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THE SUN NEWS



Future of North Inlet public access to be settled in court



PHOTOS BY GETTYS BRANNON For The Sun News

North Inlet is one of the few remaining unspoiled treasures along the Southeast coast.

BY GREGG HOLSHOUSER
For The Sun News

Goeff Groat and Terry Guyton pulled away from the DeBordieu Colony boat landing in Groat's 16-foot Alumacraft jon boat and eased down DeBordieu Creek on a calm, mostly sunny morning in late July.

The pair of local residents were taking a scenic tour of North Inlet, and soon the unspoiled acreage of this Georgetown County gem was on display, with a blue sky spotted with puffs of white clouds serving as a backdrop.

Both men have questions about their future access to areas of North Inlet after the Belle W. Baruch Foundation filed a lawsuit versus the state of South Carolina in November 2019 claiming ownership of 8,000 acres of marshland and beaches in the area between the mean high water mark and



The remote location and the longtime ownership by Hobcaw Barony and the Belle W. Baruch Foundation have kept development at bay and boat traffic at a minimum in North Inlet.

mean low water mark.

The small inlet is a unique saltwater estuary, featuring no direct freshwater influx and very little development, unlike its sprawling neighbor just to the south, Winyah Bay, which is

considered the third-largest estuary on the East Coast and is the watershed for five rivers.

"You've got to get out and see it," said Groat of North Inlet. "Until you go out there and see it you just don't know how beau-

tiful and special a place it is."

Groat took a right turn into Town Creek, then another right into Old Man Creek. Winding through the creeks bordered by spartina grass and areas of oyster bars, Groat soon eased by a Hobcaw Barony marine research facility.

From there Groat pulled into shallow Gold Spoon Bay and pointed out an area where he, and others, enjoy wade-fishing for tailing redfish on a flood tide.

Guyton, a shellfishing enthusiast, noted oyster beds and flats where he has harvested oysters and clams over the years.

All the sights and sounds that make a saltwater estuary unique were on display back in the creeks - the jumping mullet, the flipping menhaden, birds such as pelicans, snowy egrets, blue heron and osprey, oysters spitting at the water's edge, fiddler crabs scurrying along the pluff

SEE INLET, 3A

INLET

mud flats.

Next, Groat headed toward the entrance to North Inlet from the Atlantic Ocean, a striking ocean pass with a point, or peninsula, left in its natural state with shifting sand bars, no jetties, just beaches and sand dunes.

From there, Groat eased back to the landing to complete the one-hour tour.

A PRISTINE PLACE

North Inlet is one of the few remaining unspoiled treasures along the Southeast coast, and is clearly special to Groat, Guyton and numerous other residents from Georgetown and Horry counties and across South Carolina.

The remote location – nestled between private DeBordieu Colony and Winyah Bay – and the longtime ownership by Hobcaw Barony and the Belle W. Baruch Foundation, have kept development at bay and boat traffic at a minimum in the inlet.

Pristine is a word too often used to describe natural areas, but it certainly fits with North Inlet.

The inlet has been left largely unchanged over

the centuries dating back to when Native American tribes such as the Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Winyah and Sampit worked it to harvest then-bountiful fish, shrimp, crabs and shellfish from its creeks.

For decades, even centuries, the public has ventured to the inlet from Winyah Bay through a pair of treacherous creeks filled with flats, sandbars and oyster reefs – Jones Creek and appropriately named No Man's Friend Creek. The most direct access is from DeBordieu Colony on the north side of the inlet.

The rich history of Hobcaw Barony and North Inlet dates back to colonial times. According to www.HobcawBarony.com, the property was surveyed and named Hobcaw Barony in 1711 and became one of 10 colonial baronies bestowed by King George I of England in 1718 as a King's Grant. John Lord Carteret, one of 10 Lords Proprietors, received Hobcaw Barony, but sold the undeveloped tract in 1730.

Nearly two centuries later, Bernard M. Baruch purchased the property in 1905 and used it as a hunting retreat. Baruch eventually sold the property to his daughter, Belle Baruch and upon her death in 1964, she had

created a foundation to manage the land as an outdoor lab for colleges and universities in the state.

Since the late 1960s, the University of South Carolina, Clemson University, Coastal Carolina University and Francis Marion University have used the property and the saltwater marshes and waterways of the inlet for research and educational purposes. Now, Hobcaw Barony hosts researchers from more than 50 colleges, universities and research organizations from the United States, Europe and China.

WHO OWNS IT?

The State of South Carolina responded to the Baruch Foundation's lawsuit, and wants a decree stating the land between the mean high and low water mark remain available for public use, and the case remains in circuit court. When the issue will be resolved is unclear.

The Baruch Foundation has stated it intends for the public to be able to continue to use North Inlet, even if the foundation wins the case vs. the state confirming Hobcaw Barony's ownership of the 8,000 acres of marshland and beaches.

"In addition to being one of our state's envi-

ronmental and cultural treasures, Hobcaw Barony is an important recreational asset for many communities," Benjamin Zeigler, chairman of the board of the Baruch Foundation, said, in part, in a letter to the editor to the Coastal Observer. "The foundation recognizes that tens of thousands of us responsibly use and enjoy North Inlet each year, and we are committed to continuing that use and enjoyment into the future, consistent always with our duty to protect and manage Hobcaw Barony for research, education and the greater good."

Reached by The Sun News via phone, George Chastain, Executive Director of Hobcaw Barony, declined to comment, citing the ongoing court case and referring to Zeigler's comments.

Groat has become intimately familiar with the inlet, enjoying its various recreational opportunities for the past 40 years. As a long-time Georgetown County resident, he appreciates the research work done by the Baruch Foundation, but would like a tangible assurance that public access will be guaranteed in the future.

"Regardless of the ownership we want them to be able to continue to do their research as they've

done in the past, it's their property," said Groat. "We have a lot of respect for the Baruch Foundation for what they do. They have been significantly important for the research they have done estuarine-wise."

"But we want to make sure the general public that has had access for generations continues to have that. The bottom line is we would like some type of definitive understanding as to what the intentions are, if there are going to be limitations that they're going to try to impose and where the general public stands in the long run with this."

State Sen. Stephen Goldfinch, R-Murrells Inlet, is concerned with the authority the foundation would have over North Inlet if its ownership of the 8,000 acres is confirmed in court.

"Under their theory of the case, they could prevent anybody from having access to North Inlet from any way, from Muddy Bay (within Winyah Bay), DeBordieu or the ocean," said Goldfinch. "They say they don't want to do that, they say they want people to be able to use the main channel. But they would have the authority to do that and to me that is very scary."

The case has caught the

attention of Coastal Conservation Association South Carolina, which is involved in the case and pushing to keep public access to the inlet unchanged.

"For years the public has used the claimed marshlands and beaches (of North Inlet) to fish, crab, shrimp, hunt, and engage in other outdoor activities," said Scott Whitaker, Executive Director of CCA SC. "The public enjoys use of the area in question from inside their boats and also outside of moored boats in activities such as walking on beaches, wading through marshlands, or hunting."

"Since CCA SC's objective is to conserve, promote, and enhance the present and future availability of coastal marine resources for the benefit and enjoyment of the general public, CCA SC is concerned about the claims made by the Foundation and how those claims may impact the public's use of these areas."