

“Tracking Human and Natural communities in McClellanville, SC”

Report Submitted by Christopher J. Preston
Department of Philosophy
University of South Carolina
preston@sc.edu

Patience Russell spent 10 weeks over the summer learning about the relationships between human and natural communities in McClellanville, SC. She conducted interviews, read local historical literature, went out on boats with local fishermen, and kept track of current regulatory goings on in the shrimping industry. On September 7th-9th, Patience and I made a final trip down to McClellanville from Columbia to conduct 3 more interviews, for me to meet some of the people that she had already interviewed, and for me to see some of what goes on in town. The primary purpose of this summer’s research was to see if there was any sound basis for the submission of a larger grant proposal to the Donnelly Foundation for a 2 year project around McClellanville’s shrimping industry.

After discussing our findings, Patience and I both feel that it would be unwise to pursue any further funding on this project at this time. In preliminary discussions, the Donnelly Foundation made it quite clear that they disburse money only when the community has expressed a specific interest in working productively on a particular issue. Our sense was the shrimp/turtle issue had really run its course in McClellanville with the fishermen having found a way to accommodate a regulatory framework that initially promised extreme burdens. Through their own ingenuity, the fishermen designed turtle excluder devices (TED’s) that worked much better than the ones that the National Marine Fisheries Service had mandated they use. Turtle mortality is down and

the fisherman's worries are now more directed towards the conflicts between commercial and recreational shrimping and between water quality and development pressures. This latter issue really presents the most fundamental challenge to the historic way of life in McClellanville. As one of our interviewees complained, "as long as Charleston lawyers can drive into town in 40 minutes from here, the property prices will continue to be pushed upwards and out of reach of the locals." Local businesses, such as the now defunct downtown sandwich shop, have been forced out by a combination of property taxes and the lack of people that are actually working in town around lunchtime.

This familiar problem of "gentrification" is one that Patience and I feel is really beyond the scope of anything that we ourselves could helpfully do in a research project in the area. Clearly McClellanville sports a rich cultural and natural history that makes it one of South Carolina's more fascinating communities. Equally clearly it is falling victim to the same larger economic patterns that are reproduced state and countrywide.

McClellanville Project – Report Submitted by Patience Russell

I set out this summer with the initial idea of studying the intertwined lives of sea turtles and shrimpers with a focus on the South Carolina Lowcountry, especially the village of McClellanville. Shrimpers have often been blamed for killing the endangered sea turtles, yet in a previous meeting, a retired shrimper had expressed concern for the sea turtles. I was also interested in the correlation between the pollution of water by boats and how this affected water quality and the amounts of shrimp in the waters. However, the more I interviewed people and read up on current events, the more I realized that development was a far more destructive force on the environment and culture of the Lowcountry than the shrimping industry. I discovered that the environment, culture, and way of life in McClellanville are as endangered as the sea turtles that swim in the surrounding waters.

There are several ways development is affecting the community. The village of McClellanville has traditionally derived its economy from the water. I spent one very long day aboard an oystering boat. Our job was to steam up the Intracoastal Waterway and collect a barge full of oysters and clams from a polluted area where factory run-off was making the shellfish inedible and to transport our load back to cleaner waters near McClellanville. I had plenty of opportunity to interview the captain and crew on the long journey. Their main concern was that, even around McClellanville, the water quality is decreasing. This is mainly due to the fact that increasing homes leads to increasing run-off of pollutants and discharges from septic systems of new homes near the water. Shellfish filter the water, so small amounts of pollution mean that they are no longer

harvestable. The crew expressed concern that within their lifetimes they would see the waters closed off to the harvest of clams and oysters.

Increasing development also means an increase in motorboat traffic. By the end of June, several sea turtles had washed up dead on South Carolina's beaches. Some looked like propellers had struck them. These deaths are generally attributed to shrimping vessels, but due to a forecast for a bad year, shrimping season had not yet opened. This meant that shrimpers were not responsible for the deaths. The problem was more likely related to recreational boaters and other unknown factors. Shrimpers deal with many other problems. Because waterfront property is becoming so expensive, many people are selling it to developers. It is much more profitable for a property owner to sell their waterfront land to a developer to turn into a row of expensive vacation homes than it is for an owner to keep a dock for local fishermen and shrimpers to run out of. As places to dock their boat decrease, the size of the fishing fleet decreases as well.

Another problem with increasing property values, is that property taxes rise as well. Many locals cannot afford homes in McClellanville anymore. The residential area near the docks, called the Village, is practically deserted. Locals cannot afford the property taxes and leave, and the homes are bought by people who have the homes as vacation homes. The Village is empty most of the year, and as a result, the town cannot sustain a grocery store or restaurant. This means the residents who are left and who live in outlying areas must drive the forty minutes to Mt. Pleasant for supplies. One older resident, a retired shrimper, complained that he must pay exorbitant property taxes without any benefit—he does not receive garbage service, road maintenance, or any other benefit. Young people cannot find work in the area and cannot afford a home there

anyway, so they move away. Some residents feel resigned that there is nothing they can do. Others participate in an area group that tries to address some of the issues that the encroaching development brings.