

Island-goers debate liberties traditionally enjoyed by pet owners

Canine controversy heats up

Citations expected for dogs on Shell Island

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PANAMA CITY

As the weather heats up again, so too does a controversy about whether dogs should be allowed at Shell Island.

Officers from the Florida Park Service, a division of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, began issuing warnings and criminal citations last summer to dog owners who let their pets run free on the island.

The citations sparked an emotional debate about liberties traditionally enjoyed by dog owners at Shell Island, culminating with a September meeting between island-goers on both sides of the issue and representatives from the state agency.

But park officials plan to continue their enforcement efforts this summer in accordance with the Park Service's rules, said DEP spokeswoman Katie Flanagan.

"Until those rules change, we intend to enforce them," Flanagan said. "Dogs are not allowed on the beaches inside state parks."

Park officials have said the dogs disturb several types of threatened birds and a rare mouse that nest on the 700-acre barrier.

Private property, however, is not subject to the no-dogs-allowed rule.

Mary Sittman, who owns several lots at Shell Island, said she had hoped DEP would back off its enforcement efforts until a long-term agreement is reached.

"I had hoped that in the meantime, DEP would let us be the good stewards that we have been at Shell Island for so many years," Sittman said.

She said she would expect vigorous enforcement of serious criminal activity at the island, but questions the sensibility of criminal citations to dog owners.

"There are better uses of our tax dollars," Sittman said. "It's a silly waste of taxpayer money."

Sittman let a group against DEP's crackdown on dogs stage a protest at her property last summer, and they'll be there again this year, said Bay Families with Dogs Executive Director Stephanie Somerset.

Somerset said DEP moved "a step in the right direction" last year by clarifying that the state would not enforce its policies on private property, county property or below the mean high water line, meaning on the wet sand and in the water.

She said that in January she got those promises in writing.

"That doesn't fully satisfy the recreational need for which we advocate," she said. "We are still advocating for the county and DEP to work with us to find a section of Shell Island that we can enjoy with our dogs."

Such cooperation is in the works.

The Bay County Commission weighed in on the issue earlier this month, asking DEP to participate in a stakeholders' meeting in the hopes of a compromise, and Flanagan said DEP would take part.

The meeting should take place within the next few weeks, County Attorney Terrell Arline said.

"We would expect our government to listen to the constituency, especially since our tax dollars bought that island for recreation purposes," Somerset said.



Robert Cooper / The News Herald

Stephanie Somerset and her Siberian husky, Rocky, make frequent trips to Shell Island. Somerset is executive director of Bay Families with Dogs, a group that supports the idea of allowing dogs on the beaches inside state parks such as Shell Island.



Andrew Wardlow / The News Herald

Park officials say the dogs disturb several types of threatened birds and a rare mouse that nest on the 700-acre barrier island.

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Tom Needham / The News Herald

The once-pristine Shell Island has become very popular to tourists who visit in throngs during the summer. Law enforcement is trying to minimize the impact to the island not by limiting people, but by banning dogs at the beach.

