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Stew In Brunswick

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coastal field representative with the Wilmington office of the Division of Coastal Management. "I'm not saying that there's no green space left, but if you ride through the county today thinking of what was there five or 10 years ago, you see some pretty dramatic changes."

The impacts of development on coastal ecosystems are by now too well-established to bear repeating in any detail. Brunswick's attractive barrier islands mostly have been scraped clean of maritime forests, but the habitats now under direct threat are the mainland maritime forests along the tidal creeks and ridges on the northern bank of the Intracoastal Waterway. This is where development has been heaviest in recent years, and it's in these areas that biologists are seeing characteristic symptoms of ecological decline.

•Biologist David Dumond of Wilmington speculates that increased drainage through ditches and shallow wells have caused some of the limesink ponds to dry out near Pretty Pond, in the Boiling Spring Lakes area.

•Bill Adams is worried that the magnificent ramshorn in Orton Pond, downstream from the golf course and subdivision at Boiling Spring Lakes, may not survive current land uses upstream. "People want a nice lawn, so they fertilize," he says, "and then the nutrients get into the ground water and eventually work their way to Orton Creek and they get into the pond." The nutrients have grown a thick carpet of weeds in the pond, interfering with boating use and prompting calls for weed eradication efforts which might harm the rare snail. It's the kind of problem that worsens with development.

•The N.C. Division of Environmental Management, has reported that failing septic tanks along the Lockwood Folly River are the most likely causes of high counts of fecal coliform in the river which have closed shellfishing over widespread portions of the river. Shellfish in lower estuarine sections of Lockwood Folly River once supported a thriving fishery. But as the riverbanks were developed, rising amounts of bacteria were detected. By 1988, 71 percent of the shellfishing areas had to be closed, the largest percentage of closed shellfishing waters of any river in the state. Because of periodic high bacterial levels, the river was removed from a list of coastal waterways to be reclassified as Outstanding Resource Waters, although a management plan underway seeks to restore the river.

The county's official stance on the topic of growth is that it's inevitable and desirable. "The county commissioners have consistently adopted a pro-growth policy," says John Harvey, director of the county planning department. "What's happening to Brunswick County is happening to the entire United States coastline. Growth is going to occur. The challenge is to channel that growth and have quality growth."

Most observers agree, but many believe that the county's growth has

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been haphazard at best and that the need for channeling it has become more critical each year. Among the problems most often cited are potential water shortages, traffic build-ups along main-traveled corridors such as NC 133 and US 17, and water pollution. Often blamed is the county's underutilized land-use plan—a problem in itself, but also potentially a part of the solution to some of the difficulties the county is experiencing.

Under the state's Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA), each of the 20 coastal counties is required to prepare and periodically update a land-use plan. Ideally, say state officials, the planning is a rational process that begins with a vision of the county's future, proceeds to a set of policies to bring about that future, and then, most important, includes ways of ensuring that these policies are carried through. "With a policy statement in mind that reflects the county's collective vision of the future," says Haskell Rhett, "county planners can think about ways to control the growth patterns in their county; direct industry where they would like it to go—put a new landfill, for example, where it won't have as significant a negative impact on people and resources." Strong subdivision regulations and a zoning ordinance would help achieve the county's objectives and ensure that fragile areas are protected and that land uses are properly situated with relation to one another.

But the county lacks both a zoning ordinance and minimum lot sizes in its subdivision regulations. Without the latter it's difficult to control the density of development, and without zoning, control of growth is all but impossible. "I've been after the county for 15 years to adopt a zoning ordinance and they still haven't done it," says Rosetta Short, a Long Beach resident and long-time member of the Coastal Resources Advisory Committee, a CAMA advisory group. "Without it we've had nothing but topsy-turvy development, \$100,000 houses next to gas stations, things like that." Indeed, in the most recent update of the Brunswick County land-use plan, the county itself recognizes the need for zoning. "...it is the county's intention to encourage and facilitate responsible growth. However, without county-wide zoning

controls, the location of imminent development is to a large extent uncontrollable in Brunswick County."

Of course, Brunswick isn't alone in not having county-wide zoning controls. Eight out of the 20 CAMA counties lack any zoning ordinances at all, and of the 12 that have them, only six are full county-wide ordinances. Renowned for its outstanding diversity of species and natural communities, however, Brunswick's lack of zoning is the more serious because it has more to lose than other coastal counties.

Even more ambitious ordinances can be installed by Brunswick if it desires. In 1983, the county's neighbor, New Hanover County, implemented the most conservation-oriented ordinance of any coastal county. Its Conservation Overlay District protects important environmental and cultural resources by requiring developers to preserve 50 percent to 100 percent of certain resources—wetlands, maritime communities, areas of special significance, significant archeological or historical sites, and primary nursery areas. David Dumond, who mapped the county's biotic communities for the ordinance, says that for a county that wishes to practice conservation planning, the most important things to know are what's there and where it is. "Then, when potential development comes along, these valued areas must be taken into consideration in the planning effort," he says. It's an impressive and effective ordinance which so far has worked well in New Hanover County.

Epilogue

For many naturalists, Brunswick County is at a crossroads. Already the impacts of growth are dismaying those who have worked there the longest. "The county is not what it used to be," says herpetologist Alvin Braswell, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh. Adds Peter Weigl, a professor of biology at Wake Forest University and chairman of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Nongame Advisory Committee: "I've been bringing classes down to Brunswick for 23 years, and every year I see less and less."

There are hopeful signs: For the first time, the county has been authorized by its county commissioners to put in zoning ordinances, a positive step that may help steer future development out of sensitive natural areas. And in the coming fiscal year (1991-1992), Brunswick will be updating its CAMA land-use plan, an opportunity, says Haskell Rhett, for the county to grasp "the big picture."

Even more active steps may be needed to protect the county's extraordinary fabric of natural communities from being torn asunder by haphazard development. Acquisitions by The Nature Conservancy or by local land trusts may be the surest way of protecting a valuable area and its freight of rare species.

Without this kind of attention, Brunswick may well lost its position as the state's premier natural garden. And that would be a loss for us all.