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By Stephanie Somerset

A recent opinion editorial by Mr. Ron Merritt advocated for dogs being allowed to run free on beaches from St. Andrews State Park to Phillips Inlet, rather than Shell Island.

Let me be the first and loudest voice to say that this is *not* the position of Bay Families with Dogs. We have not and will not advocate for dogs to be allowed in the highest-volume beach areas along Front Beach Road and Thomas Drive. Crowded beaches are just not the place for a playful romp with Rover.

What we are requesting is a small place in the sun and surf where we can take the entire family – two-legged and four-legged – for a day at the beach. We've been doing it for years, whether at Shell Island, Gulf County or other secluded places where we would not inconvenience others. We can't take our dogs to work, so when we are ready to play, it is our joy to have them with us. Most of these dog owners are responsible and do not appreciate irresponsible dog owners. So the code of conduct which we propose for dog-friendly beaches is this:

- Always clean up after your dog.
- Do not let your dog visit with other beach-goers, unless welcomed.
- Your dog must be well-behaved and under your control at all times by obeying your commands.
- Always pay attention to your dog.
- Your dog must be healthy, fully immunized, de-wormed, licensed and wearing ID tags.
- Cooperation between dog owners is essential – your responsibility is also to ensure that other dog owners comply with these rules.

Bay Families with Dogs supports the position that any infraction of these rules should be met with a warning or fine. It also supports the creation of dog-friendly areas on Shell Island and the mainland that would be established with consideration of bird nesting areas.

There are large areas on Shell Island that are obviously not nesting areas that would be perfect for this. Dogs generally will stay in these areas to avoid the sawgrass, nettles and brush they associate with

dunes. Whether you're a dog lover or not, the simple fact is that dogs would much rather stay with their people or frolic in the water than run around in prickly, hot dunes. And responsible dog owners will keep their animals close in order to avoid the snakes and, unfortunately, broken glass bottles that litter the dunes.

Shell Island is a treasured recreational and tourist destination for boaters. There is not a park or beach that could substitute for it. And at over 1,200 acres, there is plenty of room for various uses.

Mr. Merritt states in his opinion piece that even the presence of dogs can have a destructive impact on the “the reproductive efforts of a small group of breeding birds. It doesn't take prolonged harassment — sometimes only a few minutes of chasing birds can be sufficient to move the adults away long enough for the chicks to perish.”

First of all, the part of Shell Island we visit is a state PARK. Parks are used for recreation.

Second, if the presence of dogs is so detrimental to these birds, then can we expect that humans (especially those driving all-terrain vehicles with wild abandon over the dunes) or children playing and running gleefully, will also be banned?

Third, if these birds are so incredibly endangered and fragile, shouldn't some effort be made to relocate them to an actual island free of the coyotes, opossum, raccoons, fox, snakes and other predatory birds (yes, birds) that over-run Shell Island?

Of course, points two and three are absurd – aren't they? Certainly humans and adorable children won't be banned from roaming Shell Island as they have for scores of years – or will they?

It is sad enough to watch erosion when it happens on Shell Island's sugar sand shores – we shouldn't have to watch the erosion of our right to enjoy them.

Stephanie Somerset is the executive director of Bay Families with Dogs, Inc., a non-profit advocacy group formed to improve the community environment for people who enjoy outdoor recreation with their dogs. Goals include better education and awareness for both dog owners and the non-dog owning community, and to obtain and maintain recreation

zones on area beaches for Bay County families to enjoy responsibly with their dogs. BFWD advocates a considerate approach that respects the concerns of non-dog owners while providing rightful access to public spaces. BFWD is committed to enriching the quality of community life through responsible pet ownership, and fostering goodwill between pet owners and others. For more information visit www.bayfwd.org.