

DOES THE PUBLIC CARE ABOUT RESEARCH AND INVENTORY PROJECTS IN THE PARKS?

The First Fire Island National Seashore Science Conference

By MICHAEL BILECKI

OVER THE PAST 2½ YEARS, FIRE Island National Seashore in New York has hosted several public meetings about various park planning projects. The meetings facilitated good discussion on the issues and also prompted many unanticipated, but welcome, questions about research projects going on in the park. To satisfy this interest in park research, the staff of the seashore decided to hold a public meeting to introduce a few of the research projects just beginning at the park. Despite making announcements in the press, no one attended the meeting—it was a complete flop! This left us wondering if we had gauged correctly the level of interest in science and its application in the park. Perhaps we erred in scheduling it on the island and during the summer when residents and renters are on vacation and relaxing. Also, logistical problems with boat travel for non-island residents may have played into the lack of attendance.

When I discussed the outcome of the meeting with Dr. Mary Foley, Chief Scientist, New England Support Office, she suggested that maybe it was time for Fire Island to hold a science conference. Designed to be more comprehensive than the failed effort, the science conference would introduce both new and ongoing research and inventory projects, from shoreline change to estuary monitoring, and their principal investigators. More summaries would be planned and a direct mailing would publicize the event. We still felt strongly that this would be a good opportunity to show how the data being collected are helping us make various decisions related to resource protection.

PLANNING THE CONFERENCE

With so many researchers and grad students conducting research in the seashore, we soon recognized that the conference could last at least 2 days. Because this was to be the first Fire Island National Seashore Science Conference, we decided to

start with a 1-day event and focus only on those projects receiving at least some funding from the National Park Service. We ended up with 12 projects from 10 presenters (table 1).

Cost to the park was a concern initially, but ended up being minimal. I spent quite a few hours on the phone discussing topics and the focus of the event with the researchers. Logistics was accomplished efficiently by the resource management staff without spending a great deal of time.

To publicize the event, we created a three-fold brochure-invitation that included a schedule of presentations and mailed it to more than 175 parties using our resource management mailing list. Recipients ranged from individuals with interest in the seashore, home owners, and community associations, to environmental groups, special use groups, universities, and local, state and federal agencies. In contrast with our earlier, failed effort, 80 people signed in at the conference and more than 100 people were counted in the audience.

IMPACT OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference received rave reviews. Not only did the newspapers print positive stories about it, but the park received a few letters and phone calls from organizations, agencies, and the public telling us how much they appreciated the opportunity to learn more about our work at the seashore.

Perhaps the biggest reason it was well attended was because we targeted invitations and held the conference in January. Also, the presentations were diverse enough to create interest among the many agencies, interest groups, and organizations.

The value of the conference can be measured in various ways. For the park, learning the status of projects and hearing the presentations will be very useful

to our inventory and monitoring planning efforts. The most beneficial and exciting aspect from my perspective was bringing the researchers together in one place so that the public, other agencies and resource managers, public officials, and park staff could meet and talk with them. The various groups who attended the conference may not have all agreed with the data or the focus of a research or inventory project, but they did appreciate that the seashore made an effort to share the information and its application in the decision making process.

For their part, the researchers also felt the conference was beneficial. After the conference, Dr. S.S. Mitra (Department of Natural Resources Science, University of Rhode Island) said, "The conference provided a valuable overview of the breadth of scientific research conducted on the

TABLE 1. PRESENTATIONS AT THE FIRE ISLAND SCIENCE CONFERENCE

Birds, Mammals, Ticks, and Lyme Disease at the Fire Island Lighthouse Tract:
Project Overview and Migratory Bird Phenology and Residence Times
Tick Populations and Transmission Dynamics of Lyme Disease Spirochetes
Tick Burdens and Population Status of Small Mammals and Deer
Contraceptive Management of Fire Island Deer
Density and Herd Composition of White-Tailed Deer Populations
Estuarine Resources: Focus on Nekton Communities
Beach Invertebrates
Freshwater Wetlands Delineation and Inventory of Wetland Herpetological Species
Ecology of Red Foxes on Fire Island: A Proposal
Fire Island Deer Exclosure Study 1985-1995
Predicted Effects of Potential Breaches on Tides and Salinity in Great South Bay
Time and Space Scales of Shoreline Change at Fire Island, 1870-1996

national seashore, and it fostered communication among the diverse communities committed to Fire Island's natural resources."

Putting together the conference was not easy, but overall, the organization and preparation were well worth the effort. We hope to make this a biennial event.

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