

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

FORUM

TO: Stephen M. Spratt, County Administrator

FROM: Holly Greening, ESF Science Co-Chair
Darden Rice, ESF Policy Co-Chair

CC: Elizabeth Warren, Assistant County Administrator
William Davis, Director, Dept. of Environmental Mgmt.

DATE: August 16, 2007

PINELLAS COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE FORUM RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DRAFT SHELL KEY MANAGEMENT PLAN August 9, 2007

The Pinellas County Environmental Science Forum met on August 9, 2007 to consider revisions to the draft Shell Key Management Plan as recommended by the Shell Key Management Plan Subcommittee. The following recommendations were approved unanimously (12-0) by the Environmental Science Forum voting members present at the meeting.

OVERVIEW COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environmental Science Forum believes very strongly that enforcement is critical to land management efforts and protection of public safety. The LIMA contracts should be renewed at the current level of 10 personnel- or higher- for environmental lands. The dedicated staff of the LIMA unit has specialized training, equipment and site-specific information, and they provide a level of service necessary for effective enforcement activities on the County's environmental lands.

The ESF also recommends that boundary definitions of the Shell Key Preserve be established within 12 months of Plan adoption.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON PLAN ELEMENTS

(Recommended additions to the text are underlined or noted in the recommendations)

Natural Resource Management

Pets and Other Domestic Animals

2000 Plan – Dogs were permitted on leash or under voice-command in the Public Use Areas. This was inconsistent with Ordinance 2-6. Plan amended in 2002 to restrict pets from April 15th to June 15th. Staff recorded dog intrusions in the restricted areas and during the restricted time.

2007 Plan – No pets in the Preserve in accordance with Ordinance 2-6.

Recommended as is

Problematic Nest Predators

2000 Plan – Remove raccoons from the island. Staff recorded intrusions and predation where possible. Place bird spikes on signs posts to inhibit predator perches.

2007 Plan – Continue to remove raccoons and implement innovative ideas for predator deterrence.

Recommended as is

Control of Invasive Exotic Species

2000 Plan – Remove all exotic vegetation from the Preserve. The Australian-pines in the south were to gradually be removed over 10 years to provide shade for campers. Native vegetation was to be replanted to provide shade in the south camping area.

2007 Plan – Continue to remove exotics from the island as needed. The Australian-pines will be removed from the island by 2012. Continue to replant with native species (sabal palm and seagrasses) to provide shade in the camping area.

Recommendations:

Change 2012 to 2010.

Add as last sentences (page 48): “This program may continue to receive matching grant funds. Recommended replacements could include, but not be limited to, strangler fig, gumbo limbo and South Florida slash pine.”

Research

2000 Plan – Research conducted at the Preserve by ELD staff includes efforts to document changes to the island’s habitats; monitor reproductive success of nesting shorebirds; monitor utilization by migrating and wintering birds; document intrusions into nesting areas by humans, dogs, and predators; monitor the distribution and abundance of seagrasses; inventory fish communities in diverse habitats; and monitor nesting attempts by sea turtles. Authorized outside research project include wintering red knots and piping plovers, breeding populations of snowy plovers and piping Wilson’s plovers, disturbance to colonial shorebirds, and sources of bird mortality.

2007 Plan – Continue research and monitoring efforts. Continue to encourage outside research projects.

Recommendations:

Change category name to: Research/applied land management science.

Add as 1st sentence (page 48): “Extensive research and applied land management science provides a sound basis for decisions of the environmental science forum and the BOCC. Staff outreach to form partnerships and utilize volunteers from other agencies, institutions and universities also provides a sound and robust understanding of Shell Key Preserve, particularly the natural and anthropogenic impacts it faces.”

Remove the sentence “in addition, partnerships have been established with researchers from other agencies and institutions.”

Law Enforcement

2000 Plan – Since 2001 the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office (PCSO) Environmental Lands Unit (ELU) has provided enforcement for the Preserve. The number of visitors in the northeast part of the island has increased over the last several years. This is reflected in the number of citations and arrests that ELU has issued. Due to an increase in visitors the ELU has increased summer weekend patrols.

2007 Plan – Contract agreements with the PCSO will continue as the primary enforcement. New or improved means of law enforcement will be pursued. Due to budget cuts the number of ELU officers will drop from 10 to 2 deputies.

Recommendation:

The LIMA contracts should be renewed at the current level of 10 personnel- or higher- for environmental lands. The dedicated staff of the LIMA unit has specialized training, equipment and site-specific information, and they provide a level of service necessary for effective enforcement activities on the County's environmental lands.

Signage

2000 Plan – Over 170 PVC posts have been installed on the island to support regulatory signage and to delineate the BPA against trespass. Rules posted on the regulatory signs are required to provide enforcement on the island and throughout the Preserve.

2007 Plan – Update and improve existing regulatory signs to incorporate education and interpretation and a clear understanding of the Preserve rules and conservation goals,

Recommendation:

Add to 1st sentence, (page 50): “in accordance with the approved plan.”

Habitat Mapping and Protection

2000 Plan – ELD staff members mapped the various habitat of the entire island using a GPS with sub-meter accuracy. Ephemeral islands have been mapped when practical. The resultant maps provided data that facilitated the adjustment of the BPA prior to the nesting season.

2007 Plan – Habitat mapping will be carried out periodically, using aerial photo interpretation of images provided by SWFWMD. Staff will ground truth maps through fieldwork. The resultant maps provided data that facilitated the adjustment of the BPA prior to the nesting season. Ephemeral islands will be mapped using GPS. When practical the islands will be posted to protect the resource and wildlife. Monitor the foredunes and manage accordingly.

Recommended as is

Education

2000 Plan – ELD staff and volunteers provided educational opportunities through interpretative programs, signs, brochures and casual conversations with visitors in the Preserve.

2007 Plan – ELD staff members will coordinate a combined education effort about the Preserve by enlisting support from its volunteer network and from such groups as the St. Petersburg Audubon Society, National Audubon Society, Tampa Bay Watch, and local colleges and universities. Staff will update the existing regulatory signs and provide others that include interpretive information about the Preserve's ecology and stewardship. Staff will coordinate with commercial shuttle transport vessels to provide captains and crew with education materials for distribution to passengers.

Recommended as is

Land Acquisition

2000 Plan – Most of the lands within the Preserve are held in public ownership.

2007 Plan – The County will continue to evaluate parcels currently under private ownership for potential purchase.

Recommended as is

Public Use

Alcohol Use

2000 Plan – The possession and or consumption of alcoholic beverages is prohibited on the island of Shell Key. The use of alcohol in the remainder of the Preserve, however, is subject to existing laws that govern alcohol consumption and safe boat-handling. This is inconsistent with Ordinance 2-6.

2007 Plan – In accordance with Ordinance 2-6, the possession and or consumption of alcoholic beverages will not be allowed in the Preserve (including the islands and waterways),

Recommended as is, with the Preserve boundary defined within 12 months of adoption of the Plan.

Overnight Activities on Shell Key

2000 Plan – Camping was permitted in the “Public Use Areas” of the island. Campfires and all other open flames are allowed in these “Public Use Areas”.

2007 Plan – The overall camping experience at the Preserve will be improved in accordance with acceptable guidelines for sustainability and for public health and safety, including a requirement for campers to remove all refuse, waste, and trash. Camping and campfires will be restricted to the southern “Public Use Area” of the island in designated locations, an approach that will limit overall human disturbance, promote protection of native wildlife, facilitate efforts to ensure compliance, and encourage public safety. Further, beginning May 2008, all overnight uses will require a “license to use” agreement or permit issued by the County. Fees may apply.

Recommendations:

Add as the 3rd sentence (page 61): “Campers will be expected to bring, use, and remove portable toilets.”

Add as last sentence, if consistent with the State Lease (PAGE 62): “A fee will be assessed for large groups. This fee program will be managed by Fort Desoto Park department camping staff”.

Public Use Areas

2000 Plan – The “Public Use Areas” were identified in Figure 1.

2007 Plan – The areas for public use within the Preserve have changed very little. The public-use designation for the east side of the island’s mid-section will be eliminated so that this area will be included in the BPA. Any other official changes in delineated public-use areas will be in response to storms, wildfires, and other significant ecological events.

Recommended as is

Liveaboard Vessels

2000 Plan - Occasionally, liveaboard vessels have moored within the Preserve for an extended period of time. At these times, the ELU has enforced Ordinance 2-6 that prohibits vessels moored within the Preserve for more than 14 days in any 30-day period.

2007 Plan - ELD will continue to prohibit liveaboard vessels moored in the Preserve for more than 14 days in any 30-day period.

Recommendation:

Add as last sentence (page 63): “All vessels are prohibited from discharge within preserve boundaries.”

Noise Standards

2000 Plan - In order to provide an enjoyable experience for all user groups, especially to protect nesting shorebirds and nearby residential properties from excessive noise, all activities within the Preserve comply with the Pinellas County Code, Article XII pertaining to noise.

2007 Plan - The ELU will continue to enforce the Pinellas County Code, Article XII.

Recommended as is

Commercial Activities

2000 Plan – Commercial activities within the Preserve will not be allowed unless permitted.

2007 Plan - Commercial activities within Shell Key Preserve will not allowed unless permitted as a concession or other appropriate license from the County that specifies uses consistent with the 2007 Plan. A schedule for permits and fees will be developed by the County for vendors and concessions so that they may comply with Pinellas County Ordinance 2-6. Vendors will need to apply for a license through the County.

Recommendations:

Change 2nd sentence (page 64) to: “A schedule for permits, fees, and rules will be developed by the county for vendors and concessions”

Add as last sentence: “Commercial operators and vendors with a permit or license to operate in the Preserve shall participate in education activities to further the protection of the resources of Shell Key.”

Large Groups

2000 Plan – Groups of 50 or more people visiting the island require a permit from ELD.

2007 Plan - ELD will continue to utilize a permitting process for groups of 50 or more people visiting the island. Each permit will be reviewed and permission granted on a case-by-case basis and dependent upon consistency with the management plan. Permits will not be issued during known nesting periods to protect nearby shorebirds.

Recommendation:

Add as last sentence, if consistent with the State lease (page 65): “A fee will be assessed for large groups. This fee program will be managed by Fort Desoto Park department camping staff.”

Optimum Carrying Capacity

2000 Plan – Carrying capacity is an estimate of the number of users a resource or facility can accommodate while also providing a high quality experience for visitors and preserving the natural values of the site. In the case of Shell Key, controlling the numbers of visitors to the island is not practical since there are several miles of shoreline in an area with a huge boating population. At this time, it is not intended to restrict access to the island other than to the core bird protection areas as outlined in this plan, but rather to monitor the results of the Resource Management and Public Use Programs previously described to determine if they are sufficiently protecting natural resources. The management plan will be revisited and amended if it is found that conservation methods are not effective or if specific public activities are found to be inconsistent with natural resource management.

2007 Plan - Carrying capacity is an estimate of the number of users who can be accommodated by a resource or facility while also providing a high quality experience for visitors and protecting the natural values of the site. In the case of the Preserve, strictly controlling the numbers of visitors to the island is impossible since it has multiple points of access along several miles of shoreline in an area with a large boating population. At this time, the ELD does not plan to restrict human access to the island other than from the BPA as outlined in this Plan. Rather it intends to monitor the results of the “Natural Resource Management” and “Public Use” elements

as previously described to determine if they are sufficient to protect the Preserve's natural resources. The Plan will be revisited and amended if it is found that conservation methods are not effective or if specific public activities are found to be inconsistent with natural resource management.

Recommended as is

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES:

Water quality testing

The county will undertake regular water quality testing to determine human fecal indicator organism levels.

Wake zones

Modify current minimum wake area in the northwest portion of the preserve to idle speed.