



Phil Maier
Director, Coastal Reserves & Outreach
Department of Natural Resources
PO Box 12559
Charleston, SC 29422

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Dean Harrigal
Manager, Botany Bay Wildlife Management Area
585 Donnelly Drive off Hwy. 17
Green Pond, SC 29446

Bess Kellett,
Volunteer Coordinator
Botany Bay Plantation Heritage Preserve/ Wildlife Management Area
PO Box 22
Edisto Island, SC 29438

Dear Phil, Dean and Bess:

The Edisto Island Preservation Alliance appreciates having had the opportunity over the years and recently to discuss with you our concerns about tourist visitation pressure on the wildlife and habitats at Botany Bay Plantation. We know that all of you share the same concerns, and that you have already taken some steps to address some of them.

Our board has detailed our observations, concerns, and recommendations in the form of a board resolution. I enclose that resolution for your consideration.

I sincerely hope that this resolution will be helpful to DNR as you move forward to build on the solid successes that you have achieved to date in the management of Botany Bay Plantation. We stand by to offer more information and photographs, and to assist you in any way that we can in addressing these recommendations.

Best Regards,


Lloyd Eray
Chair
Edisto Island Preservation Alliance

cc: Jim Brailsford
Bud Skidmore



Edisto Island Preservation Alliance

Observations and Recommendations to SCDNR on the Continuing Protection of Wildlife and Natural Habitat at Botany Bay Wildlife Management Area and Heritage Trust Preserve

Whereas, EIPA officers and members assisted in the creation of the Botany Bay volunteer program and have been volunteering regularly for many hours per week ever since the property was first opened to the public; and

Whereas, the protection and preservation of the wildlife, plants, habitats, and overall ecosystem of Botany Bay Plantation is a critical component of EIPA's mission; and

Whereas, EIPA is aware that Botany Bay Plantation has been designated as a South Carolina Heritage Preserve and a South Carolina Wildlife Management Area and as a part of the ACE Basin National Estuarine Research Reserve. In addition, the State of South Carolina must hold, maintain, and use Botany Bay Plantation primarily as a "wildlife preserve." Thus, Botany Bay must be managed primarily for wildlife with accommodation of human visitors a secondary function so long as the human visitation does not interfere with the primary purpose; and

Whereas, EIPA is aware that a "wildlife preserve" consists of a tract of land that is conserved and managed for the protection and preservation of its wildlife, flora, fauna, and natural habitats and ecosystems and to provide opportunities for scientific study or research; and

Whereas, because Botany Bay Plantation is located in the midst of a tourist resort destination community, it is subjected to visitation pressure far in excess of that experienced by a typical Wildlife Management Area or Heritage Preserve. Annual visitation to Botany Bay Plantation is in the 50,000 to 60,000 range, and growing, with attendant vehicles; and

Whereas, through thousands of hours of volunteer service over 5 years at Botany Bay Plantation, EIPA officers and members have had a unique opportunity to observe the management and operation of Botany Bay Plantation and the impact that the human visitors and their vehicles have had upon the natural resource; and

Whereas, the Board of Directors of EIPA believes that the experiences, observations, and recommendations of its officers and members as Botany Bay volunteers should be beneficial to DNR in fulfilling its management responsibilities and should serve to improve the experience of all Botany Bay visitors and volunteers. Now Therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Directors of the Edisto Island Preservation Alliance, at its meeting held on October 16, 2014, a quorum being present and voting, one member abstaining, adopted this Resolution containing Observations and Recommendations pertaining to the Board's concerns about the human visitation pressure on the wildlife and natural resources of Botany Bay Plantation.

SUMMARY: In our opinion, the flora, fauna, habitats, and natural ecosystems of Botany Bay Plantation will not accommodate unlimited numbers of human and vehicular sightseers and beach-goers. In addition to the problem of resource degradation, we find that the human visitation pressure also poses safety and emergency response concerns. Our central recommendation is directed toward a reduction in the number of visitors. Some benefit could also be obtained from more effective signage and communication, a more visible law enforcement presence, and some scientific study of the impact of human visitation and agricultural practices on wildlife.

OBSERVATIONS: Tourism. Many of the tourists who fill the parking lot and parade to the beach with their beach umbrellas, tents, baby strollers, coolers, and gear-wagons are not there to experience a natural wildlife preserve – they are there because someone told them that Botany Bay is a cool, free beach where they should spend some time while on vacation at Edisto Beach. The mostly well-intentioned but uninformed tourists claim a spot on the beach to set up their colorful paraphernalia and treat the beach as they would Edisto, Folly, or Myrtle. The primary activity in the summer months is swimming, despite warnings of the dangerous conditions and the absence of lifeguards. Children of all ages spend hours in the surf. Many beach visitors are unprepared for how taxing the walk to the beach can be, especially in the rocky and washed-out segments of the causeway, and they are certainly unprepared for the trail to be under flowing tidal currents as it is at high Spring tides. Bicycles have been reported to be a cause of congestion on the causeway and a hazard to less mobile walkers and those struggling with getting strollers and wagons past the rougher spots. Many volunteers have reported a serious problem with the speed

of vehicular traffic between the gate kiosk and the beach parking lot, and also on the driving tour. The 15 mph speed limit is excellent, but only if it is observed and enforced. This is one of several areas where we think that an increased law-enforcement presence and visibility will be helpful.

This beach holiday mentality appears to put extreme pressure on the wildlife including trampling of the mudflats where the shorebirds feed, strolling in large groups alongside the marked nesting areas, and the apparently inevitable littering. It also detracts greatly from the experience of those who visit Botany Bay for nature observation and study and puts extreme pressure on the volunteers who must deal with litter including plastic bags, aluminum cans, glass bottles, food containers, and soiled diapers. Most importantly, the beach volunteers must face the fact that there will be a swimming emergency or tragedy sooner or later, and the volunteer on duty will have to deal with it. That might well include making the decision of whether to stand on the beach with a cell phone calling emergency numbers knowing that it will all be over before help can arrive, or attempt a rescue that is likely to be beyond the capabilities of the volunteer.

Most visitors understand and observe the existing prohibition against the removal of shells and artifacts. If we assume that percentage to be as high as 95%, that still leaves 3,000 or so visitors in the course of a year who may well be secreting and removing prime shells, sharks teeth, pottery, and other fossils and artifacts. One volunteer has reported that on several occasions during the summer months he has noted the location of desirable shells, fossils, or pottery in prominent locations and has found that by the end of his shift that those items have usually disappeared. This is another area where increased law enforcement visibility will be helpful.

Science. We have been impressed with DNR scientists and their work on water quality, oyster restoration, fish counts, shorebird counts, sea turtle nesting, and many other topics, throughout the ACE Basin including Edisto Island and Deveaux Bank. However, some of our volunteers have suggested the desirability of also having DNR science studies on such things as the impact of visitation and traffic pressure at Botany Bay on birds and other wildlife; and the possible impact of the use of agricultural pesticides on Botany Bay on the health of marine species in our intertidal zone and creeks, the wildlife species on Botany Bay that feed heavily on the Botany Bay food plots, and the predator wildlife species that feed on them.

Visitor Education. We find that a large percentage of the tourist visitors to Botany Bay are only superficially informed about what to expect. They know that there is an undeveloped, free access, beach, that a pleasant .5-mile walk is required to get there from the parking lot, that shell collecting is prohibited, and they might know that there will be no restrooms or trash containers. They generally are not

prepared for the difficulty of the walk to the beach, the possibility of exposure to venomous reptiles and spiders, ticks, biting insects, weather hazards, and the extremely unsuitable and unsafe conditions for ocean swimmers at the beach. We think that the write-up on “Before you visit Botany Bay” on the EIPA website (preserveedisto.org) is a more effective educational vehicle than those to which the tourists are presently most likely exposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

1. Prohibit swimming from the beach by visitors to the Botany Bay WMA and Heritage Preserve. This would achieve progress toward several necessary ends including greatly alleviating safety and emergency response concerns and significantly reducing the numbers of tourist visitors and vehicles, thereby reducing the pressure on wildlife and habitat. Other means of reducing visitation including closing on more days per week than just Tuesdays and hunting days and implementing an admission charge or admission pass system should also be considered.
2. Improve the dissemination of realistic information including rules, regulations, and precautions; and communicate directly with the Edisto Island Chamber of Commerce, real estate and time-share resort entities on the beach, and other sources of tourist referrals to Botany Bay. EIPA volunteers will assist with this effort if requested by DNR. Also, improve signage to include swimming regulations and cautions and a reminder not to litter. We recommend that the swimming sign be worded as follows: “Swimming Prohibited. Dangerous Currents and Hidden Submerged Hazards. No Lifeguard.” Pending the adoption of the swimming prohibition, the first sentence of the sign should say: “Swimming Strongly Discouraged.” The existing sign with somewhat similar language has faded and gets very little attention.
3. Conduct more scientific study on Botany Bay Plantation. We recommend that the topics for study include mammal populations, songbird and shorebird populations, butterfly populations, plant populations, and the impact of current and future levels of human and vehicular visitation of those populations. We also recommend a study of the pesticides used in agriculture on Botany Bay Plantation including the materials used and the amount applied and to what extent those materials are found in the bird, mammal, and marine life in the forest, beach, marshes, and creeks of Botany Bay. As only one example, it would be interesting to study the seeds produced in the food plots for pesticide residue and then study the wildlife consumers

of those seeds and the predators up the food chain for indication of persistence or build-up of those same materials. EIPA volunteers will assist with this effort if requested by DNR.

4. Do not create public restrooms. While there would be obvious benefits for all, the primary result would be to encourage more tourists who want to spend a day on the beach and treat Botany Bay Plantation like a park instead of a wildlife preserve.
5. Increase law enforcement presence and visibility.

CONCLUSION. EIPA respectfully offers these observations and recommendations with the hope of furthering the protection of the flora and fauna of Botany Bay Plantation and preserving and enhancing the highly successful DNR volunteer program. The EIPA Board and the EIPA Botany Bay volunteers will offer more details on any of these observations if it would be helpful, and we repeat our offer of assistance in implementation of any of these recommendations if requested by DNR. We commend the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources for the outstanding accomplishments at Botany Bay Heritage Preserve and Wildlife Management Area over the past five years. This document would have been much too long had we attempted to catalog all of the many accomplishments and successes instead of just focusing on few problems and issues that we feel are deserving of attention and solutions.