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The Ecology of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve

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National
Estuarine Research Reserve***

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Preface

Our nation's estuaries are extremely valuable. Human activities such as dredging and filling have damaged many estuaries in modern times. Based on its concern for these areas, the United States Congress, in 1972, enacted the Coastal Zone Management Act to provide federal aid to the individual states to establish and manage natural field laboratories for research and education.

Sapelo Island's Duplin River estuary lies about midway on the Georgia coast between the Savannah and St. Marys rivers. Throughout its history it has received protection by public and private landowners and, since the early 1950s, Sapelo Island has been the focus of ecological and archaeological research. In 1975, the state of Georgia proposed the Duplin estuary as a National Estuarine Sanctuary. The U.S. Department of Commerce studied and approved the Georgia proposal, the state completed its land acquisition and, on December 22, 1976, the site received formal designation as the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Sanctuary, later Estuarine Research Reserve.

Since then, the Department of Commerce has designated 20 other estuarine areas nationwide as part of the National Estuarine Research Reserve program. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) administers this system for Commerce. As part of the national program, Sapelo Island represents Georgia in the Carolinian biogeographic region and it is the focus for NERR support of estuarine scientific research and education in Georgia.

The Duplin River estuary includes unspoiled coastal salt marsh and tidal creeks, areas that are among the earth's most biologically productive systems. They began forming at the present location several thousand years ago; the ability of the tidal marshes to produce food has captured the interest of man since pre-historic times. More recently, people have come to the system for scientific research, education and recreation.

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve has several primary functions, among them to provide opportunities for scientists to investigate the workings of estuarine systems, public education and compatible recreation and to protect and monitor the Reserve's natural and cultural resources. About 6,000 visitors a year participate in the SINEERR's public tour program and organized educational activities. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the University of Georgia Marine Institute and NOAA have a large public audience for programs about estuaries and the SINEERR is excellent location to present these types of programs.

The 16,500 acres that make up Sapelo Island include the SINEERR. Sapelo represents a direct investment of some \$5 million in state and federal funds. The Reserve occupies just over one third of the island, comprising the Duplin River estuary and several

upland tracts. In all, the Reserve has 2,100 acres of uplands and 4,000 acres of tidal salt marsh. NOAA provided a grant of \$1.5 million to help the state of Georgia acquire 2,094 acres of the SINERR.

- Primary management goals for the SINERR include:
- maintaining the integrity of the Reserve for research and educational programs;
 - protecting its lands and waters from stress and alteration;
 - promoting quality public access to Sapelo Island for nature interpretation and low-intensity recreation;
 - promoting and encouraging improved scientific understanding of estuarine ecosystems.

Georgia DNR has administrative offices within the SINERR. In addition the University of Georgia has a major research facility within the Reserve, the UGA Marine Institute. Visitor activities include guided interpretive tours, hunting, fishing, nature study and camping. DNR manages the Reserve for NOAA, coordinates the public tours through a mainland Interpretive Center, presents on-site and off-site educational programming, manages Sapelo Island's wildlife and forest resources, enforces conservation laws on the island and operates a public ferry to provide the primary means of access to the Reserve and the island in general. The Reserve contracts with the UGA Marine Institute to conduct continuous scientific monitoring at four sites on the Reserve with regularly collected data being compiled and reported to NOAA on a quarterly and annual basis.

This comprehensive site ecological profile has been made possible by grant funding provided by NOAA to the Sapelo Island NERR. The UGA Marine Institute was awarded a contract in late 1994 to begin work on the site profile. The Sapelo Reserve is the fourth Reserve in the national system to complete its site profile. NOAA is encouraging the other Reserves in the System to compile similar profiles as well. The SINEERR management and staff would like to thank the UGMI and its lead investigator on this project, Dr. Alice Chalmers, for their efforts in compiling this document, which should provide a valuable tool for coastal managers and planners in the future management and protection of Georgia's vital coastal resources.

**Buddy Sullivan, Manager
Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve
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Table of Contents

i	Preface
iii	Table of Contents
v	List of Tables
v	List of Figures
vii	Introduction by Buddy Sullivan
vii	The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve and Sapelo Island
1	REGIONAL SETTING OF SINERR
1	Climate
4	HISTORY OF HUMAN ACTIVITY ON SAPELO ISLAND
4	Prehistoric Indians
6	Early Spanish, French and English
7	Thomas Spalding
8	Howard Coffin
9	R. J. Reynolds
10	CURRENT USE AND OWNERSHIP OF SAPELO ISLAND
10	The Department of Natural Resources
10	SINERR
12	R. J. Reynolds Wildlife Management Area
12	The Sapelo Island Natural Area
13	The Reynolds Mansion
13	The University of Georgia Marine Institute
13	The Hog Hammock Community
14	POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEARBY COASTAL AREAS
14	Geological and Hydrological Characterization of SINERR
14	GEOLOGICAL SETTING
14	TIDAL CONDITIONS
15	HYDROLOGY OF THE DUPLIN RIVER
15	GEOMORPHOLOGY OF THE DUPLIN RIVER WATERSHED
16	BEACH MORPHOMETRY AND THE SAND-SHARING SYSTEM
19	Ecological Studies in the SINERR
21	AQUATIC HABITAT
21	INTERTIDAL HABITAT
27	UPLAND HABITAT
28	BEACH AND DUNES
37	PRIMARY PRODUCTION
37	DECOMPOSITION
38	HYPOTHESES AND PARADIGMS
42	CHEMICAL STUDIES IN THE SINERR by James J. Alberts
42	INORGANIC CHEMICALS
42	Atmospheric Inputs
43	Major Elements, Trace Metals and Organometallics
43	Elemental Redox Cycles

Iron and Manganese Cycling 44

ORGANIC MATTER 44

Occurrence 44

Plants and POC 45

Polysaccharides 45

LIGNIN 45

HUMIC SUBSTANCES 47

Occurrence 47

Utilization 48

Chemical Characterization 48

CHEMICAL REACTIONS 49

Inorganic Reactions 49

Organic Reactions 49

Flux Calculations 50

MISCELLANEOUS ANTHROPOGENIC CHEMICALS 50

Sewage Sludge, Dredge Spoil and Pulp Mill Effluents 50

RESEARCH NEEDS 51

Research and Monitoring Goals 52

RESEARCH 52

MONITORING 53

The Future of SINERR: Management Questions and Research Needs 54

Acknowledgments 55

References 56

Appendix 1. Vegetation of Sapelo Island A.1

Appendix 2. Selected List of Invertebrates (Excluding Insects and Arachnids) in Tidal Salt Marshes of the Southeastern Atlantic Coast A.15

Appendix 3. Selected List of Insect and Arachnid Families in Tidal Salt Marshes of the Southeastern Atlantic Coast A.19

Appendix 4. Selected List of Fish Found in Estuarine Waters Near Sapelo Island A.23

Appendix 5. Reptiles and Amphibians Known or Likely to Occur on Sapelo Island A.27

Appendix 6. Birds of Sapelo Island A.30

Appendix 7. Mammals Known or Likely to Occur on Sapelo Island A.37

Appendix 8. List of selected publications from the University of Georgia Marine Institute A.39

Figure 1. Location of Sapelo Island and SINERR. 1

Figure 2. Temperatures at Sapelo Island, 1964 - 1994. Measured at the National Weather Service station at the University of Georgia Marine Institute. 2

Figure 3. Rainfall at Sapelo Island, measured at the National Weather Service station at the University of Georgia Marine Institute. 3

Figure 4. Storm tracks of hurricanes within 50 miles of Sapelo. 4

Figure 5. Some points of interest on Sapelo Island. 5

Figure 6. The Duplin River Watershed. 6

Figure 7. Administrative units on Sapelo Island. 11

Figure 8. Location of monitoring stations. ML - Marsh Landing; BC - Barn Creek; FD - Flume Dock. 12

Figure 9. Idealized cross-section of an intertidal salt marsh, based on Frey and Basan (1985). 17

Figure 10. Schematic diagram of the three stages of marsh maturation. 1) Youthful, with high drainage density and high proportion of low marsh; 2) Intermediate; 3) Mature, with low drainage density and high proportion of high marsh. (After Frey and Basan, 1985.) 17

Figure 11. Distribution of the three major physiographic regions of the Duplin River tidal salt marshes. (From Wadsworth, 1980.) 18

Figure 12. Patterns of drainage density in the three physiographic regions of the Duplin River salt marshes: a) high drainage density, young marsh; b) intermediate drainage density and age; c) low drainage density, mature marsh. (From Wadsworth, 1980.) 18

Figure 13. Idealized cross-section of Sapelo Island. 19

Figure 14. The black line shows the approximate location of the 1953 shoreline in relation to the 1989 shoreline in the photograph. 20

Figure 15. Temperature, salinity and pH in the Duplin River for 1986 - 1994. 22

Figure 16. Network of GPS Control Points. 30

Figure 17. Boundaries of 5 watersheds on Sapelo Island with the water bodies they drain into. 31

Figure 18. Some results of land cover/land use change analysis of Sapelo Island, 1953 - 1989. (From Welch *et al.*, 1992.) 31

Figure 19. Soil types of Sapelo Island. From McIntosh County, Georgia Soil Survey, 1959. United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service. 32

Figure 20a. Legend. Land use/cover for the SINERR and Sapelo Island, 1953 to 1989 based on aerial photographs and generated using the ARC/INFO geographic information system by the Center for Remote Sensing and Mapping Science, Department of Geography, The University of Georgia. 33

List of Figures

Table 1. Comparison of High Marsh (SS) and Low Marsh (TS) at Sapelo Island. 24

Table 2. Summary of salt marsh energetics (from Teal, 1962). 38

List of Tables

Figure 20b. Land use/cover for the SINEER and Sapelo Island, 1953 based on aerial photographs and generated using the ARC/INFO geographic information system by the Center for Remote Sensing and Mapping Science, Department of Geography, The University of Georgia. See Fig. 20a for legend. 34

Figure 20c. Land use/cover for the SINEER and Sapelo Island, 1974 based on aerial photographs and generated using the ARC/INFO geographic information system by the Center for Remote Sensing and Mapping Science, Department of Geography, The University of Georgia. See Fig. 20a for legend. 35

Figure 20d. Land use/cover for the SINEER and Sapelo Island, 1989 based on aerial photographs and generated using the ARC/INFO geographic information system by the Center for Remote Sensing and Mapping Science, Department of Geography, The University of Georgia. See Fig. 20a for legend. 36

Figure 21. Teal's energy flow diagram of the salt marsh. Numbers are kcal m⁻² yr⁻¹. (From Teal, 1962.) 38

Figure 22. Conceptual model summarizing net carbon balance in a Georgia salt marsh. Numbers are g C m⁻² yr⁻¹ (Data from Chalmers *et al.*, 1985.) 39

Figure 23. Diagrammatic representation of pathways of carbon relocation within the marsh. (From Chalmers *et al.*, 1985.) 40

Figure 24. A conceptual model of the coastal interface system. A = autotroph, H = heterotroph, OM = organic matter. (From Hopkinson and Hoffman, 1984.) 41

Figure 25. Conceptual models of carbon flow in the Georgia Duplin River estuary and nearshore ecosystems. Estuarine subsystems are the salt marsh proper (top) and adjacent tidal creeks and rivers. The whole estuarine system consists of both salt marsh and tidal creeks and rivers. The nearshore is the area out to 3.2 km from shore. Numbers are g C m⁻² yr⁻¹. 42

Introduction by Buddy Sullivan

In 1972, Congress passed the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA). In the CZMA, and its subsequent reauthorizations, Congress officially recognizes that resources of the coastal zone are of national significance and are rapidly disappearing. The CZMA also recognizes the interrelationships between uplands and tidelands. The "coastal zone" was defined in the Act as including all uplands "to the extent necessary to control shorelands." The CZMA established as a national goal "to preserve, protect, develop and, where possible, to restore and enhance the resources of the nation's coastal zone for this and succeeding generations."

Section 315 of the CZMA of 1972, as amended, establishes the National Estuarine Research Reserve System. Under the system, healthy estuarine ecosystems which typically different regions of the U.S. are designated and managed as sites for long-term research, and used as a base for estuarine education and interpretive programs. The system also provides a framework through which research results and techniques for estuarine education and interpretation can be shared throughout the region and across the nation.

As stated in the Coastal Zone Management Act, the National Estuarine Research Reserve System provides for "the establishment and management, through Federal-state cooperation, of a national system of Estuarine Research Reserves representative of the various regions and ecological types in the United States. Estuarine Research Reserves are established to provide opportunities for long-term research, education and interpretation."

Prior to the establishment of the NERR system, scientific understanding of estuarine processes was increasing slowly and without national coordination. There was no ready mechanism for the detection and measurement of local, regional or national trends in estuarine conditions. Resource managers, governments and the public did not always have access to information about the significance and ecology of their estuaries, could not assess the full impact of past activities, and could not readily anticipate the damaging effects of proposed management and development policies. NERR System research and education can help fill those gaps in knowledge and guide estuarine management for sustained support of commercial and recreational fisheries, tourism and other activities.

NERRS sites serve as laboratories and classrooms where the effects of both natural and human activity can be monitored and studied. There are currently 22 Estuarine Research Reserves comprising 445,000 acres in 17 states and Puerto Rico. Through careful management of these resources, generations of scientists, fishermen, naturalists and others will come to experience the beauty to be found where rivers return to the sea.

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve lies in the midst of an estuary where the currents of Doby Sound and the Duplin River meet. The Reserve comprises 6,110 acres and encompasses ecologies typical of the Carolinian biogeographic

1. The story of human activity on Sapelo Island, current use and ownership of the island and the regional setting of the SINEER, including the commercial and recreational utilization of Georgia estuarine areas;
2. The geological and hydrological characterization of the SINEER, to include the development of lagoon marshes, tidal conditions, hydrology of the Duplin River, geomorphology of the Duplin River, influence of the Altamaha River and upland runoff, and beach morphology and the sand-sharing system;
3. Ecological habitats of the Reserve, including (a) aquatic, Duplin River and Doby Sound; and (b) intertidal, mudflats and mudbanks, intertidal creeks, vegetated salt marsh and high marsh, beaches and sand dunes, forested uplands, vegetation patterns and shoreline changes through time utilizing Geographic Information System (GIS) and historical maps and photos to document changes;
4. Chemical characterization of aquatic and marsh habitats, including water column (carbon, nitrogen, phosphorous and silica nutrients), marsh sediments and biota;
5. Primary productivity (water column and salt marsh);
6. Secondary productivity, including the Duplin River (zooplankton, crabs and fish) and salt marsh (fiddler crabs, snails and tidal migratory organisms);
7. Organic matter;

The Reserve annually receives funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), supplemented by matching state funds to conduct various educational and scientific monitoring programs. Part of the monitoring program has entailed the preparation of this ecological site characterization profile. This project began in late 1994 with a contract between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which manages the Reserve, and the University of Georgia Marine Institute. The UGMI, with funding provided by the Reserve's annual operations grant award from NOAA, has prepared this document based, in part, on the forty-five years of scientific research its resident faculty members have conducted on Sapelo Island, primarily within the boundaries of the Estuarine Research Reserve. This ecological profile contains a diverse range of material, including:

region and incorporates a coastline characterized by expanses of tidal salt marshes protected by a chain of barrier islands. The SINEER contains about 2,200 acres of upland forest dominated by stands of southern live oak hardwoods, pine (longleaf and loblolly), white-tailed deer, wild turkey and numerous other forms of wildlife. Two-thirds of the Reserve is comprised of expansive belts of salt marsh, which host a wealth of inhabitants. Members of this diverse salt marsh community feed and reproduce in the marshes and along the exposed river and creek banks at low tide. The Reserve also includes large areas of beach and dune communities fronting the Atlantic Ocean, as well as a network of oak, cedar and palm upland hammocks scattered through the marsh and beach areas.

8. Detritus foodweb and outwelling (hypotheses and paradigms about SINEER marshes), including early mass balance studies and models, the salt marsh as a nursery, coupling of marsh to nearshore and riverine influences on marsh and nearshore.
 9. The future of the SINEER: management and recommendations.
- The Ecological Profile of Sapelo Island is a document to be read and understood by the concerned citizen, by monitoring groups and management agency personnel, and by scientists studying this and similar estuarine systems. Much of the material referenced is necessarily very technical, but the Profile itself should give a useful overview of the ecology of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve to anyone with the interest to read it.

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve and Sapelo Island

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve was established in December 1976 in the Duplin River watershed of McIntosh County, Georgia, on the western side of Sapelo Island (Fig. 1). Sapelo Island and its surrounding marshes have been the focus of ecological and geological research since the early 1950s; archaeological research has

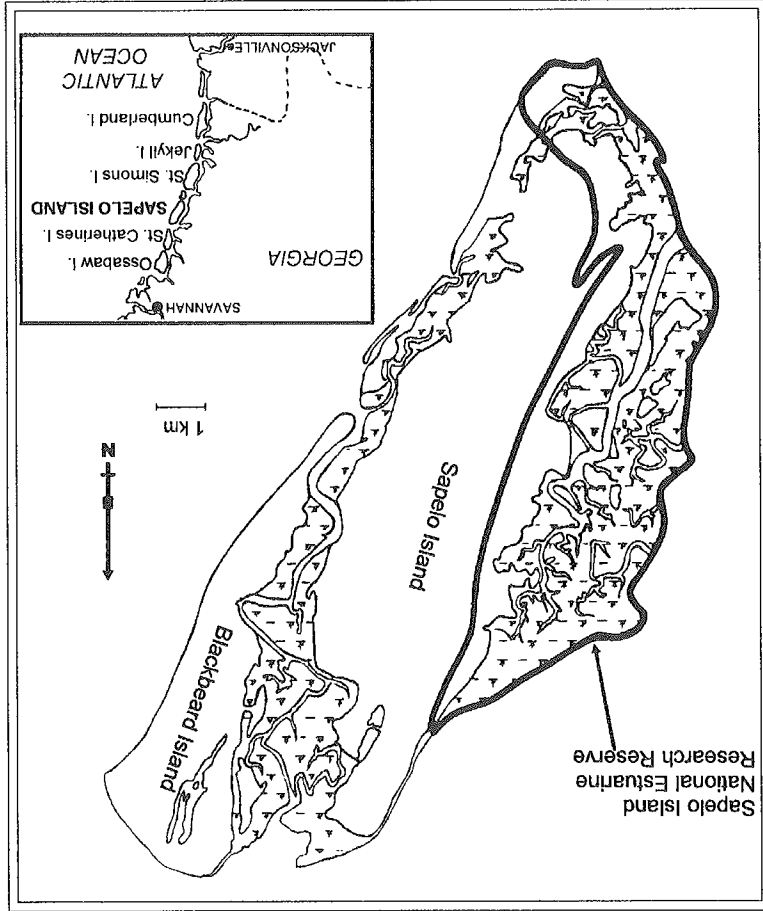
been conducted on the uplands of Sapelo Island since the late 1800s. In 1981 *The Ecology of a Salt Marsh* (Pomeroy and Wiegert, 1981) was published, synthesizing much of the research that had been done in the SINERR and describing quite thoroughly our understanding of the ecology of the marsh as it stood at that time. This profile presents an update of *The Ecology of a Salt Marsh*, reviewing research that has been completed since that book was written, and adding some supplemental information that was not included. Some of the material contained in *The Ecology of a Salt Marsh* is included here for the sake of clarity. For further information on research that has been done in the SINERR and elsewhere on Sapelo Island, the reader may consult the original publications on which this review is based. Scientific publications reporting results of research conducted on Sapelo Island are collected by the University of Georgia Marine Institute and published periodically in their Collected Reprints series can be found in Appendix 8.

REGIONAL SETTING OF SINERR

Climate

Sapelo Island has a subtropical climate with short, mild winters and long, humid summers (Fig. 2a and 2b). The ocean has a moderating effect on temperatures, with

Figure 1. Location of Sapelo Island and SINERR.



Sapelo Island generally reporting lower maxima and higher minima than are reported from inland areas. Rainfall is heaviest during the summer months (Fig. 3a), when short, intense afternoon thunderstorms are common, and heavy rains associated with hurricanes and tropical storms often impact the area. Total annual rainfall over the 30 year record averaged 51.3 inches, with a minimum of 32.3 and a maximum of 66.9 inches (Fig. 3b). Although there are cycles of wet and dry years (Fig. 3b), it is unusual to have a month

Figure 2. Temperatures at Sapelo Island, 1964 - 1994. Measured at the National Weather Service station at the University of Georgia Marine Institute.

