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By Kelly Marshall

Ailing state park inlet ready for restoration by bringing ocean water farther inland

An old inlet at Huntington Beach State Park, now shrunk to the size of small, shallow pond, will get a new lease on life by this spring.

Sandpiper Inlet, once a thriving salt marsh, is almost dry and is overrun with phragmites, an invasive species of plant, said Mike Walker, a nature interpreter at the park.

Most wading birds have deserted the inlet, leaving only a few species that enjoy shallow, stagnant water.

Walker presented plans to restore the inlet, using the cleansing motion of ocean tides, during the annual Chowder Talk in Murrells Inlet on Tuesday night. He asked residents and members of Murrells Inlet 2007 to help move sea oats and other native plants out of harm's way so heavy equipment can shift some sand and open a path to the ocean by April.

It is the first time biologists have attempted to return an inlet to its natural state in South Carolina, although similar projects have taken place in Florida, Walker said.

"We're going to cut a channel through the sand dunes that were put in artificially after Hurricane Hugo," Walker said. "It's basically for wildlife diversity. The Waccamaw Audubon Society has been trying to do bird counts, and it is appallingly low."

Anna Hyatt Huntington and her husband, Archer Huntington, owned the property before it became the state park.

Anna Huntington chose the name Sandpiper Inlet because of the wide variety of birds attracted to the salt marsh.

Time and some mistakes made after Hurricane Hugo, however, caused Sandpiper Inlet to close in, Walker said.

Since Hugo struck in 1989, biologists are more informed on how sand scraping can affect inlets, Walker said. After Hugo, sand dunes were placed in a way that stopped the ocean from flowing in and out of the shallow swash.

"After Hurricane Hugo, only high tides could feed the inlet," Walker said. "By the 1990s, we had phragmites and a freshwater habitat."

Work to restore the inlet started last summer, Walker said.

Students from Coastal Carolina University have been monitoring water quality in the inlet and studying plants growing in the area, he said.

The Waccamaw Audubon Society has studied birds and noted the gradual decline of waterfowl coming to the marsh.

Friends of Huntington Beach, a newly formed nonprofit group, helped secure a grant for the project last year, Walker said. Coastal permits have been approved, and the project will be complete before turtle nesting in May.

The project is being partially funded by the Five Star Restoration Grant Program, sponsored by the National Fish and Wildlife Service Foundation, the Community-Based Restoration Program within NOAA Fisheries, the National Association of Counties, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Wildlife Habitat Council, Walker said.

"We think the restoration of the inlet is a worthy project," said Murrells Inlet resident Scott Jordan. "It's for the restoration of the habitat and the enjoyment of visitors."

Bob and Barb Maxwell have donated $12,000 to the Nature Conservancy for the construction of a wildlife-viewing platform at Sandpiper Pond, Walker said.

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