middle of the island, said Stephanie Somerset, who heads up Friends of Shell Island and sits on an advisory committee that met last week at the park.

She said the proposed restriction would cover the westernmost 2½ miles of the island and run from the bay side to the Gulf side.

"The rules would be that you could walk in this area but not sit, stand or lay out a towel or cooler," Somerset said. "This takes miles of Shell Island's shores away from us and would allow the park to unleash rangers on ATVs to harass those who try to enjoy these beaches."

Somerset also said if the park boundaries were extended 150 feet into the Gulf people could not drink beer in their boats within that area.

"As a reminder, these state park rules also forbid consumption of alcohol, allow them to ban your dog from the island and control where you can grill, picnic and camp," Somerset writes on her Friends of Shell Island website. "The park has rules against numerous infractions such as digging a hole, picking a flower or 'disturbing' nature. By the way, this restriction would be written into their 99-year lease, making it as near-permanent as possible." Martha Robinson, a communications manager for the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), said none of the proposals being discussed has been adopted as part of the management plan update.

"At this time, we haven't written a plan," she said. "Lots of ideas have been bounced around in our two advisory board meetings. Now it's a matter of which ones make our proposal."

Lori Elliott, a press secretary for the DEP, wrote in an email that at the recent St. Andrews State Park advisory group meeting, "numerous concepts and ideas, which stemmed from input from the public and previous advisory group meetings, were discussed.

"These are not formalized proposals or plans at this point in the park's unit management plan update process," she wrote. "Rather, these ideas and concepts are an opportunity for the advisory group to brainstorm ways to balance protecting state park natural resources and recreational opportunities as well as to improve the overall park experience. The process for updating a park's unit management plan, which happens about every 10 years, is an extensive process that includes working with local stakeholders and soliciting direct public input."

She said a public hearing will be held in the fall to present the draft plan to the public.

Melody Ray-Culp, a regional biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and also a member of the advisory committee, said park officials brought forth the proposals but declined to comment about whether that agency supports them.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is interested in many of the resource issues that St. Andrews State Park officials are (studying), and we are working closely with the park to move forward with their obligations under the

Endangered Species Act,” she said.

Some of those species include the endangered Choctawhatchee beach mouse and threatened Piping Plover shorebird, she said.

Charter boat fishing Capt. John Black said he was in attendance at the recent meeting of the advisory board held, and he was concerned to hear the proposals discussed. Black said there seems to be a “liberal California mentality” when it comes to protecting species that “animals need for people to go away.” He said the two can co-exist.

Black said he has another concern — that if the park rules are extended 150 feet offshore, fishermen and pontoon and Jet-ski charters that are not on the list of state-approved concessionaries would be told to leave the area.

He said the proposals he heard would cut off about 90 percent of the island from human intrusion.

“It’s going to impact the enjoyment of this area for the locals, and it is definitely going to impact us economically,” he said.



NEWS HERALD FILE PHOTO

Beachgoers enjoy Shell Island in 2008.