

Pet lovers raise hackles in Shell Island hearing

## Dog owners bark at park service

*By David Angier*

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Three Florida Park Service members gathered information Tuesday night from 175 dog owners and bird lovers about the future of Shell Island.

"We're not here to debate," Park Service officer Albert Gregory told those gathered. "We're not here to argue with you. We're here to listen to you.

"We're not trying to limit, reduce or eliminate public use of Shell Island."

But, Gregory said, there was no way to ignore the law.

Recently, officers have cited dog owners with allowing their pets to run free on the island. The citations sparked an emotional debate about the liberties that dog owners traditionally have enjoyed on the island.

Tuesday's public comments, Gregory said, would be used to help the Park Service develop its plans for the 700-acre barrier island that forms the eastern half of the pass into St. Andrew Bay.

"Shell Island is truly a gift to our county," Marie Presser said. "We've always gone to Shell Island and we've always taken our dogs."

Park Service officer John Bente told those gathered that there are several types of threatened birds, and a rare mouse, that nest on Shell Island's beach and are disturbed by dogs. He said birds such as plovers, black skimmers and American oystercatchers can be more disturbed by dogs than humans on the beach.

Bente said a bird leaving a nest for only a few minutes could return to find its eggs "cooked" by the sun.

Many of those gathered for the forum in a Gulf Coast Community College lecture hall brought pictures of their pets which they held up during the meeting.

Presser's husband Greg said he was a fairly observant person and in the hundreds of trips he's taken to Shell Island with the family dogs, he's never seen them attack a bird. Greg Presser said he rarely sees the birds that Bente talked about.

Bente said Shell Island is a rare, undeveloped beach area. State parks such as Shell Island, St. Joseph's Peninsula and St. George Island make up 70 percent of nesting sites for threatened shore birds.

"Shell Island is one of the last remaining undeveloped coast habitats in Northwest Florida," Bente said. "It's a wild island full of natural treasures."

Marie Presser said she was a member of the Audubon Society, but that organization was on hand to oppose changing the dog restrictions on the island.

"I am a dog lover," Bay County Audubon Society President Neil Lamb wrote in a prepared statement that Julie Wraithmell handed out before the forum. "Yet, I understand that there are appropriate and inappropriate place for dogs in public. The prohibition of dogs on state park beaches also protects the imperiled wildlife that depend on these preserves for habitat."

Mary Sittman said she owns several lots on Shell Island and was participating in a county program to swap that land for mainland properties. She said she would reconsider swapping her remaining parcels unless the Park Service could guarantee a place on the island where she and friends could bring their dogs.

She said there was a double standard from the Park Service in maintaining the island. She said officers do nothing about commercial tours that bring tourists to the island and don't provide restrooms or a place for their litter.

Most of those who spoke within the first hour of the meeting asked the Park Service to work with

residents to create a dog park on the island.

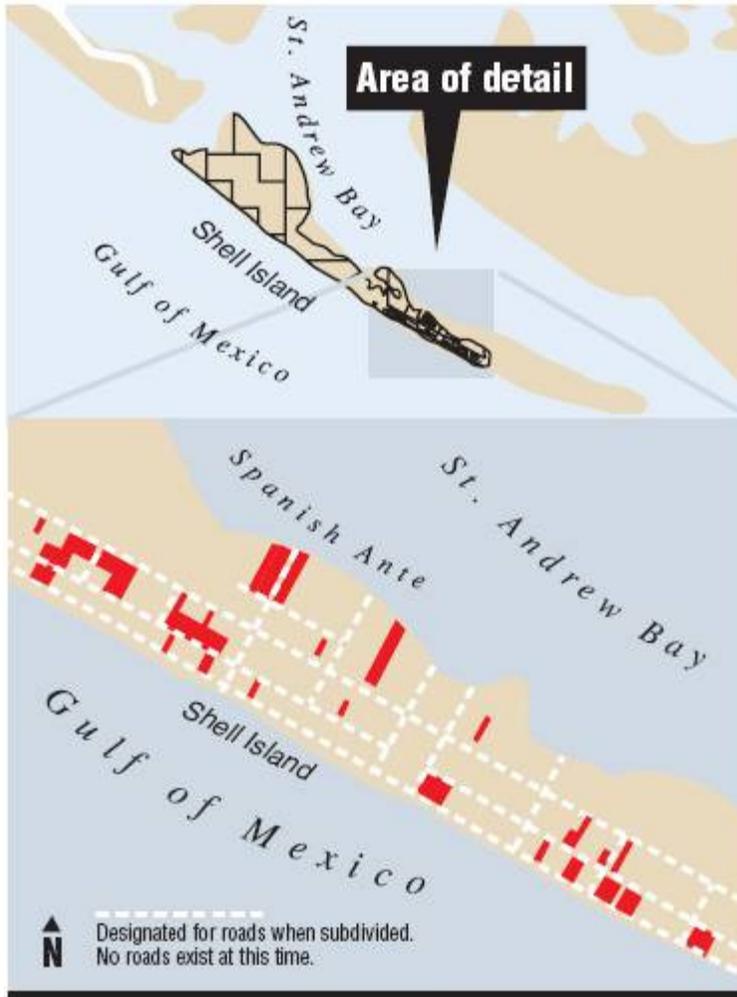
"I've been able to take Rascal to the island once," David Swaim told the officers, referring to his dog. He said he's upset that he and Rascal are unable to enjoy Shell Island like other dog owners have through the years. "There's no place to let Rascal run or discover the water. I don't understand what happened to change what was happening on Shell Island."



Terry Barner / The News Herald

During a public forum Tuesday night about allowing dogs in Shell Island, Megan Sizmur, left, and Leilana Lehtio, both of Panama City, showed photographs of their dogs to representatives of the Florida Park Service at Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City.

**■ Shell Island privately owned lots**



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