

[From Summer 2004]

CNHA Drawn Into Controversy

As a member and supporter of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Chesapeake Bay Group, for more than 20 years, it is difficult to report that CNHA and CNWR management find ourselves at odds with this respected organization. Controversy began when the following brief article appeared in the May/June issue of the *Old Dominion Sierran*, the Sierra Club's Newsletter for Virginia:

Save Assateague
by Tyla Matteson, Conservation Chair

I am sure you know about the ponies who swim every year from Assateague Island to Chincoteague, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Or perhaps you have visited the unique nature reserve, a barrier island on the migratory bird flyway, where many species of birds can be viewed. This is a National Wildlife Refuge, run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and should be protected, but there are plans to open it up for ecotourism. Even a small amount of human traffic would be harmful to the fragile ecosystem.

Thanks to Sierra Club member Jay Cherrix of Chincoteague, we are staying informed on a number of incursions into this valuable wildlife area at Assateague. He and his wife Rose have formed Save Assateague to educate residents and visitors, via his canoe and kayak touring business, and word of mouth, of the need to curtail the rapid influx of condos and accompanying tourist business that is already impacting water quality and habitat.

Please help Jay and Rose by adding your name to the thousands who wish to save Assateague. You may reach them at cptkayak@intercom.net or call 757-336-6811. A series of public hearings have begun and your input is valuable. Please express your opposition to any commercial activities on Assateague Island, including intrusive bus tours on the island. You may direct your concerns to Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Manager John Schroer at john_schroer@fws.gov.

(I've quoted the entire article, verbatim, so I could not be accused of taking things out of context or misrepresenting its message in some other fashion.)

As soon as I read the article, I called John Schroer to ask if he had seen it and if he had been contacted by any Sierra Club staff about the article in order to verify the facts. The incredulous answer was "NO! "

As John Schroer keeps pointing out, the Virginia portion of Assateague is designated as either National Wildlife Refuge or National Seashore (the Maryland portion is part National Seashore and part State Park); therefore, Assateague has already been "saved". There are no plans to open it up for eco-tourism as alleged, and there are no "condos and accompanying tourist business" on Assateague as the article implies to the uninformed.

Furthermore, the so-called "intrusive bus tours" have been in existence for more than 30 years, are confined to a gravel service road, limited in number and to certain days and times, and subject to cancellation if they would be disruptive to wildlife in the adjacent areas.

In subsequent exchanges of emails with the Sierra Club author, it was candidly admitted that the article had been written and submitted prior to requesting and receiving information from John Schroer, and still had not been looked at until Roger Diedrich, Chapter Chair, had asked the author to look at e-mails John and I had sent refuting the basis for the article.

The entire article was based on unfounded allegations made by one individual who has been taking

out full-page ads in the Beachcomber (a local Chincoteague newspaper supplement for tourists). Half the page is used to launch vitriolic diatribes and personal attacks against Park Service and Fish & Wildlife personnel and the integrity of local conservation organizations (most recently CNHA) by an organization calling itself Citizens for the Preservation of Assateague (CPA). The other half of the page is an ad for his kayak and canoe business. The purported organization he has formed, CPA, is owned and operated solely by him as part and parcel of his commercial business. There is no board to oversee what CPA says or does and any contributions he manages to extract from the unsuspecting are part of his for-profit business income which is used to underwrite his attack ads. By alleging there's a conspiracy to develop Assateague he entraps well-meaning tourists to come to his places of business to sign a petition.

To date, attempts to get the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club to look at the facts and correct their misinformation (including invitations for their representatives to visit the refuge and see things first hand) have been to no avail.

John Schroer's last, e-mail to Mr. Diedrich, Chapter Chair, follows:

Dear Mr. Diedrich:

Over the past 35 years, I have worked in nine southeastern states, working closely with the conservation groups, including state Chapters of the Sierra Club. I have always considered these groups to be valued partners. They have always been there for support when needed to help the many refuges that I have worked on to protect wildlife, and yes, they have been there to let us know when we might be doing something contrary to their missions. But I have never had any group or chapter make an attack that was not based on the truth, as the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club has done.

Since you have only had the time to have a brief conversation with Ms. Matteson, I suggest perhaps a longer conversation is in order. In her letter of May 7 in which she indicates representing 14,000 members, she is commenting on the 10-year planning procedure and mandatory review for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The review which is being done is on the existing secondary uses excluding the priority public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997

Perhaps you need to ask Ms. Matteson whether or not she knows what 15 activities are actually under review. It appears that she has simply listened to one individual, who has a vested interest in this situation, and formed an opinion for the entire Chapter.

What is terribly disappointing is the fact that Ms. Matteson has "...been following ecotourism and various development plans for Assateague for two years..." and she never took the time to contact either me or the Superintendent of the Assateague Island National Seashore. I again invite members of the Virginia Chapter to this refuge to find the truth.

John D. Schroer

In my e-mail exchanges with Mr. Diedrich, I also raised the following questions -- to date unanswered. Isn't the source of your misinformation operating two canoe and kayak tour business establishments that are clearly a tourist business? Aren't his canoe and kayak trips ecotourism? Are you aware he recently purchased a permit from the National Park Service to conduct his commercial ecotourism activities within the boundaries of Assateague Island controlled by the Park Service (albeit the surrounding waters)? Aren't the waters and marsh on the west side of Assateague Island part of its habitat? Are they less "sensitive" than the dirt road used by the CNHA tour vehicle? Why do you consider the canoe and kayak tours (which roam freely in Assateague's habitat) totally benign, but insist that CNHA's tour (which is confined to a dirt road, with access controlled by refuge management) an ecological disaster? What am I missing?

The credibility of the Sierra Club is too important to be jeopardized by the shoddy practices of one of their chapters. If you believe that the Chincoteague Refuge and CNHA have been unjustly maligned, we urge you to make that known to Sierra Club officials. The Virginia Chapter Chair, Roger Diedrich, can be reached at: 703-352-2410 rdiedrich@cox.net . Chapter Director, Michael Town, can be reached at:

michael.town@cavtel.net , 804-225-9113

The Mid-Atlantic Regional office for the national organization can be contacted at:

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If you happen to be a Sierra Club member, and/or a member of the Virginia Chapter, please make that known. If they hear from enough folks and members concerned about the credibility of their reporting, it may help the Chapter avoid repeating this egregious behavior.

If you'd like more information, please call or email me.

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