EP. 4: PROTECTING CULTURAL RESOURCES

TRANSCRIPT

Kaitlyn Dirr 0:18

Hey there, my name is Kaitlyn Dirr and welcome to the NERR or Far podcast. On today's episode, we are going to be talking about the significance of archaeological sites across the NERRs, as well as the importance of protecting cultural resources.

People have been living along our coastlines and in estuaries for a very, very long time. Because of this, the National Estuarine Research Reserves, or the NERRs, have an important role in protecting archaeological sites and other cultural resources on their lands. Here to tell us more about the history of one of these NERR sites is Keith Laakonen, Director of the Rookery Bay Reserve in Florida.

Keith Laakkonen 1:06

People have been part of the story of Rookery Bay going back over actually 4000 years, going back to Late Archaic period. And people have really lived with the environment for a long time. And you can see a lot of numerous... prehistoric shell mounds is what we call them. And these are dotted throughout the landscape, and they're now covered with tropical hardwood hammocks and a lot of other species which, basically, we have a lot of confidence that would not exist anywhere else except for these, for these shell mounds. And one of the reasons that these exist is because the diet of the Calusa Indians, who unfortunately no longer with us, was really high in protein, and they got a lot of their protein from the bountifulness of the estuary. Things like clams, and the gastropods and the fish really supplied them a very high protein diet. In fact, their diet was so good that the average Calusa male in the 1700s was, 16-1700s at the time of contact with Europeans, was about six foot tall. And unfortunately, European diets back then weren't as good. And so the Spanish, when they came over, describe the Calusa as being giants, as these six foot tall giants and- but it was basically because of the richness of the estuary that the Calusa were able to exist, not only exist but do successfully. And were actually one of the few non-agricultural Native American tribes in America. Basically, they had enough going on that they didn't have to farm, although there is pretty good evidence that they used aquaculture. There's also a lot of other history at the reserve, including some of the first people who settled Rookery Bay after the Calusa were gone were actually some of the, some of the veterans of the Civil War period. So folks coming out in the 1800s you know, who settled onto Rookery Bay and surrounding areas, just gotta imagine how tough those folks were but again, they came here for the same reason the Calusas existed so successfully for so long, it's the bountifulness of the estuary.

Kaitlyn Dirr 3:25

We can travel nearly 500 miles from Rookery Bay Reserve in Naples, Florida, to the ACE Basin Reserve near Charleston, South Carolina, and we will still find Native American shell mounds and rings in the

estuaries. One thing that these sites across the southeast have in common is that they're currently threatened by storms and sea level rise. Here to tell us more about the importance of these sites and what we can learn from them is Julie Binz, manager of the ACE Basin Reserve.

Julie Binz 3:54

Yeah, we have done a lot of work with our state archaeologists about our Native American sites. They have worked as quickly as they can to understand and document the shell rings you know, shell mittens and other types of evidence of human settlements that go back 1000s of years that are severely eroding due to all of these original factors you talked about before. We've learned a lot of things about the abundance of our oyster populations 4000 years ago or other different species that were used for food, we can tell how people moved around based on the availability of different resources, how they really lived in connection with the environment, right, how they use it to their advantage, and were so resilient in the face of the different environmental threats that we can face. And so it's really interesting. I was so surprised to learn how many sites are along the southeastern coast and how many of them are in danger of being inundated in the near future. So it's kind of this race against time to learn what we can about these civilizations before they're underwater.

Kaitlyn Dirr 5:17

Native American archaeological sites give us a glimpse into the history of estuaries and coastal communities in the southeast. Sadly, as our planet warms, sea level rises, and storms become a greater issue, scientists and archaeologists are in a race against time to study and gather all that they can from these incredible cultural resources. In our introductory episode, we introduced two priority issues that the NERRs of the southeast are working to address. One was a changing climate, and the other was determining the impacts of coastal development. Another community that has had a big role in the history of our southeastern estuaries and a community that is dealing with the impacts of coastal development is the Gullah-Geechee community. The Gullah-Geechee are descendants of enslaved West African people who worked on coastal plantations from North Carolina to northern Florida. The Geechee people still maintain many unique West African traditions and elements of their language and culture. Some historians believe that the historic Hog Hammock community on Sapelo Island in Georgia is one of the last intact island-based Geechee communities in America. According to the island's Cultural and Revitalization Society, about 96% of the island surrounding the community is owned by the state of Georgia and cannot be purchased for development. This, in tandem with the fact that the islands can only be accessed by ferry or private boat, creates an environment that makes those who have called Sapelo home for generations subject to stress and fracturing from land loss, speculative developers, a lack of job opportunities and racism. Here to tell us more about the human history of Sapelo Island and the NERR's partnership with the Geechee community at Hog Hammock is Adam MacKinnon, Education Coordinator for the Sapelo Island NERR.

Adam Mackinnon 7:12

You know, we have, I mean, we have this human history out here. It's unique. So I always say Sapelo's one place, it has evolved, you can go to different places to find a little bit of everything, but we have all the research history from Odum, you know, basically establishing modern ecology out here to you know, we had the Native American shell ring on north end that dates back 4500 years... this is, shell ring. We had the Spanish, the French, English were all out here. You have the Gullah-Geechee community. So you have this whole human element to this place. It's just a pretty unique merging of many different things that, so you don't have to- you go one place you get all these different experiences, you just choose and that's often one of the hardest things is choosing which one to focus on. There's so many things out here that are worth looking at. I mean just going to that little community is this is, as I said, it's probably the last intact Gullah Geechee community on the East Coast. That's on a barrier island. Most of the ones that are off barrier islands, they kind of, I won't say they've... it's more of a homogeny over there so they really preserve more here. Although I will say there's not many people that can speak fluent Geechee or Gullah anymore. But it's- the culture is still alive. We have a culture day out here, where we sit, we help the community put this event on where they do the native, regular, the storytelling, the dances, the food to try and keep this alive out here. So these are pretty neat things...that Sapelo has. We try to partner whenever we can. So we also- I mean we have the labs open for- we have a lot of private vendors that do tours and so we allow them to come in here because we really spruce up the lab, made it kind of really exciting, you know, with new creative exhibits, touch tanks and you know all my years are not a game I got a ton of artifacts I've collected over the years. So it's just a resource for them. We hire from the community where we can, plus you know, on the side we have DNR, they help us too. We have a park, National Park and a state park. So- with a big mansion on it. So they try to hire locals whenever we can. And we we used to have interns a lot, but there's not many kids left on the island. So that kind of fell by the wayside. They all have to go to school on the mainland and so you don't see them a lot. But we also support, there's nonprofits out here, one is Save Our Legacy Ourselves. They have an intern, so we pay for that intern for them. And then we have SICAR, the South Island Cultural and Revitalization Society. We pay for an interpreter there. So we're trying to help them without kind of getting in their business. We're giving them the freedom to make their own decisions. But we're just gonna support them where we can when we can. They're a wonderful group of people. That said, I'm an endangered species guy, but I can look at that community over there just like an endangered species. They used to be sore of about 700 of them in like the 1910s and now there's like 30. As being... Sapelo's slowly transformed into kind of a vacation weekend place and because it's private property, they can do whatever they want. And we can't really say oh, you shouldn't sell it, but that's basically all they have. So we try to work with them and make good management decisions and you know, there's flooding in the community. So we're, we're trying to work with them through their one of their interns to help solve this flooding problem, you know we had Irma, which basically flood most of the island, helping with assistance for that kind of stuff. So whenever we can, we partner because they're essential to what we do out here. They're, they're... we have to be partners because we're neighbors.

Kaitlyn Dirr 10:38

As Adam said, the Sapelo Island NERR works closely with the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society or SICARS. SICARS is a local society whose mission is "to preserve and revitalize the Geechee community on Sapelo Island". They have initiatives related to community education, land use planning and sustainable development. To learn more, please check out their website. More cultural resources

and reminders of the history of our southeastern estuaries are the horses at the Rachel Carson and Currituck sites of the North Carolina NERR. Lori Davis, the reserve's Education Coordinator, is here to tell us more.

Lori Davis 11:18

So back long ago 1920s ,1930s around Beaufort, the body of water that separates town proper and what is known as the Rachel Carson reserve now, that body of water was really shallow and so people from the town would bring their animals over there to graze. It was free grazing for them. And so a gentleman who brought his horses over there to graze, he ended up passing away so they became feral. So when the state of North Carolina took over the management of the reserve, we decided to leave the horses on there because they're a cultural resource to our community. And we just love seeing them. Of course, the site was bought for the estuary and not for the horses. But, you know, growing up in seeing those horses, you know, we have stories that they're descendants of Blackbeard and of course they're just stories we know that's not true, but we like to tell them, I still tell them to this day, you know, but it's just nice to see them over there. It's a hard environment for them. They do have to struggle to survive. But it's nice seeing- I mean it is kind of like a game, especially when I'm with students. Are we gonna see a horse today or not? Because there's not many on the island. So it's kind of fun to see.

Kaitlyn Dirr 12:39

The creation of many of the NERRs in the southeast was made possible by a number of conservation organizations and government agencies. But in the case of the North Inlet-Winyah Bay Reserve in South Carolina, there was an important environmental steward who paved the way: Belle W Baruch. Erik Smith, Reserve Manager, has more on her connections to North Inlet.

Erik Smith 13:02

It's a shame that Belle did not live long enough to see the establishment of the reserve because I think she would- I think the mission of the reserve is exactly what Belle was thinking about when she left this property in trust for the purposes of research and education. Who was Belle? She was this amazing woman who happened to be the daughter of Bernard Baruch, a wealthy New York City financier who bought the property shortly after Civil War and the collapse of the rice plantations, and he bought it as a hunting property and enjoyed it as a winter retreat. His daughter Belle came down here and realized what an amazing piece of property, what an unusual piece of property this was. And she saw how the other plantations, and this is in the late 60s, were getting developed and how the coast of, the coast of South Carolina was starting to be developed and she realized she needed to or wanted to leave this property intact and set up a trust that made this property available for research and education. And that that's so very much in line with the mission of the reserve, which is protecting and wise coastal stewardship of the estuaries through research and education. Unfortunately, she died a little bit young of cancer and never got to see the creation of the reserve, but I'm pretty sure she knows about it is really happy that it's here.

Kaitlyn Dirr 15:07

The National Estuarine Research Reserve System doesn't just study and protect our natural resources on the coast, they also play a role in protecting cultural resources and keeping the rich history of southeastern coastal communities alive. Whether it's an archaeological site, herds of feral horses, a community teeming with important culture and tradition, or hunting land turned living laboratory, reserves are committed to lending a hand and learning more. Julie Binz from the ACE Basin reserve mentioned something in our interview that I think best encapsulates what we've discussed in this episode.

“We have had people here for 1000s of years and they've been shaping the land and the water and the water has- and land has been shaping them and how they live. So we have just amazing stories about people: how they've survived in this place for so long and overcome storms and development and hardship and living in some of these really remote places.”

There's a lot that we can learn from these people and these sites. Storms, sea level rise, coastal development, and a number of other threats have created a race against time for those studying at the reserves, but hopefully we can learn more about the history of our estuaries before it's too late. Until next time, I'm Kaitlyn and this is NERR or Far: The Reserves Are Where You Are.