

Live Oak Trees Bulwark of the Maritime Forest

By Charlie McBriarty

A story about the maritime forest was stimulated by a fellow PKSer, Clint Anderson. An amateur photographer, Anderson took a picture of entwined trees he had located in a lot on Hawthorne Drive near his home. He eventually sent the photo to this newspaper and the editor speculated that it might lead to a story about the maritime forest and how it has been impacted by seasonal hurricanes.

During a recent visit with Anderson there was an opportunity to view several examples of his photographic skill. The photo of the entwined tree, which was identified by his son-in-law as "Don't Leaf Me," shows three trees that appear to have grown together over the years. It looks as though the larger tree, a live oak, reached-out with two limbs to embrace a nearby tree, another species from the oak family. Subsequently, a branch of this second oak has entwined itself around an even smaller bay tree that had earlier sprouted near the two embracing oak trees. At this point, the three trees seem bound together. It might be speculated that this quirk of nature was the consequence of a hurricane and these trees are protecting and supporting one another against future storms.

Just what is the Maritime Forest? What

is its impact on our environment, and how does a hurricane affect it? The search for answers to these questions has led to a broader understanding and appreciation of the greenery that seems, at times, to surround us.

As we drive along the by-ways of Bogue Banks we see trees, shrubs, vines, and other flora that at times seem to engulf the roads with greenery. If the goal of our trip is to show a visitor a view of the ocean or the sound, this greenery severely inhibit such views-- in the summer as well as during the months of November through March. (Being originally from the upper Midwest, I cannot yet call these months winter.) This greenery, that has earned the town of Pine Knoll Shores the honor of being designated as Tree City USA, is part of the Maritime Forest.

An Internet search revealed a number of interesting facts about the maritime forests. At least one site reported that maritime forests are a "rare and highly threatened coastal resource in North Carolina." Maritime forests are found sporadically along the barrier islands and nearby coastline from North Carolina to Florida. The forest is found on the more stable of the barrier islands. They serve as a habitat for wildlife, protect and replenish fresh

water, bind the soil that eventually elevates the island, and help to protect coastal areas during hurricanes.

These forests are different from those found further inland because the maritime forest has had to adapt to the coastal environment with its salt spray, periodic hurricanes, shifting sand, soil erosion, storm surges, and limited quantities of fresh water. The trees that seem best suited to the coastal environment are oak, red cedar, holly, and pines, although a recent North Carolina State University Department of Horticultural Science report identified 98 distinct species of trees found in the North Carolina Maritime Forest.

A recent telephone conversation with Pine Knoll Shore's arborist, David Styron, revealed that over time hurricanes have eliminated many trees from the island. Some of the large trees indigenous to the local maritime forest, such as hickory, sweet gum, and cedar, have been significantly reduced as a consequence of hurricanes and land development. The periodic loss of large pine trees appears to be less traumatic because pines tend to grow well and quickly reforest areas cleared by hurricanes. Throughout the years it is the live oak trees that have survived. Live oaks have adapted to the environment of Bogue Banks and are essential for the stability of the island.

Hurricanes are not the major contributor when it comes to destruction of live oaks. Land development and associated construction takes most of that credit. Obviously, building homes, condos, businesses, and such, results in the loss of these trees -- no matter how careful the local efforts to preserve. It is not the process of building alone that threatens trees such as live oak. Concrete -- as in foundations, driveways, and parking areas -- plays a significant role in the eventual destruction of these trees.

According to Styron, concrete frequently inhibits the growth of trees because the concrete is neither flexible, nor porous.

Thus, concrete negatively impacts their root system, and it is the root system that is a major contributor to the tree's growth. Often cement areas are too close to existing trees, which can inhibit growth and may eventually kill them. Foundations, driveways, and parking areas need to be about 20 to 30 feet from trees to ensure their continued prosperity.

In addition, septic systems can also cause damage to trees. Regular maintenance of septic systems will reduce this problem. A plumber or septic tank installer can recommend methods of maintaining a septic system to keep tree roots from invading the tank.

Fire is another threat to the maritime forest. Styron believes that a fire presents a much greater threat than hurricanes. He points out that there appears to be a high volume of dead and fallen trees, shrubs, vines, and other dry materials found within the forest -- especially in the summer. He noted large areas bordering the highway as examples of where such dry materials appear to have accumulated and that these materials could quickly contribute to a destructive fire.

The maritime forest is a critical part of Bogue Banks. Without the forest, barrier islands (including our island) face eventual destruction. It seems important that each of us who have invested in this island and those visiting do what ever we can to preserve the maritime forest. Be mindful that carelessly discarded cigarettes can be the cause of a serious fire. Before building, remodeling, or landscaping, consult with the Pine Knoll Shore's Community Appearance Commission and follow their advice regarding the preservation of trees -- particularly the live oaks. You might even begin a program of planting trees around your home to replace those lost due to construction, hurricanes, or natural causes. If we do our part, perhaps we can preserve the beauty of this part of the world for our children's grand children.

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