



Large signs on beach at South Point

CUMBERLAND ISLAND MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 31, Number 1

April 2020

Editors: C. Ruckdeschel and A. Mahoney



All docks have "Park Closed" signs

VIRUS

Covid-19

The first confirmed case of this coronavirus in the U.S. occurred on 20 January 2020, and in Georgia on 1 February 2020. By 1 April, 4748 cases had been reported in Georgia. The first official U.S. death occurred on 29 February 2020 and by 17 April, that number had climbed to 37,659, with 673 deaths in Georgia.

Cumberland Island National Seashore closed on 18 March 2020, but allowed visitors access by their own means to enjoy the beach and trails. No Park personnel, other than law enforcement and a maintenance worker, were on the island. The intensity and seriousness of the issue continued to escalate, and on 4 April the Park Service closed all access to the park by the public, with large signs at dock landings and on beaches. Law enforcement continued to patrol, aided by a couple of other staff members, but the fire crew continued business as usual – mowing and chewing up firebrakes. Other than the distracting clamor of their heavy equipment and resulting visual mess, the island was peaceful and extremely pleasant.

Most caretakers remained and several island landowners took advantage of the natural isolation to escape the cities.

Cow-nosed Rays

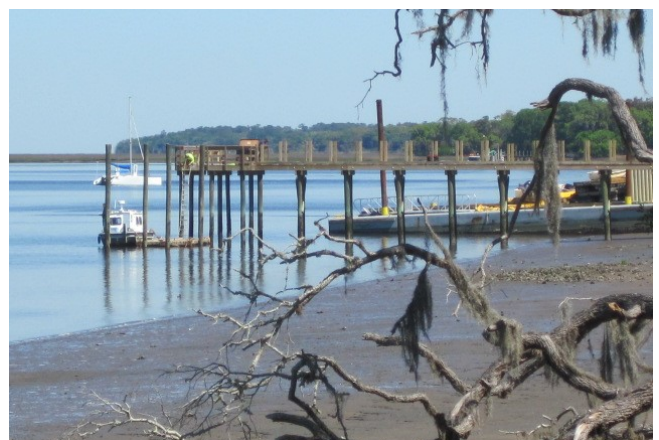
I returned to the island on 23 February 2020 and on the first beach survey found five fresh *Rhinoptera*, Cow-nosed Rays. From that survey through 20 March, 32 more animals stranded, some had shark



COW-NOSED RAY DOB

wounds, some were eaten by vultures. Size of the animals ranged from small (~20cm TW) to large (almost 1m TW), with most being medium sized (~90cm TW). This species travels in schools and migrates through Georgia waters heading north in the spring.

ISLAND DEVELOPMENT continued ...

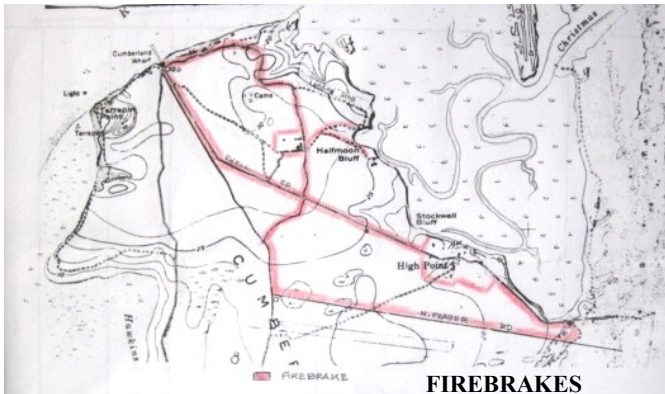


NEW RAILING BEING INSTALLED ON FIXED DOCK
PRIVATE PROPERTY NORTH OF SEA CAMP

Continued ... Work continued on the dock for the private property to be developed just north of Sea Camp. Rough weather during 2019 damaged the ramp to the floating dock. A railing was erected on the fixed dock in April 2020. A load of other building materials was reportedly brought over with material for the dock, but that has not been confirmed.

FIREBRAKES

The miles of firebrakes on the north end will be mowed and cleared annually. All were re-cleared 13



-17 April 2020 using the Park-owned Bobcat “mulcher.” The Park will make no attempt to maintain Wilderness character on the adjacent lands.



BOBCAT MOWING ALONG CLUBB RD



MOWED SCRUB

BECAUSE THEY CAN

Conservationists worked hard to get the northern portion of Cumberland Island Congressionally designated Wilderness in 1982. Years of dealing with the National Park Service (NPS) assured them that was the safest way to guarantee the public complete protection of the natural aspects of the island. Despite language in the enabling legislation directing such protection, “...except for certain portions... the Seashore shall be permanently preserved in its primitive state...” they knew how easily the managing agency could circumvent the intent and letter of the law.

All might have gone well if local special interests had not found a corrupt congressman, Jack Kingston, to repeatedly introduce legislation until it finally passed, to remove the Main Road, north end, and beach from Wilderness designation. Attached to an Omnibus Budget Bill passed in 2004, the rider slipped by. It gave the special interests the right to conduct commercial tours through the Wilderness and gave the NPS free reign to ignore ecosystem needs and do as they please with fire. Their pleasure at the moment is to reduce all areas to manageable fuel loads, regardless of the type of ecosystem or negative impacts on its health.

There are two main problems with controlled burns on the north end: the two predominant ecosystems there require different fire regimes if they are to maintain their character. The fire-adapted scrub needs a significant fuel build-up over many years to allow hot burns down to mineral soil. Invading



FIRE ADAPTED SCRUB COMMUNITY



RESULT OF A HOT FIRE IN SCRUB

plants that are not fire-adapted are thus eliminated and the scrub ecosystem remains viable. If fire frequency is deliberately increased, there will be a concomitant reduction in intensity, and over time the composition of the community/ecosystem itself will change .

A recovering maritime forest is the second ecosystem now threatened by the NPS through controlled burns. Most of the north end, that is not in scrub or wetlands, was historically in agriculture and is now



RECOVERING MARITIME FOREST ON NORTH END

in successional stages progressing toward reestablishing a maritime forest. The number of pines per acre depends upon the time since the area was last cultivated or disturbed. Introducing fire into these various stages of recovering forest benefits pines, while killing slower growing oaks and understory plants, such as red bay, species which characterize the maritime forest. The Ecological Survey of the

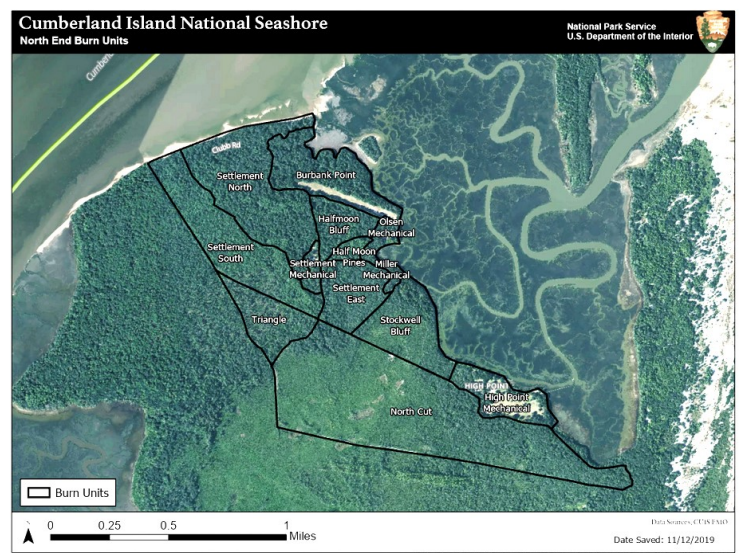
Island, done for the NPS in 1975, clearly explains this natural succession.



GROUP OF PINES INDICATES A RECOVERING OLD FIELD

NPS Action

In early December, the same heavy equipment used on the sides of the Main Road (CIM Newsletter 2019, V30(3):2) was used to cut another firebreak on the north end, this one from the river to the Settlement. The reason for all these miles of destructive firebreaks? All the area on the north end which was removed from Wilderness for special interests, except the Cedar Dock parcel, has been divided by the park into units separated by firebreaks. Four areas are designated to be mechanically cleared (around structures) and nine are designated burn units. There, crews have conducted controlled burns. Beginning in



BURN UNITS ON NORTH END OF ISLAND

January 2020, the entire area, all burn units, were manipulated with fire.

The first units burned in January were the “Settlement North, Triangle, and Olsen Pines.” The majority of the area burned poorly, despite the downed snags and



SNAG FELLED IN BURN AREA

other cut up downed trees, including cedar, and wood piled at the bases of trees. Even the pine litter was not totally consumed. Under pines it killed small young oaks and other woody understory species, but



stopped cold when it came to larger hardwoods. I (CR) was not on the island for this burn.



DEAD WOOD PILED AT BASE OF TREES

All other designated units were burned on 18 March 2020, with re-ignition continuing until the end of the month. Complementing the usual drip torch method of ignition were a flamethrower and a helicopter



FLAME-THROWER IN ACTION



HELICOPTER WITH IGNITION BALLS



IGNITION BALLS DROPPED BY HELICOPTER

dumping plastic balls with chemicals that ignite on the ground ... or are supposed to. There are fewer pines in the areas burned in March, so again the burn was very poor. At Burbank Point, they ignited the wrack line of dead spartina, hoping it would carry up into the forest.



WRACK LINE IGNITION AT BURBANK POINT



FIRE REFUSED TO BURN BENEATH ANY HARDWOODS



GROUND IGNITION CONTINUED THROUGH 22 MARCH



THE FIRE WENT OUT WHEN IT ENCOUNTERED OAKS



FIRE REFUSED TO BURN UNDER HACKBERRY TREE

Unfortunately, the Fire Management Plan is not totally updated, so we cannot see the justification for burning all the areas, the specific NEPA compliance for each, nor the minimum tool analysis. Nor will the public have any review or input to the annual updates.

Why is the NPS so intent on burning the entire island? The best we can figure, it can be traced to a national policy or directive, heavily focused on western lands and forests, and is certainly not appropriate for East Coast barrier islands. But the current interpreters apparently are unaware of this and simply follow the written rule. In the Fire Plan now being revised, there is a purported *need* for prescribed burning, targeted herbicide use for fuel management and restoration, the use of manual and mechanical tools for vegetation management, and wildfire managed for resource objective. The ostensible goal is to better protect structures and to “restore fire to its natural role,” but there lacks *any explanation* of how that is to occur through use of the listed destructive factors, especially in a recovering maritime forest. Likewise, the Park Service’s regulations authorize the use of wildland fire (including controlled burns) in Wilderness to “reach

desired future resource conditions,” yet never provide a description of what those conditions are. Smoke and mirrors.

Managing for “desired conditions” is the antithesis of Wilderness. Protecting Wilderness on adjacent lands to help maintain its character is the responsibility of the NPS. But the Park has no Wilderness Management Plan to guide it! The NPS Management Policies 2006, clearly state that “...the superintendent ... will develop and maintain a Wilderness Management Plan or equivalent....” The northern part of Cumberland Island was designated a federal Wilderness in September 1982. That is 38 YEARS

AGO! The administration of this park has shirked their responsibility to the public and protection of the resource for decades, and continues to do so. Manipulation of the ecosystems, such as controlled burning, is simply further abuse disguised as salvation in the name of fire. How can the financial and ecological costs, and loss of public trust be measured?? The island will best recover from past abuses on its own over time.

How we rectify this administrative mockery of Wilderness and destruction of Cumberland Island’s increasingly rare natural habitats is another question.

PLASTIC WASHED UP ON BEACH THIS YEAR.

NOT VERY COMFORTING.



SHAME ON WALMART !!!



Clam beds have been closed to the public due to horse fecal material.



Ocean water quality is not checked at swimming beach.

CUMBERLAND ISLAND MUSEUM
P.O. Box 7080
St. Marys, GA 31558