

CASE STUDY

SEA ISLANDS PRESERVATION PROJECT

CATEGORY

Community Education
Sustainable Community
Development

LOCATION

St. Helena Island, South Carolina

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SYNOPSIS

The Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia are located between the coastal estuaries of the mainland and the Atlantic Ocean. In order to educate and train local community leaders, public officials, and landowners in strategies that will help preserve their land and the culture and environment of their communities, a rural educational center called the Penn Center, initiated the Sea Islands Preservation Project in 1992. The program aims to create a sustainable plan for the island, which integrates economic activities with the natural environment and the community's traditional lifestyle.



SITUATION

For over a century, the native community of the Beaufort and Sea Islands region lived a traditional life of basket weaving, fish net knitting, boat building and blacksmithing that was closely connected to the land, sea, and natural resources. In recent years resort development has put pressure on these communities by polluting the environment and threatening the loss of their land, culture and traditional lifestyle. Pollution from runoff from new roads, parking lots, golf courses, and lawns has resulted in the closure of 40% of South Carolina's coastal shellfish beds. Private coastal development has restricted access to sea grass used in basket weaving and property taxes and land values have risen dramatically. Because the local traditional communities have not benefited from the prosperity of the region, this population's unemployment rates are high and the people are forced to work low-wage jobs with few benefits.

PROJECT
APPROACH

The Sea Islands Preservation Project utilizes a combination of citizen education and leadership training, sustainable economic development, and land use planning to achieve its preservation goals. In 1993 the Penn Center built the Penn School for Preservation in order to train the local leaders who would create the vision for the community and develop a strategic plan for St. Helena Island. The participants studied the local environment, planning, zoning, growth management, community economic development, and other issues. They then divided into committees to apply their new knowledge to explore different economic development projects. The graduates of the class drafted specific strategies and held public forums to expand support for a sustainable plan. Their goal was to create a master plan that would include an 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 the area and revitalize its economy, and land use goals for the whole island.

RESULTS/ IMPACTS

The studies completed by the community participants formed the foundation for a Master Plan for St. Helena Island and numerous comprehensive strategies for human and economic development. These include:

- Creation of the South Carolina Coastal Community Development Corporation which provides local residents with needed business and leadership skills, and knowledge to apply for financing from different sources;
- Construction of a food processing center and business incubator food center that will also house a business center for community members;
- Development and assistance with a local craft market;
- Legal assistance to landowners to prevent buyouts by developers;
- Land use and zoning revisions and purchase of conservation easements to protect land;
- Preservation of historic buildings; and
- Sustainable forestry to help preserve valuable natural resources.

The residents acquired tools that empowered them to develop and work towards a long-range vision not only for their own property, but for the community as a whole. With commitment, expertise, and coalition-building, local people were able to build a community-based, comprehensive approach to economic development that uses the traditional culture and natural resources to create a sustainable future.

PARTNERS

Regional and national groups have improved the project's activities and provided necessary legal and financial advice and support. South Carolina Coastal Conservation League and the Neighborhood Legal Assistance Program collaborated to build Penn School for Preservation.

FUNDING

The Penn Center's Land Use and Environmental Education Program funded the project with support from federal, state, and private sources.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The project emphasized the importance of training local leaders and building their capacity to make decisions and develop comprehensive plans for their communities. Because the local people are empowered and are defining their own future, their plans are more likely to be successfully implemented. A key component of this project is the integration of human and economic development and the preservation of natural and cultural resources. The communities realize that these elements are all interconnected and need to be balanced in a sustainable community plan. The Penn Center also learned that land use decisions are both challenging and crucial, and that more training and education is needed concerning land use planning and processes.

SOURCES

- Sustainable Communities Network, Case Studies South Carolina http://www.sustainable.org/casestudies/SIA_PDFs/SIA_South_Carolina.pdf
- Penn Center, Land Use and Environment Education Program <http://www.penncenter.com/>

