

# PENN CENTER SEA ISLANDS PRESERVATION PROJECT

*St. Helena Island, South Carolina*

## The Sea Islands

The Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia are located between the coastal estuaries of the mainland and the Atlantic Ocean. Before the Civil War most of these islands belonged to large plantation owners. In 1861, when Union forces established a headquarters in the coastal town of Beaufort, South Carolina, these properties were abandoned by the owners and in 1862, by an order of President Lincoln, set aside for the soon-to-be-freed slaves. For over a century these natives and their descendants maintained a way of life closely linked to the land, sea and community. Traditional livelihoods that revolved around agriculture, fishing and oystering depended upon basket weaving, fishing net knitting, boat building, and blacksmithing skills. Their language, Gullah, a blending of English and West African languages, is still spoken by some of the residents.

Recently, however, these communities have come under increasing pressure from resort development, which is polluting the environment and threatening the loss of their land, culture and way of life. Forty percent of South Carolina's coastal shellfish beds are now closed due to pollution from runoff from new roads, parking lots, golf courses, and lawns. Access to sources of sea grass used in traditional basketweaving has been cut off by private coastal development, forcing weavers to buy grass from Georgia and Florida. Property taxes and land values have escalated.

Although the Sea Islands belong to some of the wealthiest counties in the State, the native population has not shared in this prosperity. Unemployment rates are high and low-skill jobs in the nearby resorts provide low wages, no benefits, and little opportunity for advancement.

## New directions

The Sea Islands Preservation Project was started in 1992 to educate and train local community leaders and landowners in strategies that will preserve their land, and the

culture and environment of their communities while developing economic activities that are in harmony with the natural environment and traditional way of life. Its main focus is on St. Helena Island, just off Beaufort, although its lessons can be applied to many of the other islands equally threatened by extensive resort development. A combination of citizen education and leadership training, sustainable economic development, and land-use planning serves to achieve its preservation goals.

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The Sea Island Preservation Project is a program of the Penn Center, an historic institution which was founded in 1862 on St. Helena Island by northern abolitionists to teach self-sufficiency. Today, the Penn Center continues this educational focus and, in addition to the Sea Island Preservation Project, has a museum, a conference facility, educational enrichment programs for children, and an early childhood "at-risk" family initiative. Its programs are funded through foundation and government grants.

## The Penn School for Preservation

The Project's first priority was to set up a facility to train community leaders and public officials who could then begin the process of building a community vision and formulating a strategic plan for St. Helena Island. The Penn School for Preservation was started in 1993 in collaboration with the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League and the Neighborhood Legal Assistance Program.

Meeting on weekends for six months, the first class of 37 community leaders and public officials from St. Helena Island and

other coastal communities studied planning, zoning, growth management, community economic development, the environment, and other issues. Applying what they had learned, participants then broke up into committees to explore several economic development projects.

The 1995 class, composed of both graduates of the previous year and new participants, built on this process, drafting specific strategies and holding public forums to broaden the constituency of those committed to a sustainable future for St. Helena Island. Their goal was to create a master plan that would include a economic feasibility study for the development of the Corner Community, the "traditional commercial heart of St. Helena Island"; a set of regulations to preserve the character of this area and revitalize its economy; and land-use goals for the whole island. Between sessions, community leaders had the opportunity to attend numerous regional and national conferences on community development issues.

## Home-Grown planning proposal

The studies done by participants in the Penn School for Preservation formed the basis for both a Master Plan for St. Helena and an application for a U.S. Department of Agriculture Enterprise Community grant, submitted in 1994. Although this grant was not funded, the planning itself initiated numerous comprehensive strategies for human and economic development.

## ■ Establishment of an economic development strategy

One of the first steps was to set up the South Carolina Coastal Community Development Corporation (SCCCDC) that would be the lead organization for building and implementing economic development strategies, for providing local residents with needed business and leadership skills, and for applying for financing from a variety of sources.

Based on the Enterprise Community application, the SCCCDC applied for a U.S.D.A. set-aside of \$1 million in May 1995 to build a farmers market and food center in the Corner Community that will include a large commercial kitchen to process and then market locally grown produce and seafood. Modeled after the Spokane Business Incubator and Business Center Project in Washington State, it will also house a business center, giving local residents access to computers, fax machines, and on-line computer linkage to food industry databases.

### ■ **Product development and marketing strategies**

One of the main objectives of the Sea Islands Preservation Project is to develop economic enterprises based on traditional folk arts and crafts, the production of Sea Islands and African specialty foods and agricultural products, fish and seafood, and value-added forest products. Access to loans, technical assistance, and development of local farmers markets and national niche markets for specialty goods are all major components of this goal. To develop local crafts a Folk Art School is planned that will teach traditional arts and crafts, using locally available natural resources such as wood and sea grass. The school will also offer instruction in business techniques and include a marketing component for school graduates. It will be open to non-residents in the summer.

### ■ **Legal assistance for land ownership**

Because land has traditionally been handed down to subsequent generations without documentation, the lack of clear titles to property have made land vulnerable to purchase by developers and complicated the access to bank loans for home ownership. Workshops are held to help island residents hold on to family land, giving assistance with wills and deed transfers. Participants are taught how to avoid "partition sales," a strategy used by developers to gain control over a tract of property owned by numerous heirs whose shares are not carefully defined. Individual counseling sessions and assistance help land-owners clear title to their property to insure it will remain under their control. Plans are in place to seek funding for home construction.

### ■ **Land Use Planning**

With the help of graduates of the Penn School, the Project researched and analyzed many issues relating to land-use planning and zoning in preparation for the zoning revision required by the state every five years. It has also explored other options to zoning revision such as purchase of "development rights" and conservation easements. It has sought partnerships with national non-profits to help research and fund these efforts. Other studies on property tax and agricultural-use tax issues are also part of the Sea Islands Preservation Project.

### ■ **Historic building preservation**

In order to preserve valuable assets and restore the Corner Community's traditional function as the commercial and cultural center of the community, extensive research

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**Scope:** Coastal islands of South Carolina

**Inception Date:** 1992

**Participants:** Local residents; public officials; local and national nonprofits

**Project type:** Economic development, cultural/historic preservation, leadership development/training

**Methods used:** Comprehensive planning, training and education, legal assistance

**Lessons learned:** Importance of training local leaders; time demands of fund raising on a small staff.

has been carried out into a variety of historic designation possibilities, purchasing options of some of the historic buildings, and funding opportunities to accomplish these objectives.

### ■ **Sustainable Forestry**

To prevent a 328-acre forest on St. Helena from being clear-cut, project staff hired a forester to timber the property in a sustainable manner, selectively cutting trees so that timber would still be available for the future. In the process, the community made a greater profit than had the forest been clear-cut.

### **Challenges**

In three years the Sea Islands Preservation Project has shown the community of St. Helena Island what is possible with commitment, expertise and innovative coalition-building. By providing the training and structure needed to create a vision and define objectives, the Project demonstrates that communities can develop successful strategies that have human, economic, and environmental dimensions while preserving traditional lifestyles and values. As with

many new undertakings, attention must now be paid to building an infrastructure that can implement these activities, strengthen the capacity to meet complex funding requirements, and keep the momentum going for years to come. The groundwork has been laid, however, for a community-based comprehensive approach to economic development that builds on the rich traditions of the past to ensure a sustainable future.

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## **UPDATE**

**December 1997**

With Penn Center acting as the lead agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated St. Helena Island a Champion Community and awarded a \$1 million grant to the newly established SCCDC to build and operate a food processing kitchen using local agricultural products, fish, and seafood. Additional federal funds from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) were awarded to Penn Center to landscape a one-acre park in the business center and to renovate the Cooperative Building across from the park. The CDC will also manage an arts and crafts shop. In the Community Corner area there are plans to buy two historic buildings. A business district designation is also envisioned for this area.

Much of Penn Center's present activity concerns land-use questions. The Center is building a consensus to limit development and is working with the county to designate St. Helena Island a conservation district for historic and cultural purposes. In particular they must convince large farmers that their land could actually become more valuable if not densely developed. Penn Center won the title-clearing lawsuit over the Woodlands Club property, saving the 328-acre native-owned property from a "partition sale." After clearing a complicated web of titles involving 47 individuals, the Center hopes to incorporate the Club with the present owners and develop a land-use plan that will include residential usage and a sustainable economic project. In all these issues the Penn Center faces two main obstacles: lack of funding for a staff with land-use expertise and the difficulty in educating the islanders on complex land-use planning and processes.

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