

ORV RegNeg Comments
Carl Classen, County Manager, Hyde County
December 11, 2008

Thank you all for your hard work on a very tough, very complex issue. The law setting up the Cape Hatteras National Seashore reflects that complexity by noting the need to balance of visitors (meaning all Americans), villagers, and the fish and fowl. Conservation means conserving all of them. Tough balance. You have a tough job.

The beaches of Ocracoke Island are essential to the survival of Ocracoke village and critically important to the survival of Hyde County. Half of Hyde County's entire assessed value is based in the tiny village of Ocracoke. More than 97% percent of all the occupancy tax collected in Hyde County is collected in Ocracoke Village. 800 of the County's 5,000 residents – or 16% of the County's population live year-round in Ocracoke village while the 1,000 homes there represent 33% of the County's dwelling units. No specific figures are available, but – based upon the two preceding figures and the 1.3 million visitors last year arriving by ferry – I estimate that approximately 75% of all Hyde County's sales tax is collected in Ocracoke Village.

Does the closing of beaches hurt Ocracoke? Of course. Can it be quantified? That's tough because it's hard to know how many people never came or who wrote our Island off their vacation list due to all the bad publicity about "beach closures." Just a 10% reduction, though, means a big impact. If the occupancy tax revenue is reduced by just 10%, that is the total amount granted to the Ocracoke Youth Center and 33% of this year's allocation to the Ocracoke Health Center. Will there be fewer kids or fewer sick people? Not likely. Those revenues will need to be made up by general property tax payers.

Unlike National Parks, we have villages in this park and the economies and quality of life in these villages is directly related to the sea. Access to the beaches is a critical part of what makes Ocracoke special. The following is just another example:

This morning, I spent an hour with the manager of the Ocracoke Fish House (Hardy Plyler, who is also a commercial fisherman); with Commissioner Gene Ballance (who is another commercial fisherman); and with a local volunteer. The three of them were trying to keep a Golden Leaf project in budget that is helping to keep alive the last fish house on Ocracoke Island. Without the fish house, just like without access to fishing from the beaches, a character of Ocracoke will die. Losing that character hurts not only the fisherman, but also the businesses that support the fishing industry and the guests who come to see this rare, vanishing slice of American culture.

Lastly, let me make several points in relative to the proposals I have seen:

- **If fees are required, the revenues should only be used for increased levels of service and should not supplant existing budgets.** To make any of the compromises work, more law enforcement and biotech staff is needed. Fee revenue should be targeted to make those increased staffing levels happen.

- **Limiting beach access should be based on science.** If there were few nests on the north end of Ocracoke, then don't limit access. If there are few nests before May 1 or after July 31, don't limit beach access unless evidence is documented. When beach access is to be limited, keep the buffer reasonable. 1,000 meters is not scientifically based nor is reasonable. I know this is a political process but use science as much as possible.
- **Bust the people who violate the enclosures.** It was a mistake to expand enclosures just because someone violated the boundary. Unless someone is caught, it's impossible to know who actually broke the boundary. The ORV driver may have been a misguided fisherman or an ill-informed birder. Enforce the law against individuals; don't criminalize all beach users.
- **Use volunteers for monitoring nests.** On a personal note, I was a member of NEST (Network for Endangered Sea Turtles) for 7 years and that group of volunteers does a great job helping the turtles while also helping the local economy. NEST volunteers educate people about the importance of sea turtles and provide data to the State and federal government. Another sea turtle volunteer group operates on Pea Island. Only Hatteras Island and Ocracoke don't have volunteer turtle groups; though I have been told a volunteer group used to operate on Ocracoke. Please let interested volunteers help. As a marine mammal stranding volunteer, I have spent hours on the sad watch of a beached common dolphin and then saw it mercifully euthanized. Utilize the many people in our communities who want to help the animals and fish but who also want to help keep our wonderful culture alive.
- **Keep up the excellent Internet-based mapping by the National Park Service.** Those maps allow guests and villagers to know what is open and what is not. The service was appreciated this past summer and will be critical in the future
- **To the National Park Service, I plead, "Open up the Sound side on Ocracoke"** to help take pressure off the beaches – especially in those locations where beach access is limited to just pedestrians or boaters.
- I believe the discussions between Commissioner Ballance, David Esham and the environmental groups have been productive in developing useful alternative ideas for Ocracoke Island. These commonsensical people seem to have come to a general understanding and I applaud them for that effort. I hope that they will continue meeting and find a good compromise that conserves our villages, our quality of life, and our fish and animals.

Thank you for allowing me to make these comments.

Carl Classen
County Manager, Hyde County