

Shell Island rules change

[By Ryan Burr](#)

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — One of the most popular destinations this holiday weekend, state parks, will not be magnets for criminal citations this year.

A law that went into effect last week decriminalized violations of most state park rules, such as taking a dog that went on the wrong part of Shell Island or consuming an alcoholic beverage on the beach. Such rule-breaking will be treated as a civil infraction with fines up to \$1,000 and possible eviction from the park.

During the summer of 2006, Florida Park Patrol officers handed more than a dozen Shell Island visitors notices to appear in court on second-degree misdemeanor charges for various park violations.

"Ever since the summer of 2006 when people were, without warning, suddenly charged with criminal offenses for violating unknown park rules while enjoying Shell Island, we have been working to decriminalize these," Stephanie Somerset, executive director of Bay Families with Dogs Inc., said in a news release. "Justice is not served by giving people criminal records for enjoying the same recreational activities they've been able to enjoy for more than 100 years."

The most serious state park violations, such as killing wildlife, are criminal actions under the new law.

Somerset's organization worked with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which oversees the Florida Park Patrol, to see the decriminalization law passed.

"We congratulate the DEP for recognizing that visitors to state parks don't typically intend to cause crimes. It's encouraging to see common sense prevail," Somerset said.

The Legislature passed the decriminalization legislation in 2007, but Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed it because of its effects on the Babcock Ranch Preserve in South Florida.

In her news release, Somerset quoted Jack Mashburn, the former state legislator who spearheaded the creation of St. Andrews State Park in 1953: "I was privileged to help create St. Andrews State Park when I was in the Florida Legislature, and I applaud the decriminalization," he said. "Our state parks should welcome all citizens of any color, creed or race, and treat them as the honored guests that they are."

Since complaints piled up about park rule enforcement in 2006, DEP has acknowledged the rules do not apply on wet sand, in the water or on private and county lots and roads. Somerset said Bay Families with Dogs continues to advocate for "a broader resolution to retain recreational access for boating visitors — citizens who have enjoyed Shell Island for generations — with and without their faithful dogs along."