

# Sea, Sand,

**A maritime forest, marshes, and miles of beach make Seabrook Island, S.C., a wildlife haven. The community's residents have acted to preserve the area's delicate habitat and promote sustainability.**



# and Sustainability

By Laura Otto

Seabrook, a 2,400-acre coastal barrier island tucked away 20 miles south of Charleston, S.C., is home to deer, bobcats, endangered birds, more than 30 species of reptiles, including tree frogs, chameleons, and alligators. It's also home to plenty of advocates who understand there is so much to preserve in its maritime forest, marshes, and beachfront.

The 1,800 residents who occupy the 2,594 properties of Seabrook Island Property Owners Association don't take for granted the miles of pristine beach on the Atlantic Ocean and North Edisto River. They delight in watching bottlenose dolphins from the shore and spotting bald eagles soaring overhead. They take advantage of this wildlife haven by exploring the community's 14-acre lake, miles of biking and hiking trails, and more than 500 acres of common property.

That's why the association embarked on an effort to protect and preserve the area's natural beauty and create a plan to prolong the island's sustainability. That's also how it recently became the first in the state to be designated a Certified Sustainable Community by environmental education nonprofit Audubon International.



Images by Ellis Creek Photography

**WHEN SEABROOK WAS AWARDED** the certification in December, it was only the sixth community in the world to earn the honor, joining Eufaula, Ala.; Williamston, N.C.; Coconut Creek, Fla.; Stowe Mountain Resort, Vermont; and Rio Verde, Ariz. Oldfield Community Association and Hilton Head Island, both in South Carolina, also joined the exclusive Audubon list shortly after.

“This designation signifies that Seabrook Island has been recognized as a community that has demonstrated leadership in creating a sustainable future,” says Heather Paton, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, executive director of the community.



### **PRESERVING WHAT MATTERS MOST**

The community’s population—made up mostly of people age 50 and older—have always had enormous respect for their surrounding environment, coupled with a keen awareness and realization that these natural wonders could disappear if they don’t act to preserve the habitat.

The island’s beaches are protected habitat for piping plovers—small sand-colored, sparrow-sized shorebirds—and other species. Just offshore lies a 215-acre bird sanctuary. Meanwhile, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources has previously recognized Seabrook Island’s Turtle Patrol for its volunteer efforts to work on sea turtle conservation.

“The property owners of Seabrook Island have long believed in and practiced many of the tenets and principles of sustainability, as demonstrated through their volunteerism,” says Edward Houff, former board president of Seabrook Island.

Yet the association wanted to formalize its efforts and create a long-term sustainability plan, which it began working on in 2011.

“Sustainability means not only preservation of our existing environment but also taking actions to help ensure the treasures of our environment are not wasted,” says Houff, who bought his first house on the island in 2012 and moved there permanently two years later.

### **CERTIFYING SUSTAINABILITY**

Residents didn’t need any convincing from the board when deciding to work on the sustainability plan and, ultimately, participating in the Audubon International certification program, which can be a rigorous process.

Audubon’s program is a “way to publicly recognize and reward the environmental achievements and leadership of communities that learn about sustainability and how it can be implemented on a local scale,” explains Jessica Latus, director of Sustainable Community Programs at Audubon International.

The certification is centered around creating measurable goals and objectives that benefit residents, visitors, and the environment. The multiyear program focuses on three sustainability areas: a vibrant economy, a healthy environment, and an equitable community.

For the program to be a success, communities should already have some sustainability efforts in place. The Audubon International program is designed to support a community’s previously identified priorities and build on its ongoing sustainability and planning efforts.

The process begins with a baseline assessment—carried out by residents and an Audubon International representative—of the community’s current sustainability levels. In addition, residents are surveyed to help gather interest, as well as to establish a starting point on knowledge of sustainability endeavors.

A goal-setting plan is then put in place. This time-consuming stage consists of various stakeholders drafting a long-term vision for the community. Applicants must address each of the program’s 15 broadly defined sustainability focus areas, some of which include wildlife conservation and habitat enhancement, water conservation, energy efficiency, health, and transportation.

Seabrook created focus groups to solicit owners’ input, which was incorporated into the long-term sustainability plan. The final step is implementation and reporting progress. With a concentrated effort, communities can achieve certification in less than two years.

“The Sustainable Communities Program helps communities—whether they are municipalities, large resorts, lake associa-



**PRESERVATION PASSION.** Seabrook Island is a wildlife haven, which is why residents are so passionate about preserving it. To protect the creatures that call Seabrook home, the community is making strides to become sustainable. That includes constructing the community's boardwalk, at right, using ironwood decking that lasts three times longer than pressure-treated lumber.



tions, or planned communities—take steps to ensure that they are healthy, desirable, and vibrant places in which to live, work, and play—both today and tomorrow,” says Latus.

### CONSERVATION CHALLENGE

Seabrook Island's approach to sustainability is founded on the belief that preserving the island's natural habitat and making investments in energy usage, recycling, and infrastructure will have long-lasting and environmentally friendly effects.

For Paton and her team, the most consistent challenge during the certification process was educating residents about sustainability and the duties of the different organizations that handle it. She frequently explained that sustainability encompasses much more than the environment.

“To eliminate any confusion, we had to teach our residents what Audubon International does and the differences between Audubon International and the environmental organization dedicated to bird conservation, the National Audubon Society,” says Paton.

Seabrook Island pays an annual Audubon International membership fee of \$1,000 and an additional fee of \$1,000 for each stage of the program. The association had planned for the costs, some of which were anticipated in the community's strategic plan or budgeted as new programs.



“We found that over 50 percent of the items in the plan are already complete or are part of our regular operating practice,” adds Paton. Going forward, “we anticipate the only charge will be continuation of the annual Audubon International membership fee.”

### PUTTING A PLAN INTO ACTION

Successfully implementing sustainable practices and ensuring their longevity requires community interest and participation. Residents must believe in the benefits sustainability provides.



According to Paton, Seabrook's short- and long-term planning, daily operations, and programming are guided by the three pillars of a vibrant economy, a healthy environment, and an equitable community. Each accomplishment over the course of the plan checked off one of the pillars.

To promote healthy living, all Seabrook Island properties are designated smoke-free areas. To encourage residents to grow their own produce, the community increased the number of association-run gardens. The community also renewed participation in the Adopt-A-Highway program. Residents now clean a mile stretch of road on a quarterly basis. In 2017, the Seabrook Island Greenspace Conservancy donated 1.59 acres to the association as open space. Since it started in 2003, the conservancy has donated more than 100 acres.

The association also had plans in place to promote a healthy local environment and economic vitality. First, the interior of the community's Oyster Catcher Community Center, which includes meeting space and an outdoor pool designated only for property owners and their accompanied guests, was refurbished in 2016. The following year, pool renovations were completed.

In 2009, Seabrook Island opened the Lake House, a 28,000-square foot community center. The community hub features meeting rooms, a library, a 14,000-square foot fitness center, and indoor and outdoor pools.

Since the Lake House opened its doors, sail shades constructed of sustainable materials were added to the pool; the



shades reduce harmful sun exposure and eliminate annual umbrella replacement costs. Fluorescent and incandescent light fixtures were replaced in 2016 to take advantage of more energy-efficient technologies and minimize light pollution. Electric bills at that facility have decreased by 28 percent since the switch.

Landscape and median lighting was switched to LED too. Dark-sky lighting also has been installed in the parking lot. To save money in the long run, the association decided to use iron-wood decking rather than pressure-treated lumber in boardwalk construction, which increases lifespan by three times.

To conserve water, the association also put sensors in its irrigation devices. Additionally, the association will install fiberglass lining in critical drainage pipes as part of its 10-year storm drain infrastructure maintenance program to preserve the system's integrity.

**HEALTHY APPROACH.** Active living is a part of the Seabrook ethos. Residents take advantage of multiple common areas, tennis courts, and community gardens. The Oyster Catcher Community Center, opposite page on the right, was refurbished in 2016. It features a meeting space and an outdoor pool for property owners and guests.



## DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT

The certification process tested the perseverance and dedication of association staff and volunteers, but the progress was a labor of love, according to Houff.

“If there was a challenge, it was in ensuring that members accurately documented all the requirements to demonstrate their commitment to this effort,” he says.

Communicating progress also is an important part of the process. The association blog “Tidelines” published 1,300 posts in 2017, touching on topics like environmental stewardship, health and wellness, and technology. The site has had more than 50,000 visits and 149,000 post views since launching. Now celebrating its fourth year, the blog has had more than 520,000 views to date. Editors are all Seabrook Island volunteers.

Paton believes earning the certification is a watershed moment for the community.

“The honor sends a clear message to current and potential owners that we are active stewards of not only our environment, but our island economy and the quality of our community. All of us combine to create a vibrant and healthy place to live,” says Paton.

Environmentally aware communities like Seabrook find themselves in a much better position to attract new business and encourage expansion, which can result in local job growth, according to Paton. She says becoming a more sustainable community produces a ripple effect on many economic fronts, including business growth, reinvestment, and expansion.

“We anticipate that it could attract interest from potential buyers who appreciate the sustainability message and philosophy,” says Paton. “And possibly some additional eco-based tourism.”



For communities considering certification, Latus says to think of it as an investment in well-being.

“Your community’s care for the environment sets a positive example for others to follow and will preserve a healthy, diverse, and beautiful landscape for future generations,” she adds.

Houff says the honor is a tangible recognition of the community’s commitment to its surrounding beauty. He hopes it serves as a blueprint for other communities to follow and educates the next generation of homeowners.

“Sustainability is about teaching our children and others about how we interact with and affect the living and growing things that are naturally around us. And putting these values and principles to use in our everyday lives,” he says. “It is what we have done on Seabrook Island and will continue to do.” **CG**

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