



Elmer's Island

Elmer's Island, named after the owner Charles Elmer, Sr., deceased (now owned by son, also named Charles) is approximately 1700 acres of barrier beachfront, low dunes, sand and mudflats, saltmarsh, lagoon and tidal channels immediately to the southwest of Grand Isle across Caminada Pass on the central Gulf coast of Louisiana. It is an "island" because it is bounded by water on all sides, even though the "water" on the north is a tidal channel and on the north and west a small bayou named Bayou Thunder which is often silted in at the mouth where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Caminada Pass and a big lagoon are to the east and the Gulf of Mexico is to the south. It is one of the few genuine sandy beaches in Louisiana that is accessible via a land route that, provided the washed-out culverts and road over the channel is restored, can accommodate light trucks, campers and autos. It traditionally had been operated by the owner and his son, Jay, as a fee use area available to the public. After Jay Elmer's death, road access to Elmer's Island was gated and locked due to liability concerns.

The large lagoon on the east side of Elmer's Island was created by enclosure with sand eroded from the old Lafourche delta (Bayou Lafourche is a former channel of the Mississippi River) and transported by longshore drift to form a "hook" around the lagoon. The sand was breached by the surge from the 2005 hurricanes and now there is a wide gap allowing waves from the Gulf to roll into the lagoon. Without reoccurrences of major storms, the beach will repair itself, but the 2008 hurricanes caused further erosion and intervention may be necessary to protect Highway 1. The lagoon, marsh, tidal channels and mudflats provide excellent nursery habitat for popular gulf finfish, shrimp and crab, and the birds and other wildlife that depend on this system for their groceries. Wildflowers that grow on and behind the dunes are striking in that harsh and contrasting environment. The area possesses a wilderness ambience despite its proximity to development. Woody vegetation is scarce, but there is potential for planting appropriate species that would be attractive to neotropical migratory song birds as well as provide storm Buffer and land holding capacity.

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 2

The Louisiana Wildlife Federation got involved with (actually initiated) the Elmer's Island acquisition campaign in the winter of 2002 when past LWF president Keith Saucier, while on the way back to his Gonzales home from his camp on Grand Isle, noticed that the gate to Elmer's Island had been closed and locked. He was also aware that the owner had the property on the real estate market. Keith brought the idea of getting the state to acquire and reopen Elmer's Island to the LWF through his local LWF affiliate, the East Ascension Sportsman's League. A resolution proposing state acquisition was adopted by the delegates to the 2002 annual meeting of the LWF and the process of recruiting other advocates and communicating with the state, particularly Governor Foster, at the time, and the State Legislature was commenced.

Because the owner had a "For Sale" sign out, LWF felt that the need for the state to step in to buy the property was fairly urgent. There had been interest on the part of the owner to subdivide the property, sell lots for camps, potential marina development and other uses that would preclude maintaining the property for conservation and compatible public recreation. Although the Coastal Zone Management and Coastal Barrier Resources Acts make development of the property a questionable proposition, LWF felt that those laws, and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act were not adequate to preserve the character of the property compared to public ownership.

The campaign has widespread support among the public which continues even though it has taken longer than hoped to achieve the objective. Helping with that support was/is the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) which has served as an excellent networking partner to coalesce key elements of the campaign. Elmer's Island is within BTNEP's geographic reach. LWF is represented on the BTNEP Management Conference and through its participation on that body, BTNEP arranged to sponsor a website (elmersisland.org) for individuals and organizations to learn more about the Elmer's Island acquisition campaign and to sign on as supporters. Elmer's Island discussions by the BTNEP Management Conference also inspired a research project by Dr. Rex Caffey and colleagues at the LSU AgCenter to determine the economic value of Elmer's Island and the preferences of former and prospective users of the area. (Caffey is also a

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 3

member of the BTNEP Management Conference.) The AgCenter report was instrumental in influencing the state to substantially upgrade its offer.

At one time, back when Jay Elmer was still alive and operating Elmer's Island as a public use area, he was asking \$10 million for the property. Later, after his death, the Elmer Family put the property on the market, asking \$6 million (sources said they would take \$5 million). After the state took an interest in acquiring the property and began the appraisal process, it was reported by Bob Marshall in the *Times-Picayune* that the owners would accept \$5 million for the property and maybe donate part of that back to the state for a conservation tax credit. The attorney representing the state in the negotiations with the Elmers reported that a preliminary appraisal put the value of the property the Elmer Family actually owned at \$1 million. That did not evoke any warmth from the owners. A reconsideration of the appraisal in light of the LSU AgCenter survey and economic analysis, and a state claim to about 500 acres of accreted land on the island, resulted in a \$2.2 million offer. But apparently that did not boost the value sufficiently to yield a fruitful negotiation before the end of Governor Foster's term.

Of interest, in its State Parks Master Plan 1997-2012, the Louisiana Office of State Parks included a \$22 million park development plan for what is referred to as "Fourchon/Caminada Island State Park." The plan includes the Elmer's Island beachfront, but also the entire beach from Elmer's Island to Belle Pass with two 800' fishing piers, 5 smaller piers for marsh fishing, manager and assistant manager residences, 2 entrance stations, 2 boat launches, 40 cabins and 150 motorhome hookups. The cabins were to be located west of the Elmer's Island property. The plan appears to be primarily conceptual and apparently assumes the prospect of willing sellers from which to acquire the necessary land rights to develop the park. It is not clear whether or not the plan took into account the limitations that might be placed on development due to the application of the Coastal Barrier Resources Act or the Coastal Zone Management Act. Also subject to these regulations is the restoration of the dilapidated landing strip on Elmer's Island and the construction of hangars for light aircraft that the Grand Isle Mayor and others have indicated an interest in pursuing.

Despite the public and political support for the state acquisition of Elmer's Island, the owner has not been willing to sell the property at a price the state is willing to

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 4

pay. The state is bound by law to pay only the fair appraised value of the property. There are questions about the extent of Charles Elmer's ownership with respect to the land he claims to own. The state claims some of the property that has accreted on the east/southeast side of the "island." In the spring of 2004, LWF solicited the assistance of the Trust for Public Land, a private, non-profit land conservation organization with an office in New Orleans to help with the apparent impasse between the state and owner. TPL has been moving things along toward the goal by developing a working relationship with the owner and negotiating a purchase agreement. Under this scenario, TPL would acquire the property from Mr. Elmer and then sell it to the state at the fair appraised value. However, clouded property title stalled TPL's efforts and it concluded its involvement in the acquisition.

The mission statement of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation is "Conserving our natural resources and the right to enjoy them." LWF's Elmer's Island acquisition campaign is synchronous with that mission and is widely supported by conservationists within and outside of the LWF. A tenet of motivating citizen conservation advocacy is development of values through experience. The Elmer's Island experience has been lost since it was closed in 2002. There is no better and convenient place along Louisiana's coast to impart an appreciation for the coastal landscape than Elmer's Island. LWF's objective is to get people back out there with additional opportunities to learn about the coastal environment utilizing interpretation and other strategies that can be applied under public ownership. LWF also sees the Elmer's Island Acquisition as a catalyst for achieving a larger vision of a state seashore and coast conservation area from Caminada Pass to Belle Pass.

Potential Sources of Funding for the Acquisition and Management of Elmer's Island (and lands to the west)

Federal

-Grants from NOAA's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 5

State

- Direct appropriations or state revenue bonds
- CIAP funds; Coastal Protection/Restoration Funds
- Louisiana Wildlife & Fisheries Foundation (the Foundation is holding over \$2 million it received from a DEQ settlement that is directed to the acquisition of coastal habitat)
- Wildlife Habitat and Natural Heritage Trust
- Rockefeller, Marsh Island and Russell Sage Refuge Funds
- Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux Fund [fishing access]
- Fisheries Disaster Relief Funds directed to recreational fishing access

Purposes of Acquisition

- to preserve the character and habitat of Elmer's Island consistent with the natural environment and the dynamics that shape the Elmer's Island ecosystem.
- to provide for traditional public uses of fishing, crabbing, birding, camping, beach combing, consistent with the conservation of the area and the protection of the habitat.

Recommended Management Guidelines for Elmer's Island

- no commercial development (except what is necessary to support development of any subsurface minerals which ownership is retained by the seller, and any ongoing commercial activity such as the Plains pipeline and pumping station; however, all such activity must be accomplished with minimum impact to the habitat, natural resources, and outdoor recreation for which the land is being acquired).
- maintain primitive character of the property; developments should be restricted to basic sanitary facilities such as bathrooms and showers, RV waste pump out station, garbage dumpster(s), caretaker's quarters/headquarters office and group camp to be used for educational purposes. All such developments should be sited at or landward (away from the Gulf) of the existing camps. Strategically planned location of roads, boat landings, fishing/observation piers/towers, boardwalks, trails, fencing, etc., to enhance the property for its low-impact recreational and habitat management purposes shall not be considered as inconsistent with the

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 6

primitive character and uses of the property.

- conflicts with natural processes and functions must be avoided, e. g., activities and developments that cause or encourage erosion or habitat degradation or loss, interfere with nesting/roosting areas of shorebirds and other wildlife, despoil the scenic and aesthetic quality of the landscape (littering/dumping) should be prohibited. ATVs and off-road motorcycles should not be allowed on the property.

Short Term O & M Needs/Planning Concepts

- develop and maintain basic facilities required to accommodate light impact public uses, for example, a safe access road (sand, gravel, board) for accessing the beach and other areas where it is appropriate for standard cars/trucks to travel on the island; designated parking areas; interpretive kiosks strategically placed; bath house/rest rooms or porta potties

- inventory, remove or secure any manmade hazards, provide signage to warn of natural hazards, designate and secure restricted areas as necessary to promote public safety;

- establish reasonable day use and overnight access fees* comparable to what has traditionally been collected by the property owner/manager. If a user fee is charged, there will have to be a system for collecting it, such as a staffed gatehouse entry or a "ranger" to make the rounds, a depository for fees collected, an accounting system for the use fees, etc.;

- inventory the habitat and wildlife on Elmer's Island and develop interpretive natural history, geology, ecology and historical information for visitors that can be accessed via the Internet and by other economical means. Also, plot out "nature trails" and "wildlife sanctuaries" in this material;

- as appropriate, designate wildlife "sanctuaries" that should be off-limits to all but foot traffic and non-motorized watercraft, and establish seasonal/permanent restrictions on the use of motorized vehicles (cars, trucks, campers, etc.) in fragile habitat areas, places where disturbance is detrimental to wildlife such as shorebird nesting areas, and beaches where traffic contributes to beach erosion;

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 7

- develop a strategy for policing the area;
- develop a cost estimate for preparing Elmer's Island for reopening to the public;
- develop rules for the use of Elmer's Island, for example, cleaning up campsites, vehicle speed limits, no ATVs, proper disposal of human waste, no littering, etc.;
- develop an annual budget for O & M and conservation of Elmer's Island;
- recruit partner businesses in the area to serve as welcome centers for Elmer's Island;
- develop plans for establishing a group camp and educational facility (perhaps near the location of Jay Elmer's camp) for use by programs such as "Marsh Maneuvers" and field researchers (grant funds and donations can be sought for this development);
- plan events like fishing rodeos, birding trips, nature study walks, and other events in collaboration with the City of Grand Isle and others;
- establish an advisory board (Friends of Elmer's Island) to guide management and development of the property. Initially such "Friends" group would include representation from the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program Management Conference, Louisiana Ornithological Society, Redstick or New Orleans Flyfishers, LSU AgCenter, Plains Pipeline, America's Wetland Foundation, Coastal Conservation Association of Louisiana. Membership in the "friends" group would be open to other organizations with an interest in the conservation and management of Elmer's Island.

Government Cooperators in Management may be: LDWF Marine Fisheries Division; LDWF Fur & Refuge Division/Natural Heritage Program; LDCRT Office of State Parks; LDNR Office of Coastal Restoration & Management; City of Grand Isle, LaFourche Parish Sheriff; Port Fourchon, others?

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 8

Other Opportunities/Ideas

Inquiry has been made about the availability of the property which lies adjacent and to the west of Mr. Elmer's property. This property has ponds, channels and narrow stranded beach ridges (cheniers) that are extraordinary and of ecological significance. It does not include beachfront but is an integral part of that beach, marsh, chenier, tidal channel ecosystem between Hwy. 1 and the Gulf and includes frontage on LA Hwy 1. After describing the vision for Elmer's Island and how this property, with its unique features would complement that, a member of the family that owns the property, after consulting with other family members, indicated that they would consider selling the property to the state.

Driving private vehicles along the beach, especially unrestricted, is frowned upon by coastal restoration scientists and landowners who own up to the beach, because of both the potential for vehicle traffic to accelerate erosion and to disturb wildlife. One approach to minimizing damage while still allowing public access to and along the beach is to provide a beach tram that would have low impact wide tires and the capacity to shuttle a couple dozen campers/birders/fishers/ per trip out along the beach. It could make regularly scheduled trips to pick up and drop off. There could be a fare, or rides could be free, at no additional charge to the entry fee paid at the gate. Riding that tram would be a nice excursion, between Caminada and Belle Passes, plus a great way to get to campsite/fishing spots and back.

*** Charging Day & Overnight Use Fees to the Public for Access to Elmer's Island**

The Elmers charged a fee for accessing Elmer's Island, and based on a LSU AgCenter survey and economic study, the public fully expects to have to pay for access to use the area. The state (LDWF) should consider a use fee once road access is restored to Elmer's Island.

Based on a review of statutory authorities, neither the LDWF nor the LWFC has the authority to charge a fee for the day and/or overnight recreational use of LDWF administered lands as envisioned for the public use of Elmer's Island. Currently, statutory law provides for a \$15 annual use permit fee for hunting and camping on LDWF lands and a Wild Louisiana "Stamp" for "nonconsumptive" use of such

(more)



Elmer's Island, Page 9

lands that is available for the year or for day use. The day use fee is capped at \$2 by statute. None of these is suitable for what is anticipated for the public use of Elmer's Island. Should the LDWF decide that a fee should be charged, statutory authorization would have to be secured. A sample of the kind of legislation necessary follows.

Draft Fee Authorization Legislation

To enact R.S. 56:805, relative to wildlife and fisheries; to provide relative to Elmer's Island; to provide certain terms, conditions and procedures; to authorize certain fees; to provide an effective date; and to provide for related matters.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of Louisiana:

Section 1. R.S. 56:805 is hereby enacted to read as follows:

§805. Elmer's Island; administration

A. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is authorized to charge user fees to support the administration of the Elmer's Island property. The user fees shall not exceed ten dollars for day use per vehicle, including driver, and two dollars for each additional person in the vehicle. For overnight use, an additional ten dollars per vehicle may be charged.

B. As used herein, "Elmer's Island" means that property consisting of seventeen hundred acres more or less from the west bank of Caminada Pass to Thunder Bayou on the Gulf of Mexico, located in Jefferson Parish across Caminada Pass from Grand Isle.

2. The provisions of this Act shall become effective only upon the acquisition by the state of title or public use rights to Elmer's Island.