

Subject: The Environment
July 27, 2022

Last week Sallie and I took our grandchildren on our annual trek to Jekyll Island. A goal was to include some educational experiences on the vacation schedule. So, we took a dolphin tour and did a turtle walk on the beach at night.

The impact of climate change, including massive droughts, wildfires and the loss of habitat for creatures that share space with us on this big “blue marble” can be distressing. Both the dolphin tour and turtle walk made me think about our own special space on the Highlands Plateau. Jekyll Island, and for that matter all the Georgia marshes and barrier islands, have faced challenges of balancing the need for economic progress with the critical need to preserve that special environment.

On the dolphin tour, the boat captain didn't just show the group dolphins, he also talked about preserving the marsh environment of the Georgia coast. The tides and geography of the Georgia coast create an abundant and thriving marsh network that is critical for the survival of marine life. For many years I have been following the challenge of managing development on these barrier islands and marsh estuaries. Back in the 1980's and 1990's there was a heated debate about how much development should be allowed in these areas. The debate continues. Nevertheless, places like Jekyll have tried to balance public access, economic development and ecological preservation. That dynamic reminds me of the pressures facing the plateau and Western Carolina.

The sea turtle night walk was presented by members of the University of Georgia Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant programs. The staff and students of these programs have conducted studies and preservation projects for decades.

About 25 people went on the turtle walk, with experts leading us using flash lights that emitted a red light that did not bother the sea turtles.

I have been under the impression that the sea turtles were doomed to decline due to human actions such as net fishing and overdevelopment of critical beach habitat. That may not be the case. The turtles dig a nest and lay about 100 eggs per nest. The leaders of the turtle walk were sky high with enthusiasm about this year's egg laying season. They informed us that Jekyll had a record number of turtle nests on the beach this year. The previous record was 204, but this year at the time of the walk researchers had identified 239 nests. They showed us one of the nests.

These dedicated researchers attributed this increase to primarily changes in human activities. First, the shrimp boats have converted to trawl nets that allow turtles to escape. Second, they believe that public education concerning changes in beach activities to accommodate the turtles' breeding practices is having an impact. For instance, experts continue to remind the public to keep curtains to beach front accommodations closed at night in order to avoid disturbing the turtles. Finally, the research practices of identifying, monitoring, and protecting nests from threats, like egg eating raccoons, are paying off.

Organizations such as the Highlands Biological Station, The Nature Center, The Mountain Retreat and Learning Center, and the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust, are equally dedicated to

preserve our environment. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed or unappreciated, and enhance the living in Highlands every day. I hope folks living and visiting the Highlands Plateau will also continue to be mindful of activities and interactions that impact living organisms here in this unique environment. I still have hope.