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Our View: Is government addicted to Shell Island intervention?

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It seems that government, too often, is prone to one of the following actions: intervening where it is not needed or where it is not wanted; intervening where a small problem might exist in an overwhelming and unnecessarily harsh manner; or intervening while at the same time doing a poor job of communicating its reasoning, methodology or goals clearly and openly with the public.

As The News Herald's John Henderson reported on the front page of Tuesday's News Herald, "Boaters blast Shell Island proposal," St. Andrews State Park officials, as part of their 10-year update of the park's management plan, are discussing updated rules that have left Shell Island enthusiasts angry.

Stephanie Somerset, who heads up Friends of Shell Island and sits on an advisory committee that met last week with park officials, said proposed rules being floated include 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. There might be a new restricted area encompassing much of the island's western half.

"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."

Park rules that already prohibit the consumption of alcohol would theoretically reach 150 feet into the water, as would the ban on dogs.

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." Lori Elliott, a press secretary for the DEP, also said nothing is formalized, "at this point."

Other agencies said they are interested in helping the park fulfill "their obligations under the Endangered Species Act," which include the Choctawhatchee beach mouse and the Piping Plover shorebird.

Shell Island is clearly marked with off-limit areas to protect nesting birds and other animals. There's been no news shared with us that humans are suddenly more of a danger now than they were 10 years ago.

Island fans have bitter tastes from past disputes with park officials and the initial proposal from Tyndall Air Force Base to have the ability to restrict certain areas in times of crisis. The outcry, led in part by Somerset as well, over the Air Force proposal ultimately resulted in the opening of a public line of communication between the Base's highest commander and concerned citizens, and resolutions were hammered out.

Past brushes with overzealous park rangers, including officials on 4-wheelers ticketing people for having their dogs or other things routinely overlooked prior to that also set up an outcry, one that wasn't so quickly smoothed over.

Why park officials feel the need to reach their arms 150 feet into the water hasn't been well explained and isn't being well-received. Absent evidence of some new human-created problem, the perception is it's an attempt to take control.

Park officials should take a cue from the Air Force and Col. Derek France, commander of the 325th Fighter Wing, and listen to the concerns, address the concerns, be interrogative instead of declarative and act like stewards of the taxpayers' property, not landlords.

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