

FROM 1A

Nature Conservancy has never-ending job at Sandy Island

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coyotes, we didn't have phragmites, we didn't have water hyacinth."

A director of the Georgetown County chapter of The Nature Conservancy, the 65-year-old retired boat dealer speaks from a lifetime spent along the lower Waccamaw, Pee Dee and Black rivers. Long's work as caretaker of Sandy Island is the sort of assignment any South Carolina outdoorsman would kill for.

Four miles wide and seven miles long, Sandy Island's densely forested shores and mysterious sand hills that rise as high as 78 feet sit between the slow moving waters of the Waccamaw and Pee Dee rivers. At the island's south end, a rustic 200-acre community known as Mount Rena is home to a population of roughly 150 blacks who can trace their lineage directly to the scores of slaves who labored to cultivate rice amid the mosquitoes, alligators and bears. There is no bridge. Residents still reach the mainland, a place they refer to as "the other side," by boat.

Good stewards

Just over a decade ago, Georgetown County timber baron Craig Wall and textile magnate Roger Milliken Sr. planned to build a bridge to Sandy Island to log several thousand acres of longleaf pine and oak.

While the idea to build a \$2 million bridge to cut timber valued at \$1.5 million was met with considerable skepticism, revelations of plans for a several-thousand-home resort on the island provoked an uproar and galvanized conservationists statewide. Partly as a result, the Sandy Island Associates sold their 9,167 acres to The Nature Conservancy and state Department of Transportation as part of an \$11 million wetlands mitigation deal.

On March 8, 1997, just two hours before Craig Wall was laid to rest following his unexpected death from a heart attack, Sandy Island was formally dedicated as a nature preserve.

Since then, scores of visitors have made the short trip from the Waccamaw, Hagley or Samworth boat launches to hike, hunt, fish or kayak around Sandy Island. From water or land, the island's sublime beauty and varied habitats are breathtaking.

According to Furman Long, when The Nature Conservancy assumed stewardship, habitat preservation and restoration were the main priorities. This included conducting controlled burns in areas with dangerously dense underbrush, identifying red-cockaded woodpecker habitats, figuring a way to remove 95 or so broken-down, decaying cars, and dealing with non-native feral pigs.

In the early 1990s, Sandy Island's population of feral pigs went from zero to more than a thousand. Walking beside a broad swath of churned up soft soil along a cypress filled marsh, Long identified the damage a group of only three or four pigs caused in a day.

"They root all through it," he said, "eat young snakes and liz-

ards and turkey nests — any kind of nest that was in there is history. The only way to take them out is to trap them or to shoot them."

Wild sows can produce a litter of several offspring every six months, and it can take as little as six months for a piglet to reach sexual maturity. Their rooting also destroys valuable longleaf pine seedlings.

"We will never be able to get rid of all of the pigs," said Long. "It's just impossible. We can only keep the population in check."

Dr. Gene Woods, a professor of forest wildlife ecology at Clemson University, is the former forestry biologist at the Hobcaw Barony, a 16,000-acre nature preserve just east of Georgetown. During the 1980s, Dr. Woods faced enormous problems with feral hogs in Hobcaw's longleaf forests. "They can out-compete any animal, and are smarter than almost any animal out there."

He also said that Sandy Island is likely being illegally restocked by poachers, who place the pigs in Lowcountry forests for future hunts.

Predators

Driving his battered pickup truck along one of Sandy Island's dirt roads, Long stopped alongside a decaying AMC Rambler and the tracks of coyotes. Coyotes arrived in the past few years, likely swim-



WADE SPEES/STAFF

An abandoned Rambler and its toxic contents deteriorate into the pinestraw-covered forest floor of Sandy Island.

punctured trunks are laden with amber sap. The birds were a focal point of the island's return to nature. In 1994, Roger Banks, the South Carolina project leader for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, ultimately recommended a denial of the permit to build the bridge largely on the grounds that Sandy Island Associates were not addressing concerns about the bird's habitat.

Hiking out to a broad, flat stretch of vegetation, Long pointed out another predator, the water hyacinth. "This was a lake a year or two ago," he said, "and you can see there now, in just a matter of no time at all, it just annihilated it."

A native of South America, the leafy hyacinth grows alongside a problematic, Lowcountry native called alligator grass. On the far side

of the former lake, a brown swath showed a patch where wildlife officials sprayed herbicide last year. Unfortunately, at more than \$100 an acre, aerially sprayed herbicides are a temporary and expensive fix. A cold winter would drive the plant back, Long said, but he hasn't seen a truly cold one in years.

Back out on the glassy water of the Black River, Long's boat cruised into a small inlet, startling a great blue heron that flew alongside the boat for 50 or so yards before arcing into the trees. At the end of the inlet rose a stand of phragmites, which resembled a wall of nondescript reeds. These dense, fibrous plants grow rampantly.

Long and other conservationists seem to agree the phragmites are perhaps the greatest threat to Lowcountry marshes. "We poisoned it here two years ago," he said, "and it's coming right back. It'll just become so thick that very little wildlife will use it, and any other good vegetation — that we consider good in the marsh — will be completely gone."

"The only way to control it," he added, "is aerial spraying, and aerial spraying is expensive. If you don't control it, it'll take over the entire marsh system of the entire Lowcountry."

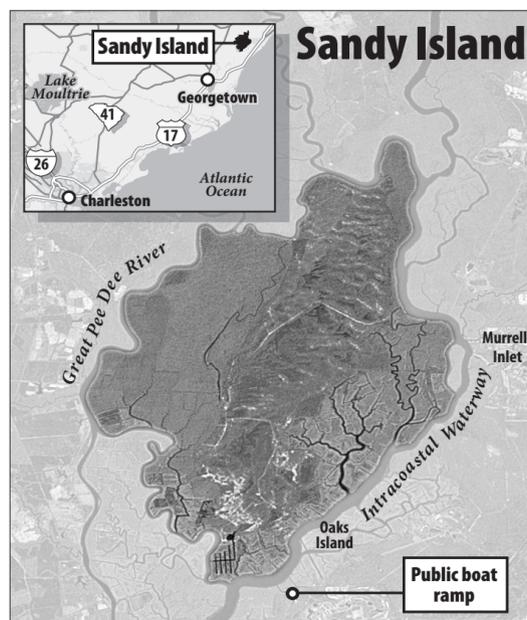
While he didn't have exact figures, Matt Nespeca with the Georgetown office of the Nature Conservancy said that funding for invasive eradication had lately come from a number of public and private sources, with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources providing the lion's share. "I don't know what we would do," he said, "if they weren't around to help us do work on Sandy Island, and if we didn't have Furman working nonstop to control the pigs."

Now retired, Banks said that invasive species like phragmites, coyote, pigs and water hyacinth were not problems widely foreseen a decade ago when the conservationists were working to preserve the island.

"We've now got a committee in the Winyah Bay task force that deals specifically with invasive species," he said.

It's pretty scary to see how fast some of these can take over.

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SOURCE: ESRI

STAFF



WADE SPEES/STAFF

Long shows visitors an area where feral pigs have torn up the ground, rooting for food near this Sandy Island swamp. The feral pigs are non-native to the island, as are coyotes.

On the Net

To see additional photos and QuickTime video clips of Chris Dixon's interviews at Sandy Island, go to www.charleston.net.

ming across the river to avoid hunters and development on the Grand Strand.

The wily canines and the island's healthy population of bears are likely preying on pigs, Long said, but not in sufficient numbers. More pressing, he said, coyotes are preying on smaller animals like fox squirrels, which spend much of their time foraging on the ground and compete with feral pigs for acorns, their food staple.

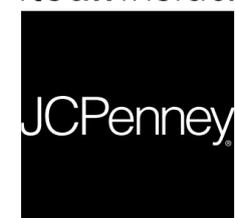
"Fox squirrels will run 50 yards before they jump up a tree," he said. "They run that 50 yards, they're history."

Already driven to extinction are some 95 island automobiles like the old Rambler, which held several rusting cans full of paint, four disintegrating lead-acid batteries, and probably oil and gasoline, he said. Removing them is "going to be an expensive deal. You're going to have to bring dump trucks over here, back hoes and barges," he said. "It's something you've got to do. We can't have a sore spot like that in a nature preserve."

A few more miles along into a forest thick with acorn-laden turkey oaks and longleaf pines, Long stopped for trees with nesting red-cockaded woodpeckers, easily noticeable because their heavily

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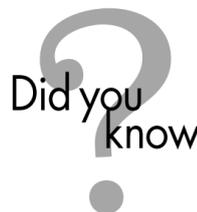
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