

Beach Rich, Fish Poor

By Art Nelson

Taxpayer funded, Government sanctioned marine life habitat destruction

For those of us with a passion for our Jersey shoreline as we have always known it, whether you are a fisherman, a diver or a surfer, the year 1994 has changed your life, possibly forever. 1994 was the year that the beach restoration or replenishment project was begun.

In case you have been away and don't know what I'm talking about, bear with me for an explanation. Something you need to realize before I tell you what is going on is that there just isn't any other real estate more expensive or profitable than "shore" real estate. That said, let's see how it ties in with the loss of marine habitat along the beach.

Widening the beaches has, for a long time, been a pet idea of real estate sales people as a way to sell property adjacent to those beaches. The problem, of course, has been who will pay for it, and, even though the scheme may be ill advised, what would it take to convince the general public? The December 1992 storm provided the answer.

The '92 storm left enough beach erosion and property damage to convince politicians that action must be taken NOW! Many politicians invest in shore real estate anyway, and the rest wanted to make it look like

they were doing something. Out of nowhere, advocate groups and partnerships popped up, each heavy with real estate people, politicians, and lobbyists.

The Army Corps of Engineers had been working on the beach issue prior to this time and had come up with three possible courses of action: Hard structures and some sand, sand, but only where it's really needed, and the last and worst of the options, cover everything with sand and put it out past almost all the jetties.

The real estate interests, of course, lobbied for that last choice. A majority of the government officials, lacking any knowledge of the marine environment, thought it sounded like a good idea so they also supported sand pumping. Earlier, the Corps had submitted environmental impact statements with many false conclusions contained in the reports. One such conclusion was that there are really very few fish around the jetties and the only thing jetties are good for is providing a platform from which to fish.

Mr. Mark Burlas, named as the biologist for the project and based in New York offices, was prominent in the environmental statement conclusions. I sent him an underwater video I made showing all the marine life he said wasn't there and I called him. He refused to view the video and then he told me that when they tried to sample the jetty life with

nets, they kept getting tangled in the rocks. So, they did the tests elsewhere. Mark Burlas still stands by his conclusions. Incidentally, Mark Burlas is a soil biologist, not a marine biologist.

In response to the environmental statements, the Sandy Hook Marine Lab's Marine Habitat Department and the New Jersey Fish and Game Office essentially said, "Don't do it!" One reason: loss of habitat for small fish, primarily black fish. The Army Corps said, "We disagree with the Fish and Game Office."

The Project: 1994 And On

The pumping began in earnest in 1994. The first place they put sand was Monmouth Beach. Sand was pumped all summer of that year, putting jetties out of sight and extending the beach a few hundred feet out to sea. In short order, it washed away. They did it again. It washed away. They did it a third time. It washed away. Along with the original area, they began to pump Sea Bright. They did that area a couple of times as well. All this to the tune of between 60 and 90 million dollars of taxpayers money. It is washing away again as you read this.

In 1997, the pumping moved to North Long Branch and a separate pumping project in Manasquan, Spring Lake, Sea Girt, and South Belmar. At least half of that

sand in the southern campaign was gone by spring 1998. That part of the project cost about 27 million dollars.

Oh, by the way, Long Branch officials promised the Hilton Hotel chain a beach so they would build a large hotel in North Long Branch.

Now, in 1998, they have pumped further south in North Long Branch, and, as I write this, they are covering some of the best inshore marine life habitat in all of New Jersey: West End through the Cottage Place area of Long Branch and on northward.

What Is The Real Cost?

As I have stated, much of the sand is already gone. They will re-pump and that will go too. All of this costs countless millions of dollars. Don't forget the project is supposed to last for 50 years. They are scheduled to come back every 6 years and do it all again. A conservative estimate says that by the time it is completed, 100 million dollars per mile will be spent on pumping sand! That is many times more than the property it is supposed to protect is worth. The only benefit is to wealthy property owners along Ocean Avenue and the previously mentioned real estate interests. It is known as a welfare program for the rich. The funding is

presently 65% Federal, 35% State and Local, but I advise you not to try and walk on the beach you just paid for. Access is supposed to be part of the deal, but don't count on it. Parking? Forget it!

All of this having been said, the real cost is the prime marine habitat by way of the jetties, bulkheads, historical shipwrecks along the beach (yes, we probably have more inshore historical wrecks than most areas), being covered and destroyed. These areas function as coral reefs do in the Tropics. They are actually inshore artificial reefs. Not only is the structure being eliminated, but also the plume of dirty water, containing who knows what, has chased the fish away for miles and miles in all directions while the pumping goes on and will continue to do so for the years to come. Fishing and diving in the pumped areas will never be like it once was. The covering of the jetties has also eliminated the surfing waves in some popular areas.

What Should Have Been Done And What You Can Do

The real path of wisdom would be to abandon the areas that are in harms way and move inland. This won't happen in our lifetime. There

isn't enough wisdom in high places for that and there is too much greed. Tropical islands, although at sea level, don't seem to flood in storms. Why? They are surrounded by barrier reefs. I believe, as do some shoreline scientists, those reefs would work for the hot spots here too (Not the whole length of the shore, only the problem areas). The reefs would also provide a great fish habitat, a win-win. They would not have to be redone every six years either.

In conclusion, sand pumping can only bring harm. There isn't room to list all of your government officials here, but find out who represents you and write your feelings to them. At very least, write to Congressman Frank Pallone who is a prime supporter of sand pumping. Also, write to Governor Whitman in Trenton. Tell your friends.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of my underwater video, BEACH RICH? FISH POOR! About this boondoggle, which appeared on TV-34 for two months this winter, the cost is \$12.00 plus \$3.00 for shipping. Art Nelson, 8 Deborah Place, Oakhurst, NJ 07755.

Thanks in advance for speaking out for the fish!!