

Line in the Sand

Wealthy Carnegie families—along with their back-pocket politicians—square off against grassroots outdoor groups fighting to save the South's wildest island

BY WILL HARLAN

Even before John F. Kennedy Jr. married Carolyn Bessette there in 1996, Cumberland Island has attracted its share of lovers. Beach-lovers flock to the island's 18 miles of pristine seashore and towering sand dunes along the south Georgia coast. Backpackers trek through the island's mystical maritime forests, where 300-year-old live oaks are draped in beards of Spanish moss. By day, bald eagles and osprey soar across wind-swept saltwater marshes. At night, loggerhead sea turtles crawl out of the ocean, dragging their ancient bodies across the beach to nest in the dunes.

It's no surprise, then, that the island originally named *tacatacurru*—"place of fire"—has ignited human passions since the native Timucuan tribes were decimated by Spanish missionaries half a millennium ago.

Today, the fight over Cumberland Island is less bloody but no less bitter, pitting wealthy island residents—along with the politicians they've purchased—against outdoor advocates and the general public. Recently, island residents lobbied local Representative Jack Kingston (R-Ga.) to sneak a back-door amendment through Congress that dismantled much of Cumberland Island's 20,000-acre Wilderness. The rider was attached to a House Appropriations Bill, and it quietly removed whole sections of federally designated Wilderness from Cumberland Island without any public input.

Now, conservation and recreation groups are hoping to re-introduce legislation to restore the Wilderness on Cumberland Island. They're also hoping to put the brakes on a transportation plan mandated by the Kingston rider, which would require the National Park Service on Cumberland Island to conduct at least five vehicle tours through the former Wilderness and along the untrammeled seashore where birds and endangered sea turtles nest.

THE SOUTH'S WILDEST ISLAND

Cumberland Island, along the south Georgia coast, is the largest island Wilderness on the East Coast. It's a National Seashore (part of the national park system), with most of its northern end designated as Wilderness. The island is also a United Nations International Biosphere Reserve because it provides critical habitat for rare and endangered wildlife—including loggerhead sea turtles and least terns.

In addition to its global significance, Cumberland Island has great personal significance to its 50,000 annual visitors. Hikers and backpackers seek the island's



PHOTOS BY SASHA GREENSPAN

Wilderness solitude and quietude. Children climb in the arms of old-growth live oaks, and campers soak in the starlight on the dark, primitive beach.

“It’s one of the best Wilderness experiences anywhere in the country,” says long-time Cumberland Island hiker Gene Nicholson, a physician from Atlanta. “Where else can you hike through an old-growth forest, see alligators sliding through pristine lakes, and hike along a wild beach all in one afternoon?”

Cumberland Island National Seashore was formed in 1972 when the National Park Service bought lands from wealthy families on the island, including Carnegie and Candler heirs. Not only were these families paid considerable amounts for their lands, but they were also given retained rights to continue living and driving on parts of the island for up to 100 years.

But the National Park Service quickly proved to be an unreliable manager of this unique barrier island—largely because of the Park Service’s vulnerability to political interests and big money. In the early 1980s, the National Park Service was considering allowing more development on the island—including building a bridge from the mainland. Conservationists, the general public, and even a few island residents realized that designating the island as federally protected Wilderness would be the only way to permanently safeguard from the vagaries of National Park Service management for future generations. So in 1982, the northern half of the island—roughly 20,000 acres—was designated a Wilderness Area by Congress. Cumberland Island was envisioned by Congress to evolve gradually into a textbook Wilderness as the 17 retained rights expired, feral animals were removed, and naturally occurring wildfires were again allowed.

But as time passed, island residents got greedy. They decided to exploit the island for profit. Heirs of the Carnegie family now operate a commercial hotel on the island called Greyfield Inn. Guests paying \$400 a night at the Greyfield Inn are driven all over the island Wilderness—in defiance of the Wilderness Act, National Park Service regulations, and even a ruling by the Eleventh Circuit Court in 2004 that vehicle tours in the Wilderness were illegal and must cease.

DRIVE-THRU WILDERNESS?

Instead of abiding by the court’s decision, the Carnegies at Greyfield decided to lobby for the removal of Wilderness designation entirely. In 2004, south Georgia Congressman Jack Kingston managed to slip a rider on the Omnibus Spending Bill just hours before it passed, taking the route of the Greyfield Inn motorized tours out of Wilderness designation, as well as the entire north end of the island and the beach. Never before in history has Wilderness been removed from the U.S. system.

“The reality of that backdoor deal is shocking. Twenty-five years of public input on island planning was obliterated, and the public knew nothing of it,” says environmental attorney Hal Wright. “Now we have a fragmented Wilderness Area split into tiny parts and a national seashore being used as a major vehicular commercial thoroughfare. And the public is still mostly unaware of the deed.”

Representative Kingston and the Carnegie heirs defend the Wilderness removal by claiming that the vehicle tours provide easier access to the island’s remote north end, where a 1930s African-American church is located. The church housed the famous JFK Jr. wedding—hosted by Greyfield Inn—in 1996. Before that, few visitors ever expressed interest in the historical significance of the north end, where a small number of African Americans worked for a former hotel on the island in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, Kingston has argued that it’s unfair to make people walk 15 miles to see this part of Cumberland.

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CUMBERLAND ISLAND: DISPELLING THE MYTHS



Over the years, the understaffed, cash-strapped National Park Service on Cumberland Island has frequently caved in to the financial and political power of the Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Candler families living there. Not only have laws and park management plans been written to favor private privilege over public interest, but even park brochures, displays, and ranger talks about Cumberland Island are often filled with misinformation and Carnegie propaganda. As a result, many visitors jokingly refer to Cumberland Island National Seashore as “Carnegie National Monument.” Here are five of the most common myths circulated about Cumberland Island—and the real truth behind them.

MYTH #1: The Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Candler families saved Cumberland Island.

FALSE. The National Park Service saved Cumberland Island. Wealthy families on Cumberland planned to strip-mine the island, and in the late 1960s they sold several large parcels to developers. The island was slated to become an upscale resort, and airport runways were already being cleared on Cumberland when the National Park Service stepped in with an offer to buy the island. Had the National Park Service not intervened, Cumberland Island would have likely become another private development island like St. Simons or Hilton Head. The Park Service paid these wealthy families substantial sums for their property, and they also granted them extensive retained rights to continue living on the island—a sweetheart deal for these already wealthy families who primarily own second homes on the island or rent them to guests.

MYTH #2: The wild horses of Cumberland Island lead a healthy, idyllic life.

FALSE. The romantic image of wild horses galloping freely along the beach is sadly inaccurate—most of the feral horses on Cumberland Island are suffering from disease and malnutrition. Because horses are not native to the island, they are not adapted to the harsh climate and topography, dearth of freshwater, and numerous parasites. Three out of ten foals do not survive their first year on Cumberland, and most adult horses are infected with parasites, worms, and are subject to a number of diseases such as encephalitis and West Nile disease. The horses also damage the island’s sensitive dune and marsh ecosystems, trample nests of endangered shore birds, and compete with native species for limited food and water resources.

MYTH #3: Plum Orchard Mansion has great historical significance.

FALSE. Plum Orchard was built for Thomas Carnegie’s brother’s fifth son, George. Not even the National Trust for Historic Preservation considers the mansion of the son of a brother of a famous person of great historical import. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has classified Plum Orchard as a class-B structure of limited regional historical significance. Nonetheless, millions of taxpayer dollars have been poured into renovating and restoring Plum Orchard—a mansion adjacent to the Wilderness area. It’s also a major stopping point on the vehicle tours and an important justification for the Kingston rider. The road leading to Plum Orchard was specifically removed from the Wilderness to accommodate the tours and allow for increased vehicle traffic to the mansion.

MYTH #4: Cumberland Island is not a true Wilderness.

FALSE. Cumberland Island—even after the Kingston rider—remains a legal, legitimate, federally protected Wilderness. The Kingston rider has removed thousands of acres from Wilderness designation, including two long road corridors to accommodate vehicle tours, but the remaining 8,000 acres of fragmented Wilderness are still legally required to be managed according to the Wilderness Act. The National Park Service has not enforced Wilderness laws on Cumberland, largely because of resistance by island residents. These Wilderness laws include removing feral and invasive species, allowing natural ecosystems to function with minimal human manipulation, minimizing the use of vehicles, and prohibiting commercial activity.

MYTH #5: All of the Carnegie heirs on Cumberland graciously sold their land to the National Park Service.

FALSE. The Carnegies who own Greyfield Inn never sold their land or supported the formation of Cumberland Island National Seashore. They are also opponents of the Wilderness on Cumberland Island. The Greyfield Carnegies still own their land, and they recently acquired additional acreage through a legally questionable land swap with the National Park Service. Unlike other island residents, the Carnegies at Greyfield will continue to live and operate commercial operations on the island long after retained rights expire.

"African Americans, as well as many elderly and non-hikers, would benefit from visiting the north end of Cumberland Island by vehicle," explains Kingston.

Not only does the Kingston rider enable the Greyfield vehicle tours to continue operating, but it also mandates the National Park Service to provide five vehicle tours a day through the Wilderness as well. Both the Greyfield and Park Service tours also include driving along the 18-mile beach, where endangered loggerhead sea turtles and shore birds nest.

"Vehicle tours are literally kicking sand in the face of thousands of hikers and visitors to the island," says Nicholson. "Commercial tours—whether by the Park Service or Greyfield Inn—don't belong on a wild island like Cumberland. The tours are destroying the beauty they're driving to see."

In addition to the beach driving now mandated by the Kingston law, hundreds of beach driving permits recently issued by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have made Cumberland's pristine beach a private thoroughfare for wealthy residents and their guests. To date, over 350 permits have been issued on Cumberland Island—primarily to friends and relatives of wealthy island families. More people are authorized to drive on the wild beach of Cumberland Island National Seashore than all other beaches in Georgia combined, including the highly developed beaches of Tybee, Jekyll, and St. Simon's.

"Beach driving is prohibited on even the most populated beaches of Georgia—there's not a single beach driving permit for developed islands like Tybee and St. Simon's. Yet Georgia's only National Seashore has hundreds of beach drivers," notes Wright.

Island residents—including GoGo Ferguson, a Carnegie heir, outspoken Wilderness critic and part-owner of the Greyfield Inn—believe their families are entitled to use the island as they have for years.

"The minimal use of vehicles on the beach has been a traditional use enjoyed by us for almost 100 years, a small price to pay for the good stewardship we have provided," Ferguson wrote recently in a letter to Representative Kingston.

SUPER DUPER

Kingston isn't the only public official with close ties to island residents. Six months ago, Cumberland Island Park Superintendent Jerre Brumbelow quietly authorized the construction of a 3,000-square-foot building on a retained rights property belonging to Ben Jenkins, even though Jenkins' retained rights to live on the island expire just three years from now. Brumbelow even provided after-hours shipments of construction materials to the island resident's property using a Park Service barge. An unmarked boat was also seen delivering supplies.

Inmate labor from the Camden County jail is being used to help build the structure, which is intended to serve as a rehabilitation center for patients with spinal cord injuries. The construction project is affiliated with The Shepherd Center Spinal Clinic in Atlanta as an apparent attempt to legitimize the project. Camden County Sheriff Bill Smith's son is a paraplegic.

However, no one in the National Park Service Headquarters or Regional Office was notified of the building plans. Nor did the project receive a building permit from the county. Investigators are also having trouble tracking down a permit for the expansion of

the Park Service dock adjacent to the island resident's property where materials for the construction have been delivered. The after-hours deliveries, missing permits, and use of inmate labor has raised suspicions that Park Superintendent Brumbelow may have colluded with the sheriff and Jenkins in secretly building the structure.

Brumbelow is now on paid voluntary leave while the National Park Service investigates the construction project. Camden County Sheriff Bill Smith has declined comment. In a story published in the *Georgia Times-Union*, Jenkins built the structure because he believed it could help him extend his retained rights on the island past 2010. In July, he testified under oath that he has been paying cash to the sheriff's department for the inmate labor.

RESTORING WILD CUMBERLAND

With the sea change in Congress, a coalition of outdoor and environmental groups are hoping to overturn the Kingston legislation. With the help of key legislators, the coalition is drafting a bill that would undo the Kingston rider and restore the original Wilderness on Cumberland Island.

Meanwhile, they're hoping for more investigations into questionable dealings between the National Park Service and island residents. Long-time Sierra Club activist Roger Buerki says that the National Seashore and Wilderness have been mismanaged by the Park Service for years—largely because of the influence of wealthy island residents.

"Cumberland Island is not a private playground for the rich and famous. There are plenty of other islands along the East Coast for that. It is a National Seashore and a fragmented but full-blooded federal Wilderness—still the largest island Wilderness in the East. It needs to be managed that way." •

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