

EP. 1 : WELCOME TO THE NERRS

TRANSCRIPT

Kaitlyn Dirr 0:19

Hey there, my name is Kaitlyn Dirr and welcome to the NERR or Far podcast. In today's introductory episode we're going to be going through the basics, starting with: what are the NERRs?

NERR is actually an acronym. NERR stands for National Estuarine Research Reserve and the reserve system is a network of 30 coastal sites created to protect and study estuarine ecosystems. The word estuarine describes an environment where freshwater meets saltwater, most often an area where a river meets the sea. In this series, we will be looking at seven of these sites in the southeastern United States. To help get us started is Keith Laakkonen, Director of the Rookery Bay Reserve in Naples, Florida and the current president of a nonprofit NERRA.

Keith Laakkonen 1:16

Research reserves are an amazing resource and today, the NERRs protect over 1.4 million acres of really important coastal estuarine lands in 24 states and Puerto Rico. The reserves have really been known for delivering really critical science to communities and how this science can impact those communities and how they can adapt to changes over time. And so, what we say with reserves: we're "locally significant, nationally impactful". And all of us together are really moving the needle on national science and policy needs. I think people might hear all those letters and words and wonder exactly what a National Estuarine Research Reserve is. It's- it can sound really confusing, but basically, we just want people to know that these are your places. These are places that you have the ability to visit, enjoy and protect. And everyone there always says that these are sort of the best kept secrets on our coastline. We want to change that. We don't want these to be secrets anymore. We want the nation to really understand that these are their shorelines. These are there because local, state and national conservation organizations have protected these lands so that they'll be here for generations to explore and enjoy.

Kaitlyn Dirr 2:32

Like Keith said, these are your places. The reserves exist as spaces to protect and study nature. What makes the NERRs unique is their strong partnership with the community. A partner program between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, also known as NOAA, and the coastal states, the reserves have four pillars, or focuses. These pillars include stewardship, research, coastal training and education. Sometimes the best way to learn more about something is by exploring and having hands-on experiences. Here to talk more about the value of hands-on learning is Lori Davis, Education Coordinator for the North Carolina NERR.

Lori Davis 3:14

I totally see a difference if a kid is able to experience something firsthand. So like I said, you know, these sites have been set aside for a reason. Yes, we want to have the general public come visit them, but having young scientists... and I consider all the students that come visit me as scientists because by the time they leave, I want them thinking about something that they learned new, whether it's about the water quality, whether it's about the environment around them, a plant or an animal or something that they saw. I want them to continue thinking about that. And I think that in a world that has become more virtual, that we get used to watching a video and then we talk about something or we hear somebody talk about it and show pictures or they might bring in an item and then we talk about it. We have to get people out into the environment. It doesn't have to be an estuary, it could be a rainforest, it could just be in the backyard exploring, and I just feel like we need to get outside more. It's really important for kids to be out there. They need to feel stuff, they need to smell it. They need to see it. They could- it's just it's just a magical place, I think.

Kaitlyn Dirr 4:46

Another way to learn about our estuaries firsthand is by taking advantage of recreational opportunities at the NERRs. The NERRs aren't just places for staff and scientists to use and enjoy. Their goal is to be accessible to the people who live there, as well as visitors to the reserve from around the country. Push any ideas of researchers in stuffy lab coats out of your mind because it is much more likely to find these coastal scientists getting their hands dirty out in the field. You too can get out into the estuary and use reserve lands to go kayaking, bird watching, fishing; the options are seemingly endless what you can do recreationally within the NERRs. The NERRs want you to know that they are here for you to visit, enjoy and protect.

Lori Davis 5:33

I do think the public sometimes thinks since our sites are very different from state parks or federal parks that we don't want the public or just visitors over there that can come on their own. So I think they get a little confused there. Which- which is understandable because we are different than the park system, both state and federal. We have different missions. Our missions aren't just to get people over there, we have other missions too, of the research and the education.

Kaitlyn Dirr 6:06

So let's look at those missions and some of the differences between the NERRs and the National Park Service. According to the NERRS Science Collaborative, the mission of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System is "to practice and promote stewardship of coasts and estuaries through innovative research, education and training using a place-based system of protected areas". The mission of the National Park Service is "to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations". Though they may seem similar, what sets the NERRs apart from parks at the national and state level is

this focus on place and the idea of a strong working relationship with the local community. There isn't as much of a focus on preserving the sites exactly as they are. Instead, these reserves are a sort of living laboratory where scientists can study and monitor estuarine systems, students and visitors can learn hands-on, and all kinds of coastal decision makers can discover ways to better manage coastal resources through various trainings. Both parks and the NERRs have numerous programs to help foster environmental stewardship and to manage protected lands. When it comes to the NERRs though, goals and initiatives, whether they be stewardship related or more research-focused, are crafted specifically with coastal areas and estuaries in mind, as well as the associated local economies. The NERR system truly earns the title "locally significant, nationally impactful" through its work to address priority issues unique to the reserve coastal communities as well as common threats across the National Reserve System. Eric Smith, manager of the North Inlet-Winyah Bay Reserve in Georgetown, South Carolina is here to detail some of those local priority issues as well as factors that threaten reserves throughout the southeast.

Erik Smith 8:13

Well, I think we have two that are really at the top of the list. South Carolina is one of the fastest growing states in the Southeast. In fact, we have Charleston just to our south and Myrtle Beach just to our north. Both of those are on the top 10 fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. And... well, everybody likes to live on the coast. But that comes with some consequences and the impacts of coastal development, and how to balance developing the coast and maintaining coastal economies with the nature and the important ecosystems and habitats that support all of that economy and development is a real priority for us. And then of course, layered on top of coastal growth and rapid development is a changing climate. The seas are rising, the temperatures are warming, things are shifting as a result of climate change, and how that is going to affect the coastal zone, the important ecosystems that support our economies is really our other big priority. So, coastal development and climate change.

Kaitlyn Dirr 9:39

How the NERRs across the Southeast are addressing coastal development and climate change is something we'll dig a little deeper into later in the series. These are some big issues that even government agencies beyond NOAA and the NERRs are currently exploring and will continue to explore in the years to come.

Erik Smith 9:58

And then of course, sort of underpinning all of that is understanding and maintaining the biodiversity of the coastal zone. That includes threats like invasive species, changes in biodiversity as a result of development, climate change, the moving of species due to commerce and ships and things like that.

Kaitlyn Dirr 10:29

Through stewardship, research, coastal training and education, the NERRs are working to create more resilient and better informed communities on our coasts in the face of a changing world and climate. Throughout the series, we will dive deeper into each of these four reserve focuses and learn more about the importance of estuarine habitats and the organisms within them. Until next time, I'm Kaitlyn and this is NERR or Far: The Reserves Are Where You Are.