

The Creation of a Coastal Zone Management System
in the State of North Carolina: A Case Study

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For ten years in the 1970's, I was involved, as chairman of a committee and later as consultant in the creation of a coastal zone management system in the American state of North Carolina. Today, this management system is considered one of the best in the U.S.A. Our experience may be relevant for today.

The coast of North Carolina is unique and extremely beautiful¹. The Atlantic coast sweeps boldly down from the Virginia capes in a series of graceful arcs. This edge of land is this ribbon of sand islands separated from the mainland by shallow bays and sounds. The northern half of this ribbon of island is called the Outer Banks. The first long arc reaches far out to sea, finally falling away to the west to form historic Cape Hatteras, whose offshore shoals are called the "graveyard of the Atlantic." The second arc trends southwesterly, comprising among others the island of Ocracoke, once a haven for pirates, and culminating in Cape Lookout, a dagger point of sand marking the southern boundary of the Outer Banks. Thereafter, the island hug the coastal mainland but jut out again at Cape Fear, the ominous name given by early explores to the third and last of North Carolina's perilous capes.

The creation of the North Carolina coastal zone management system can be broken down into five parts:

First, we undertook to settle unresolved matters of ownership of wetlands and intertidal zones.

¹T.J. Schoenbaum, Islands, Capes, and the Sounds (2nd ed. 1985).

Second, we carried out an extensive campaign of public education by scientists, planners, and lawyers. We encouraged the public as well as stakeholders by bringing them into the management process.

Third, we drafted an up-to-date law and regulations. I was the chair of the drafting committee. Our law, the Coastal Area Management Act, combined with state and local control of development in the coastal zone.

Fourth, we had to implement our law and regulations. This was a four-year process.

Fifth, we had to defend the constitutionality of our management system in the courts.

There are several lessons that can be drawn from this case study. First, public education and public participation are critical. Second, an adequate law is not enough; the implementation is crucial. Third, it is best to use a careful combination of controls by state and local government. Fourth, development cannot be stopped, but should be channeled carefully to avoid environmental disruption.