

- Prescribed Fire and Protecting Communities
- The Environmental Crisis of Plastic Pollution
- A New Event for 2018: *Lowcountry Evening for Wildlife, March* 15, 2018



Dedicated to preserving the ecosystems and wildlife of the South Carolina coast for future generations, we support our national forest and wildlife refuges through our education programs, advocacy work and by engaging citizens in stewardship of these critical resources.

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Cover photos courtesy of Andy Day.

Front cover: Glossy Ibis

Back cover (and right): Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks

Our thanks to AccuPrint of Mount Pleasant for their support with production of this newsletter.

From the Director

Dear Friends,

I delight in once again thanking you for all you have made possible for Friends of Coastal South Carolina in the past year. It has been a spectacular year for our education programs, with our new programs coordinator Crystal Herron and Naturalist Dana Norton joining us. Both have brought amazing energy and passion for teaching to our programs.

Education remains at the core of our mission. Introducing children to the amazing outdoor classrooms of our forest and wildlife refuges is the best way we know to begin instilling an understanding of the powerful link between our communities and our protected wild places, a connection which is often more difficult to make with adults. Our unique relationship with our forest and refuges also allows our students access to current research and conservation programs on the forest and refuges, another amazing way to link our kids to real-world science going on every day in their own back yards.

Your generous support also allows us, as a Friends group, to provide direct support to our forest and refuges for many of these critical programs, including loggerhead sea turtle conservation at Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge and a variety of invasive species eradication projects, through the years. This link between education programs and conservation programs truly allows your support to have an impact on multiple levels.

In the spirit of education and citizen stewardship, we have taken the opportunity to explore two important issues impacting our public lands and our communities in this issue. First, we are highlighting some shocking new research on plastic production and waste. How we use plastics is a poignant example of how our actions at home impact our wild places and wildlife every day. Secondly, Francis Marion National Forest staff share their perspective on the benefits of prescribed fire for communities. Both are powerful examples of the interdependence between our communities and our protected lands.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not address the past year's political climate. As expected, we have seen conservation attacked at every level, including the gutting of budgets for critical work on our refuges and forest, like wildfire prevention. Which makes no sense, since it is much less costly to prevent catastrophic wildfires than to fight them. The argument as to whether our public lands are best preserved or exploited (oil and gas drilling, for example) is front and center again. It's not a new debate. In fact, it began in the mid 1800s when people first began to realize our natural resources were not inexhaustible. Despite all of this, victories continue to happen on the local level with significant land acquisition victories for our forest and refuges, and citizens stepping up to advocate for the things that are important to them. With your support that is exactly where we will continue to work the hardest.

With deepest appreciation,

Grace

P.S. Please see details about our new 2018 event, Lowcountry Evening for Wildlife, page 7!



Prescribed Fire on the Francis Marion National Forest: A Commitment to Communities as well as Ecosystems

By Jeff Davids Supervisory Fire Engine Operator Francis Marion National Forest

On April 22, 2009, firefighters responded to a two acre wildfire located in a forested area within a few hundred feet of a residential subdivision in Myrtle Beach. Within a 36-hour period the fire grew rapidly to just over 19,000 acres, destroying 76 homes in the process. Over 700 individuals from 20 agencies responded to the Highway 31 Fire which became the largest mobilization of emergency personnel in South Carolina history.

As Charleston continues to experience rapid growth, more residents will be living in areas directly adjacent to forested lands. Such locations, known as the Wildland-Urban Interface, or WUI, have an elevated and tangible threat from uncontrolled wildfire.

To address this reality, local, state, and federal agencies, along with community organizations, are working together to cooperatively identify and mitigate the threat of wildfire throughout the Lowcountry. The goal is to create fire-adapted communities within fire-adapted ecosystems.

Land managers on the Francis Marion National Forest use prescribed fire to enhance plant and animal biodiversity and to restore the natural ecological structure of a fire-adapted ecosystem while reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire through hazardous fuel reduction. The Francis Marion National Forest burns annually approximately 35,000 to 48,000 acres, most of which is in the WUI. Often times when local residents see smoke in the air on their commute home, they are witnessing community protection efforts taking place in the form of prescribed fire. "We have a critical need and responsibility to provide for community wildfire protection for both Berkeley and Charleston counties," said Francis Marion District Ranger Rhea Whalen. "An active prescribed-burn program is key to reducing hazardous fuels that might otherwise result in catastrophic fire in the Wildland/Urban Interface."

The relationship between urbanization and the increasing threat of catastrophic wildfire is tangible. From 2010 to 2016, the Charleston metropolitan area experienced a growth rate 3 times higher than the national average of 14.7 percent.

According to the *Federal Register*, the State of South Carolina has 60 communities at risk from wildfire. Twelve such communities fall within the proclamation boundary of the Francis Marion National Forest. Despite increasing complexities related to population growth, smoke management, and challenging budgets, prescribed fire is the most practical and economical method to reduce the accumulation of combustible fuels while decreasing the threat of catastrophic wildfire to local communities. In 2017 the Francis Marion National Forest conducted approximately 20 prescribed fires within 1.5 miles of such "at-risk" communities.

Through hand and aerial ignition practices, the district strives to maintain the natural fire return interval of 1-3 years within pine ecosystems while reducing the threat of wildfire to local communities. Though prescribed fire operations may occur any time throughout the year, the majority of prescribed fire operations on the Francis Marion National Forest occur from February through May.

Resources:

For information on making your home and community fire safe, try the *Fire Adapted Communities* website at Fireadapted.org

Local fire safe initiatives:

The Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) - The CWPP was collaboratively developed by local and state government representatives, in consultation with the Francis Marion National Forest, to address the challenges of wildland fire protection in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. For more information on this initiative and local planning, contact the Francis Marion Ranger District at 2967 Steed Creek Road, Huger, SC 29450, 843-336-2200.

Prescribed fire makes an important economic contribution to our communities. Wildfire risk reduction may save 20 times the costs of wildfire suppression. In addition every acre of land with reduced wildfire risk represents a public cost savings of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per acre (Fireadapted.org). Above: Wildfire on the outskirts of McCllellanville, SC in 2010.





Meet Our Education Programs Team

Teaching kids in the field is as much an art as it is a science lesson, and the skill and dedication of our education programs team are what set our programs apart in quality.

Crystal Herron (left) joined our team in January. A College of Charleston graduate with a degree in marine biology, Crystal is a skilled naturalist. The first time I saw Crystal with kids during the interview process, I knew we wouldn't find a better teacher, and she has proven me correct. Her skill and creativity have already brought our programs to a new level of excellence.

Dana Norton (right) joined us as a part-time instructor this summer. We are delighted to welcome Dana as a permanent member of our team. Dana's primary role will be as an instructor for field studies lessons. She will be key in helping us meet the increasing demand we have seen for programs over the last few years.

Earth Stewards Grows to Include an Additional Field Experience

The 2017 school year is off to a spectacular start. Over 900 students and their teachers are benefiting from the Earth Stewards program this year. The talent and creativity of our educators has allowed us to keep our programs innovative, engaging and timely through many changes over the years. We have readily adapted to changing South Carolina educational standards, and teachers continue to depend on our programs as valuable tools to engage students in STEM learning.

We have taken another exciting step forward in the Earth Stewards program experience this year. We have long been looking for ways to give our kids even more time in the field. If it were up to us, we would conduct every lesson with our students in the field. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, additional travel to our forest and refuges is not always an option for our participating schools.

This year, as a solution, we restructured the introductory Earth Stewards program (the first in a series of eight lessons) to an "on-campus" field studies format at our students' schools. This has allowed us to add additional outdoor exploration time with our students as well as additional academic learning time. Another benefit has been



Dana just completed her bachelor's degree in marine biology and environmental science at the College of Charleston. It is you, our generous supporters, that make it possible for us to have such a skilled and professional team, and we are grateful.



Students explore the ecosystems of Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge as they learn about biodiversity and the factors that limit the health of ecosystems.

that students are able to compare the biodiversity and health of the ecosystems surrounding the built environment of their school to that of the forest and refuges they will visit in subsequent field studies trips. Of course, in-class lessons continue to build on field experiences throughout the program.

This change, along with an additional instructor, has already allowed us to expand the learning experience we offer. Fifth grade students study four science units during the school year: Ecosystems, Force and Motion, Mixtures and Solutions, and Changes in Oceans and Landforms.

Although the Earth Stewards program traditionally focuses heavily on the Ecosystems unit, this past spring we officially added a unit covering the Changes in Oceans and Landforms. This fall we began incorporating additional concepts from the Force and Motion, Mixtures and Solutions units.

The outdoor classrooms of our forest and refuges provide great laboratories for introducing kids hands-on to a variety of science concepts, and we are all about science learning. And face it; learning outdoors is cool, regardless of the subject!

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Pleasant Hill Students Show Us What Stewardship is All About

Students from Pleasant Hill Elementary in Georgetown County enhanced habitat on Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge by building and installing bluebird boxes as part of their Earth Stewards program service learning project.

We always encourage students to put the knowledge they gain in the Earth Stewards program to work to make a real difference in the environment.

The impact these students made was easy to see the first time the boxes were checked! Bluebirds moved in almost immediately. Nest boxes may seem like a small thing but this experience left our students believing they could make a real difference.



Earth Stewards Students Return as Volunteers and Teachers

As the Earth Stewards program enters its 17th year, we are meeting up with more and more of our former students, and we are delighted about how close to home we are finding them.

We can think of no better way to illustrate what a lasting impact your support has made over the last 17 years than to share their stories and memories with you.

This year's Saint James Santee Earth Stewards students with their science teacher Shalissa Garrett. On this day students were gathering "brown" material for their newly constructed compost pile.

Shalissa Garrett (above, far right, in blue and orange) was an Earth Stewards student in fifth grade. Today she is the fourth-grade homeroom teacher and fifth grade science teacher at her old school, St. James Santee Elementary, taking her students through the Earth Stewards program.

Shalissa grew up in McClellanville, graduated from Lincoln High School, and attended USC Upstate in Spartanburg and the College of Charleston. She has earned a bachelor's in political science and a master's in elementary education.

Shalissa told us, "I remember the Earth Stewards field trips the most. I don't consider myself an outdoor person, but I remember I loved being out in the swamps and learning about cypress knees."

My decision to teach at Saint James Santee was a no-brainer. SJS is where my love of learning, especially reading, was fostered and nurtured. It was only right that I come back to share with others that feeling of loving, growth, and success that my teachers

shared with me."

Madison Cantrell (right) is a senior at Wando High School. She was an Earth Stewards student as a fifth grader at Bell Hall Elementary. Madison came back to volunteer with us this summer, and had even kept her Earth Stewards t-shirt!

"My favorite memory of the Earth Stewards program was getting out into nature and learning about our native species. I also enjoyed the idea that it took the place of being inside all day at school. After the program, I went camping with my family frequently on Hilton Head. I remember teaching them about the native plant species I had learned about in the program!"

Madison plans to go to either Clemson University or Appalachian State, majoring in Environmental Sustainability and Science.



Former Earth Stewards student Madison Cantrell, now a senior at Wando High School, returned to volunteer with us this summer. The box turtle Madison is holding was also part of the program when Madison was a fifth grader.

Land Managers from Russia's Parks System Visit Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge

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Our Cape Romain staff gave a delegation of land managers from the Russian equivalent of our parks system a tour of Cape Romain this fall. It was very exciting to have the opportunity to learn about the work our Russian counterparts were doing and the challenges they faced on their public lands. It was no surprise that their conservation challenges mirrored ours almost exactly, with funding being at the top of their list, followed closely by development and pollution.

Executive Director Grace Gasper also had the opportunity to discuss education programing with one of the delegates, and they were both very enthusiastic about exploring the possibility of connecting the kids studying on US and Russian public lands. Stay tuned on that one!



Happy 20th Anniversary, Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge

Thanks to all who came out to celebrate Waccamaw's 20th at Cox Ferry Lake Recreation Area on December 1st. In 20 years the refuge has protected over 30,000 ecologically critical acres of land in Georgetown and Horry Counties.

From protecting habitat for swallow-tailed kites, black bears and waterfowl to protecting the primary drinking water resource for the region and wetlands that provide critical flood protection, the refuge has made an irreplaceable contribution to the surrounding communities.

We are delighted to have been able to lend support to completion of the visitor center and many other Waccamaw projects through the years.

Patrick McMillan Event Raises Over \$8,000 for Sea Turtle Conservation on Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge

Our sincere thanks to Patrick McMillan, all who attended his inspiring presentation at the Charleston Library Society in June, and our event sponsor Coastal Expeditions.



When the scheduled Sunday trip to Bulls Island was cancelled due to weather, Patrick filled the morning with another amazing presentation at the Sewee Visitor and Environmental Education Center.



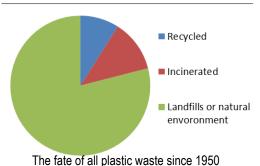
Thousands View the Solar Eclipse from our Forest and Refuges

Over 2,300 people came to Francis Marion National Forest and Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge recreation areas to experience the August solar eclipse. Forest, Refuge and Friends staff, along with visiting scientists, provided interpretation and plenty of kids' activities, throughout the day.

Eclipse-watchers at Buck Hall (L top), Sewee Visitor and Environmental Education Center (L below), and Garris Landing at "totality" (Right).



Plastic pollution: an environmental crisis equivalent to climate change



Encouraging people to take action on issues that impact our national forest and wildlife refuges is key to our mission, and plastic pollution requires action from all of us. Just like reducing our carbon footprint, rethinking our use of plastics is something we all must do, to protect not only the wildlands and wildlife we love but also our communities and our health.

The global epidemic of plastic pollution has been cited as an environmental crisis equivalent to climate change. Globally, about 20,000 plastic drink bottles are being bought every second. Worldwide, more than 480 billion plastic drink bottles were sold in 2016; placed end to end, all those bottles would extend halfway to the sun.

The extent of the plastics crisis was made shockingly clear by the first long-term global analysis of all mass-produced plastics ever made, and their fate, which was published in the journal *Science Advances* this summer. Since plastics became a part of our everyday lives in the 1950s, researchers estimated 8,300 million metric tons of virgin plastics have been produced to date, and we are learning they don't go away. They simply break down to microplastics, smaller and smaller pieces of plastic.

As of 2015, approximately 6,300 million metric tons of plastic waste had been generated. Around 9% had been recycled, 12% was incinerated, and 79% has accumulated in landfills or the natural environment. If current trends continue, roughly 12,000 million metric tons of plastic waste will be in landfills or in the natural environment by 2050 (about the time this year's sea turtle hatchlings will reach maturity).



Of the plastic waste in the natural environment, between 5 million and 13 million tons of plastic waste is estimated to end up in our rivers and oceans each year. It has been estimated that by 2050 the ocean will contain more plastic by weight than fish. Much of the ocean's waste comes from areas with no organized sanitation service, where trash is intentionally left by streams to be washed away. China and Indonesia are among the biggest polluters. Concentrated by ocean currents, plastics are reaching some of the most remote, least inhabited places on earth (see Henderson Island, below).

The dangers of plastics to wildlife are not news, especially here in the Lowcountry. Plastics are impacting species our forest and refuges protect. The South Carolina Aquarium has admitted 15 sea turtles in the last three years alone with plastic in their GI tracts. Shore and wading birds become entangled in bags and other visible plastics. Microplastics are entering the food chain, which means our finfish and shellfish may be at risk, as well as the wildlife and people they nourish. There is research taking place in Charleston Harbor, Winyah Bay, and area rivers (fresh water systems are impacted as well) to quantify the amount of microplastics in our waters and the possible human health impacts. There is also significant ongoing international research trying to assess the human health impacts of microplastics.

Microplastics don't just come from the breakdown of plastic bottles and packaging. They come from fleece clothing. The fibers released by fleece when it is washed are so small they pass through wastewater filters and enter the environment through treated effluent released into waterways. Research done in 2016 concluded that a single cycle of a washing machine could release more than 700,000 microplastic fibers into the environment.

Plastic recycling is failing. The biggest contribution to plastic pollution is single-use packaging with plastic bottles leading the way. Fewer than half of the 480 billion plastic drink bottles bought in 2016 were collected for recycling, and just 7% of those collected were turned into new bottles. Instead, most plastic bottles produced end up in landfill or in the ocean. To compound the problem, the top six soft drink companies in the world use a combined average of just 6.6% of recycled plastic in their bottles. One of the reasons cited by soft drink manufactures for not using recycled plastic in their bottles is that recycled bottles are cloudy rather than crystalclear and they fear a less than crystal-clear bottle will be unattractive to consumers. The bottom line is the best option to reduce plastic waste right now is to use less plastic and, as consumers with buying power, pressure industry for plastic-free alternatives. *See page 8 for more on recycling.*

We are making progress in kicking the plastic habit. Communities all along the South Carolina coast are, despite opposition from the plastics industry, moving to ban single-use plastic bags. Organizations like Surfrider are offering "Ocean Friendly" certifications to recognize local restaurants who kick the plastic habit.

In the case of plastics, some of the most important things we can do to help protect our national forest and wildlife refuges (and wildlife) are the things we do at home every day.

What can you do?

- Most importantly, just pick one plastic habit to kick and get a friend or two to join you.
- Thank those businesses who work to reduce plastic waste with your patronage.
- Next time you do buy a drink, choose one in an aluminum can rather than a plastic bottle.
- Did you know you can drink two liters of tap water every day for a cost of 50 cents a year? All it takes is a reusable water bottle.

Want to help us rid our forest of plastics (and a lot of other trash)? Join us for the 11th annual *Francis Marion National Forest Palmetto Pride Cleanup* on Saturday, February 3, 2018 at 9:00 a.m.

To volunteer, contact Scott Morgan at smorgan@palmettopride.org



Not even the most remote and protected place on earth is immune from plastic pollution:



Henderson Island, a coral atoll in the Pacific Ocean, is a World Heritage Site. It is one of the least visited and most protected areas of land on the planet. Yet last summer researchers estimated 17,000 kilograms of plastic waste have accumulated on the small island, which may be the highest density of plastic debris reported anywhere in the world. That much plastic represents just *two seconds* of the world's current plastic production. The plastic waste on Henderson was identified as coming from every continent except Antarctica. Let's act now before this happens to places like Cape Romain.



A New Event for 2018!

Save the Date: Thursday, March 15, 2018

5:30 pm

Alhambra Hall, Old Village, Mt Pleasant, SC

Join Friends of Coastal South Carolina and *National Geographic* photographer Vincent J. Musi for a

Lowcountry Evening for Wildlife

Benefiting the education programs and conservation projects of Friends of Coastal South Carolina.

- Vince Musi presentation
- Locally sourced cuisine and cocktails
- Same spectacular silent auction

If you liked *Music and Oysters for Wildlife*, you will love our beautiful new venue and style. We promise a quintessential Lowcountry evening. Of course, we are keeping our fantastic silent auction just as is.

Tickets, \$75, include food, beverage and presentation.

Tickets available December 2017 www.sccoastalfriends.org

About Vince Musi:

For more than 30 years, Vince Musi has photographed diverse subjects — from traveling Route 66 to global warming, life under volcanoes, Sicilian mummies, the American landscape, culture, history and archaeology. In November 2014, Vince brought the timelessness of the ACE Basin to the pages of *National Geographic* in *Lowcountry Legacy*.

Musi began as a freelance photographer with the National Geographic Society in 1993, contributing to several book projects and more than a dozen *National Geographic*

magazine articles. He's been published in *Time*, *Newsweek Life*, *Fortune*, and *the New York Times Magazine*. His work was included in *National Geographic's* Top Ten photographs, and he has 11 covers of the magazine to his credit; the most recent was the April 2014 issue on Exotic Pets. Vince lives on Sullivan's Island, SC.



The Plastic Crisis... Continued from page 6



Should we give up on recycling?

Absolutely not. Only around 7 percent of plastics are recycled, because plastic recycling is suffering from bad economics. Plastics are produced using oil, and with oil prices low, it is cheaper to produce new plastics than to recycle. Recycling capacity is also an issue. The majority of our recycling waste is shipped to China, and China is being more selective about the quality and quantity of recyclables they are taking, because they don't want to have to dispose of what they can't process.

Although plastic recycling falls short, aluminum is a very different story. The economics work. Recycling aluminum costs about 5 to 10 percent of what it costs to produce

new aluminum. The result is the aluminum can has the highest recycling rate of any beverage container (about 67 percent) and contains about 70 percent recycled content. Aluminum can also be recycled over and over. Atlanta, GAbased Novelisis is introducing a 90 percent recycled aluminum can.

Paper recycling works better too, with 60 to 70 percent of collected paper being recycled. Although 42 percent of recovered paper is exported to overseas markets, about 53 percent stays in the US to be recycled into paper and paperboard products. Each ton (2000 pounds) of recycled paper can save 17 trees, 380 gallons of oil, three cubic yards of landfill space, 4000 kilowatts of energy, and 7000 gallons of water.

Thank You to Our Donors Without You, Our Work is Not Possible

Foundations

The Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation U.S. Forest Service, More Kids in the Woods grant program Funds of the Coastal Community Foundation of South Carolina: Lothmann Family Fund Naomi Donnelley and Joseph Butler Lowcountry Resource and Community Development

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Your generous support helped Friends of Coastal South Carolina raise \$18,075 for our work along 100 miles of the South Carolina coast. Thank you!

Thirty-three nonprofit organizations from Georgetown County and beyond came together on May 2nd, with the support of the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation, to host the first annual *Palmetto Giving Day*. It was a true grassroots effort and an unprecedented success, with a combined total of over \$600,000 raised. We were honored to be part of such an impressive example of the power of collaboration. Planning is already underway for 2018.

Palmetto Giving Day 2018: Tuesday, May 1, 2018

\$7,500

Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation (Matching Gift)

\$1000

Alyssondra Campaigne Coastal Expeditions George and Betsey Geer Michael and Virginia Prevost

\$500

Hal Crow Mr. and Mrs. Jody Tamsberg Sarah Hartman

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\$40-\$15

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Many Thanks for Music and Oysters for Wildlife



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The Rusty Rudder Restaurant, Carolina Seafood, and Charleston Bay Gourmet, for providing food and beverage, and the Sewee Outpost and Awendaw Green, for the fantastic venue and music.

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Make a donation to Friends of Coastal South Carolina **in honor** of someone special to you, or give a **gift membership**. Your gift makes a lasting impact, and we will send our latest newsletter, a cloth shopping bag and a car decal to the recipient when we acknowledge your thoughtful gift.

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PO Box 1131 Mt. Pleasant, SC 29465-1131 Founded 1996 as the SEWEE Association

Lowcountry Evening For Wildlife

Thursday March 15, 2018 5:30pm Alhambra Hall, Old Village, Mt Pleasant, SC

> Tickets available December 2017 www.sccoastalfriends.org

