



Insider's Update: Cumberland Island
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Cumberland Island is one of the gems along Georgia's coast. With 19,000 acres of upland, nearly 10,000 acres of Congressionally-designated wilderness, 18 miles of undeveloped oceanfront, and thousands of years of history, the island is truly the posterchild for what Georgia's coast has to offer – vast landscapes, thriving wildlife, and strong communities.

Perhaps the most resounding lesson I have learned over the last 20 years of my career is that landscape conservation relies on partnerships between diverse stakeholders who both value and invest in the protection of a special place. This is true of Cumberland. The National Park Service owns and maintains most of the island, but the quality of the island also relies on the owners of inholdings within the National Park Boundary and on Camden County officials who make decisions that could affect the National Seashore.

By now you have probably read about the efforts to prevent a rezoning of Cumberland Island that would allow private property owners to construct single family homes. This arose in response to an island landowner group seeking permission to subdivide a 90-acre parcel. The property rights allotted by the county to most Cumberland property owners do not allow the construction of single family homes, but do allow a subdivision of lots and requires a special use permit to construct a hotel or a marina. The actions by both private property owners and the uproar from much of the environmental community have sparked a furious debate about the island's future.

I have been working on this issue since last fall would like to share a few observations.

Everyone participating in the discussion about Cumberland's future (county officials, Cumberland landowners, Camden County residents, and environmental groups) is willing to invest in his or her own way in the island's conservation. That's good news. We aren't debating "if" Cumberland should be conserved – rather, "how."

Most of Cumberland's private landowners have been on the island for generations. Many have ancestors who were responsible for the sale of property to the National Park Service. These generational landowners are as much a part of the island's history as the live oak trees and wild horses. So long as there is private property on the island, the public and the county need to view the owners as partners until they demonstrate themselves as a threat to the park. This means that they should be allowed land uses that will not conflict with the goals of the park. The day that

private property owners anywhere cannot reasonably use their land is the day they will decide to sell it. In this case, if landowners were to sell, there is a potential for a new landowner to use the existing zoning to seek a permit for a hotel or a marina.

Hence the need for something to change. In the face of change, one must evaluate the situation and do whatever possible to protect the resource in question. In this case, OHM is working with the island's landowners, officials at the National Park Service, and staff with Camden County to ensure that investments in the conservation of Cumberland made by private and public entities are matched with the passage of conservation-friendly land use policies and a sustained effort to add land to the park. This includes helping the county adopt policies that allow very low density and low-impact residential development on the island. It also includes our efforts to prevent poor land use decision-making on the mainland, like the proposed Spaceport, that would pose a fire threat to the island and disrupt the Congressionally-designated wilderness area.

One Hundred Miles takes the position that responsible rezoning should be part of the solution. We are working to advocate for private property rights that are consistent with the goals of the National Park Service and to ensure that, over time, the ongoing conservation of the island continues, either through the voluntary addition of land to the park or through private landowner conservation efforts.

Landscape scale conservation in Georgia is possible, but only if public and private property rights are recognized and respected. One Hundred Miles is committed to doing whatever is necessary to protect the Cumberland Island National Seashore.