

Section 8

Conservation Zone

Purpose

The intent of the Conservation Zone (CZ) is to separate turtle nests, sensitive dune habitat and other natural resources from vehicles in those areas where the public is allowed to drive and park on the beach. As well, vehicular activity along the toe of the dune can trim pioneering species of dune vegetation. This prevents the seaward accretion of the primary dune system and thereby diminishes potential habitat for AIBM and some nesting shorebirds that require vegetation for nesting habitat.

Relevant ITP Conditions - G.1.a. & d. & G.2.c

- 1.a Conservation Zone.** “The Permittee shall implement, maintain, and enforce driving and parking prohibitions within a 30-foot wide Conservation Zone from the northern jetty of St. Augustine Inlet south and west to the Tolomato River (commonly known as the Porpoise Point area) and within a 15-foot wide Conservation Zone throughout the remainder of the HCP Plan Area as described and defined in the HCP, except as authorized below [in the ITP].”
- 1.d Emergency and Public Safety Vehicles.** “Emergency and public safety vehicle access is not limited, including access within the Conservation Zone.”
- 2.c Conservation Zone Marking.** “By May 1 of the first full nesting season following the issuance date of this Permit, the Permittee shall, at a minimum, place signage on each trash receptacle post referred to in Condition 11.G.2.b designating the area landward of the post as Conservation Zone.”

Public driving or parking is prohibited year-round landward of the seaward edge of the CZ. Emergency, public safety and protected species monitoring vehicles are prohibited from the entering the CZ unless it is necessary to satisfactorily complete assigned responsibilities and no alternative exists.

HCP Performance During 2008

Implementation: Beach Services currently has one full time individual and one part time individual tasked with the duties of CZ post management, driving lane maintenance on certain driving beaches, sign placement and other duties as assigned for the entire 41.1 mile coastline of St. Johns County. Prior to the start of the 2008 nesting season CZ signs were placed in line with existing trash can posts. CZ posts are placed along 10.6 miles of driving beaches on Anastasia Island and along the public driving areas of Vilano beach. Officials at Fort Matanzas National Monument participated in CZ installation by continuing the post south towards the Matanzas Inlet Bridge. No CZ posts are installed north of the first of three entrances to the restricted North Beach access point

approximately 200 feet north of Vilano beach access ramp. However CZ posts are installed immediately north and south of Surfside access ramp, the second of the three entrances previously mentioned.

The CZ boundary was established by measuring the required distance from the seaward edge of permanent line of dune vegetation, toe of dune or armoring structure (i.e. seawall, revetment, etc.). All beaches as mentioned above do not have a seawall or revetment suitable to establish a posted CZ as required through the HCP/ITP. As specified in the HCP/ITP CZ width varies among beach locations.

1. HCP plan area – 15 feet, excluding non driving beaches and four wheel drive permitted driving beaches
2. Porpoise Point – 30 feet

The CZ posts are affixed with two different sign designs as shown in Objects 5 and 6 below. The first design has proven to be ineffective in certain high use areas because it tends to blend in with the post on which it is installed. The second design has proven to be very effective and has been increased in high use areas. They both present the universal red and white “Do Not Enter” symbol implying that no pedestrians may enter beyond the sign.

Object 5.



Object 6.**County Beaches**

Upon entering the beaches during the official beach season March 1 – Labor Day, large yellow signs are affixed to the toll booths informing beach patrons of the CZ and annual pass holders received a leaflet (Appendix D) with information regarding the CZ. On several occasions when Beach Patrol Officers observed vehicles parked within the CZ, operators of the vehicles were asked to move the vehicle seaward of the CZ markers. If the operator was in violation a second time a written warning ticket was given and sometimes this resulted in a citation.

Porpoise Point

In 2007 numerous CZ posts were installed at Porpoise Point reflecting the new 30 foot CZ. However, following high tide and storm events the post would wash away or would be sitting in the high tide line, thus forcing beach drivers to enter behind the CZ to exit the beach. As mentioned in Section 5, law enforcement personnel are not scheduled to patrol this area regularly, therefore any infractions that may have occurred are not recorded. As a result the CZ posts were moved back to the vegetation line to prohibit vehicles entering the closed dune area and damaging vegetation.

Assessment: As mentioned above, the trash can post acted as both CZ indicators and trash can holders. The small footings located at the bottom of the post holding the trash cans would break causing the cans to hang in front of the CZ signs. This would prevent individuals from seeing posted signage, coincidentally parking in the CZ. During high tide events the CZ is encroached upon and becomes increasingly hard to enforce. Adjustments were needed periodically throughout the season to compensate for beach/dune erosion and accretion. A number of complaints from sea turtle patrol, commercial fisherman and visitors of the beach accrued over the beach season regarding parking in the CZ. A total of 551 parking tickets were issued during the 2008 beach season, CZ infractions are included in this total.

In April 2008 Porpoise Point was staked off to allow the returning State threatened Least tern colony to nest, thus creating a 60-80 foot wide CZ in two different areas. During this time numerous washouts due to storms and high tide events occurred decreasing the amount of drivable beach. Beach erosion along this ½ mile stretch of beach just southwest of the jetties created unusual driving conditions. During high tide events it became increasingly difficult to maintain a 30-foot wide CZ on the northwest side of Porpoise Point. The CZ posts were moved landward to accommodate beach drivers and reduce encroachment into the dune area. At normal and below average high tides, there was sufficient area seaward of the CZ both north and south of the eroded area to accommodate driving and parking. However, within the eroded area, high tides precluded vehicle operation seaward of the CZ. Rather than driving seaward of the CZ, drivers entered the CZ and continued driving south towards the western side of Porpoise Point. Similarly, drivers attempting to exit the beach north of the jetty during high tides would drive on the landward side of the CZ. Beach Services has done their best to continue to install posts as needed to maintain the CZ line. However, after extreme high tides and storms CZ post become washed out leaving open areas that invite beach drivers to enter into the CZ or dune system. Furthermore, as mentioned in Section 5 there are no deputies designated to this portion of the beach. They are patrolling other portions of the upland zone and are not required to patrol throughout their scheduled time. These combined events demonstrate a lack of enforcement and ability to maintain the required 30 foot conservation zone.

The area north of Porpoise Point, commonly referred to as Vilano beach, becomes extremely congested because of the length and width of the beach. Furthermore, this area does not have a designated driving lane. The amount of CZ posts were increased substantially thus drastically reducing the amount of vehicles observed in the CZ. However, as you travel north into the North Beach 4x4 permit area the amount of CZ infractions as reported by sea turtle patrol is substantial. In this area the beach is extremely narrow during high tide events resulting in minimal area of beach to drive on and many times forces the vehicles to drive in the soft sand areas. The 4x4 vehicles are able to navigate the soft sand conditions and some permittees may actually seek out the soft sand areas to heighten the 4x4 off-road experience but this ultimately results in very deep tire ruts aiding in sand transport to the ocean's waters or causing potential endangerment to sea turtle hatchlings. According to the requirements as set forth by the HCP coordinator for North Beach 4x4 permittees drivers must stay 15 feet seaward of a marked sea turtle nest. Evidence of tire tracks of vehicles driving landward of sea turtle nests were repeatedly observed by sea turtle monitoring personnel.

South beaches are much broader in terms of management due to the length and vastness of the shore line. CZ posts are increased with four posts immediately north and south of beach ramps. In areas where congestion occurs frequently there is a higher density of CZ posts.

No reports were received of direct impacts to sea turtles, nests, or hatchlings resulting from vehicles illegally parked or driving in the CZ during 2008. No sea turtles were reported as encountering a CZ post while in route to or from the ocean.

Program Improvements: Overall there are 14.7 miles of driving beaches that require CZ post installation. To be effective, the CZ must be clearly marked and posted, the driving public must be made aware of its purpose and its integrity must be maintained through dedicated enforcement. This can be achieved by increasing the existing amount of CZ posts in congested areas and improving the CZ posts and trash can placement. As previously mentioned, Section 6: Public Awareness Material, staff mounted educational flyers (Appendix F) on the windshields of vehicles parked in the CZ in an effort to properly inform beach patrons they are in violation of the beach code. Porpoise Point has an ever increasing challenge of maintaining a 30-foot CZ and also a beach driving area. The management of Porpoise Point still needs to be reevaluated from a beach driving and safety perspective.