

Position Paper
Allowing the Continued Recreational Pursuit of
Families with Dogs Enjoying Shell Island Together

*"Dogs are not our whole life,
but they make our lives
whole" Roger Caras*

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Bay Families with Dogs
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The Issue

For generations, a significant number of Bay County citizens have been traveling to a remote area of Shell Island by boat with their family dogs and peacefully enjoying the beaches together there. This has worked well: there is no other place for these families to enjoy area beaches with their dogs; the families have been quiet, responsible and clean; the island is uninhabited, and the remoteness of the area means that there has been no dispute over this recreational pursuit for many decades. It has been considered the 'de facto' place for people and dogs to play together.

A change has occurred. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is enforcing a park rule about dogs. Although they allow dogs in State Parks, they are saying that all of Shell Island is off limits. DEP has now equipped Park Patrol enforcement agents with ATVs (all terrain vehicles) so that they can reach the remote end of their part of the island. In the past few weeks, these agents have begun a campaign of seeking out these families and warning or ticketing them, telling them that due to DEP rules, they can no longer enjoy the beaches with their dogs.

These are responsible, law-abiding citizens. After recovering from the initial shock that they may have been doing something wrong (most of these visitors had no idea that this was what DEP has declared as the rule, or even where the park boundaries are), the second emotion these families feel is that of despair at having a cherished individual freedom taken away from them.

We seek to find a resolution to this issue by working within the existing processes and laws to address it.

The Extended Family Today Includes Our Companion Animals

Over the years our society has evolved in many positive ways towards a more tolerant, nurturing community. One example is the now-established understanding that the family dog is not just a pet, it is a companion who has earned a rightful place as a family member. Studies have proven that dog ownership:

- Provides a positive environment for interaction with other people and their dogs
- Fosters a sense of community
- Teaches children responsibility and increases their capacity for kindness
- Provides valuable companionship for singles, the elderly, and people whose children are grown

In a recent study, 70% of families surveyed reported an increase in family happiness and fun subsequent to pet acquisition. 87% of people surveyed for another study agreed strongly that their pet was a part of their family.

The recognition of the cherished status that dogs hold in our society is made more evident by:

- The increased focus by FEMA and emergency planners on providing hurricane shelters that will allow family pets

- The bill signed into law this year by Governor Jeb Bush allowing people with their dogs to dine in outdoor sections of Florida restaurants
- The increased use of “Therapy Dogs” to provide comfort in nursing homes and hospitals
- Programs in which children learn to read faster by reading to dogs

Families with Dogs are a Growing Tourism Market Segment

In recent years there has been a remarkable increase in Americans who take their dogs with them everywhere they go. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, more than 29 million Americans took trips of more than 50 miles with their pets during the past three years. A recent survey by the American Animal Hospital Association found that 66 percent of owners vacation with their pets, and most will travel by car. Americans spent \$36 billion on their pets in 2005 according to the American Pet Products Manufacturing Association.

Tourism industry representatives are reaching out to dog owners by promoting pet-friendly beaches as an asset to families with dogs. The website visitflorida.com says of St. George Island in neighboring Franklin County, “The island is also very pet friendly. Well-behaved dogs are welcome on the beaches and pets are allowed in many of the rental homes.” In fact, there are 196 vacation properties on St. George Island that cater to pet owners and promote the dog-friendly beach as a tourism asset on their 19 miles of gulf-front beachside.

Bay Families With Dogs Have a Legitimate Recreational Pursuit

Many of the families of Bay County consider enjoying the area’s beaches our primary recreational pursuit. We love our local beaches, the most beautiful in the world. And along with us come our cherished family members, our dogs. Dogs make their people happy. Having our dogs with us is an essential way of caring for them, and allows us to give back to the animals who give us all so much.

Our dogs love the beach. We can’t imagine being there without them. We play, swim, and frolic together. We exercise them and in return they exercise us, making us all happier and healthier. In fact, people who own pets are statistically healthier than those who don’t. And dogs enhance the recreational experience: studies show that blood pressure and anxiety levels drop when people are around pets.

Dog owners represent a large constituency of tax paying voters in Bay County. 39% of Americans own at least one dog. In Bay County that would make us 58,000 strong. Granted, there are people who don’t share this interest. But that doesn’t make ours less intense or less valid.

Families with Dogs on Beaches are Common Nationwide

Florida has over 40 different beaches where responsible dog owners are allowed to bring their dogs. In addition to previously-mentioned St. George Island, Fort De Soto Park in St. Petersburg, which won the 2005 “World’s Top Beaches” survey allows dogs. Florida DEP’s rule against dogs on beaches is not universal; DEP allows dogs on the beach at their Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area.

There are more than 57 existing dog beaches in California, approved by local and state organizations. Studies have shown that these dog beaches have resulted in:

- No impact on water quality
- No safety issues
- No health problems
- No liability issues

In fact, in Huntington Beach and Carmel, California it has been determined that allowing dogs on a section of the beach increased revenues from dog-loving visitors who patronized local shops, restaurants and hotels.

Bay Families with Dogs Deserve to be Allowed to Continue

The Bay County families represented have been enjoying Shell Island responsibly with our dogs for decades. We travel to the island using our private boats. At over 1,400 acres and with over 14 miles of undeveloped beaches, Shell Island is so large and remote that it makes an ideal place for all choices of recreation, including ours.

We have proven over many years that we can enjoy the island with our dogs responsibly, causing no trouble and disturbing no natural resources. Our dogs' behavior is a reflection on our level of responsibility, so we care deeply about how our dogs are perceived and we insure that they are behaving. We pick up after ourselves, after our dogs, and often after others if necessary, and we insure that non-dog owners are not disturbed.

Studies have shown that responsible dog owners police themselves, and the families with dogs that enjoy Shell Island do this. These same families will even go so far as to ask disruptive groups to leave, which is what happened recently with some unruly young people at the island. They obeyed the request and left peacefully. This prevented an escalation into an issue that would have strained Park Patrol resources.

This is an established way of life for many citizens of Bay County. We love Shell Island and want to preserve it for generations to come. Because Shell Island is so large, we can actually help DEP by promoting proper use of natural resources and report problems and issues. Many of us have volunteered in local efforts to help the park; we can work together to make it better for everyone.

We Should Balance Recreational and Environmental Interests in a Fair Way

We respect the environment but also believe that making all 1,400 acres of Shell Island a sanctuary for wildlife and using it as a reason to ban our long-practiced, chosen form of recreation is excessive. There are over 14 miles of beachfront that can sustain recreational as well as environmental interests. Add to that the protected shoreline owned by Tyndall Air Force Base and there are more than 25 miles of uninhabited gulf front beach and 15 miles of uninhabited bay front beach that can nurture wildlife.

In contrast, there are usually no more than 20 families with dogs on the entire island at any point in time. The small environmental footprint of these families would not be a significant impact to the entire area.

Dogs have been both companion and helpmate to humans for centuries, in recreational pursuits as well as in the natural environment. In recent years, dogs are actually being used to help endangered wildlife. National Geographic magazine reports that scientists are gaining information about species ranging from foxes to whales, including population size, fertility, gender, stress, and extent of home range, by training dogs to help locate them.

The Penalties are Excessive

The fact that a violation of Florida State Park rules is classified as a second degree misdemeanor, (a criminal offense with a maximum 60-day jail term), serves to further compound the sting of governmental overreach. Back in his day, Little Timmy did not have to face the prospect of going to the slammer for taking Lassie to play in a wildlife habitat.

The Purpose of the Park is for Families' Recreation

The lead sentence of the Florida statute describing the purpose of our state parks states:

“It shall be the policy of the Division of Parks and Recreation to promote the state park system for the use, enjoyment, and benefit of the people of Florida and visitors.” Our use, enjoyment and benefit have been earned by us and we deserve to be able to continue it.

Conclusion

We are responsible citizens who care about our beautiful island and its natural resources. We will seek solutions that will allow us to continue using our public land for our chosen form of recreation.