Understanding our accreted land

BY KRISTIN HACKLER

On April 4, the Sullivan's Islanders hosted Dr. Richard Porcher, a well known botanist, professor of biology and director of the herbarium at The Citadel in downtown Charleston, as their guest speaker for two exclusive walks around Sullivan's Island's accreted land areas.

Dr. Porcher began the walk at the Sand Dunes Club, where the group followed a trail to the beach and back through a hidden trail that started with maritime shrubs and graduated to the edge of the local maritime forest.

Although Dr. Porcher spent a good amount of time identifying different types of plant life throughout the coastal zones and describing their individual attributes, his main focus was to discuss the accreted land report which will soon be revealed by the Sullivan's Island Town Council. Still in its rough draft stages, the accreted land report lists four broad ranging alternatives for the accreted land area:

Alternative 1: Do nothing and let the accreted land evolve naturally. This option would involve negligible alternation to the accreted land area. Paths would be

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maintained by pedestrian use and would involve only minor pruning of overhanging branches. The existing conditions and habitats would change naturally in relation to the rate of vegetation growth and the upper story tree canopy would expand and become the dominant vista across the entire accreted land area.

Alternative 2: Continue pedestrian practices which include vegetation controls such as pruning to maintain the views (at the discretion of individual property owners subject to existing Town ordinance – appendix 2). This alternative would provide for pruned swaths flanked by higher strands of forest vegetation. As the tree canopies of unpruned areas expand, they will tend to narrow the ocean vistas across the pruned areas.

Alternative 3: implement more extensive management of vegetation to address the goals and objectives of the community. This option provides for a more "naturalized" landscape with three broad vegetation communities: grassland, shrub land and forest, all of which would be maintained with negligible alterations to the topography. Whereas alternative two would tend to create shore-perpendicular bands of pruned and unpruned vegetation depending on property owners' preference, alternative three would seek to create an interestingly diverse landscape with open grassland interspersed with shrub and forest hammocks. Some areas that are presently labeled as early successional forest would be cleared of trees and replanted with grasses, particularly along the access trails.

First group attending the Botanical Walk hosted by the Sullivan's Islanders.

Alternative 4: Modify the topography for purposes of reducing potential storm damages and implement the expanded management of vegetation to address the goals and objectives of the community. This final alternative would employ the same "naturalized" landscape of alternative three, but would modify the topography with at least one continuous dune ridge being built to run parallel to the shoreline in order to provide improved storm surge protection. Other topographic modifications are assumed to include limited excavation of existing swales for the purpose of creating open water ponds to add habitat for waterfowl, provide an attractive amenity to the community, reduce the mosquito population associated with existing wetland areas and improve the ocean vistas. Initial costs would include earth moving, tree removal and the replanting of altered areas, similar to the costs of alternative three, and would require ongoing maintenance, also similar to alternative three.

Dr. Porcher adamantly stated that he found the fourth alternative particularly ill-advised, mainly because it involved the construction of artificial dunes. "Who would pay for the upkeep of the artificial dunes and to keep the natural dunes from reforming?" he asked. "This option just blew my mind."

To illustrate how deep pruning would have a poor effect on the topography, he pointed to a strand of vine-covered myrtles which were cut down last year. The trees, he noted, will not come back because they were cut too short. "If you cut off the vines, all you would find is dead myrtles," said Dr. Porcher.

He also addressed another open area which had been cleared by a homeowner, stating that it should never have been cleared. "They can see the ocean from their porch," he said, pointing to the house, which was on stilts. "There was no need to clear the area so you could see the beach from the ground."

He summarized his feelings on how the accreted land should be handled by bringing up Camp St. Christopher on Seabrook Island and noting how they allowed the dunes there to mature, creating a naturally hilly terrain. The maritime forest at the camp has also grown up and created clearings for paths, instead of the other way around. "A true conservationist does things for future generations and rarely sees the fruits of their efforts," said Dr. Porcher. He closed the walk by recommending that the residents of Sullivan's Island should form a natural history group, as well as hire a coastal geologist to regularly survey the beach and accreted land to ensure the land is being properly maintained.