

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Twin Lights, Highlands.

SCOTT LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Why Coastal Retreat is Not the Only Solution

By The American Shore & Beach Preservation Association

When running through the list of solutions for coastal erosion problems, one item always needs to be retreat – the willful abandonment of the coast to the forces of nature causing the erosional issues.

It needs to be on the table with all the other engineering and management approaches because, frankly, you cannot eliminate any choice from consideration if you are trying to be a good coastal steward. However, contrary to the strongly held views of a very small but very vocal coastal minority, retreat cannot be the only answer – and here's why.

Retreat is not always:

- **Cost-free**, but few of its proponents are willing to talk about the economic consequences of abandonment. These consequences cover the loss of revenue via property taxes, tourism taxes and sales taxes currently being generated, which would not be replaced if the coast were abandoned. It also means the literal cost of retreat – taking away all the things now along the shoreline to really allow nature to take its course.

- **Environmentally sound**, due to legal restrictions on municipalities' ability to condemn and remove structures, retreat often leads to dilapidated buildings and their associated infrastructure (electric, water, sewage/septic) on the active beach. Compare this scenario to the hundreds of restored beach/dune systems created by nourishment projects all over the U.S.

- **Realistic**, because people clearly want to live and play along the coast. Where has population growth been highest? Along the coast. Where is economic activity the strongest? Along the coast. When people are given a choice where they want to live,

where do they go? Along the coast. To think you're going to change that behavior is folly.

- **Politically viable**, when a majority of your populace lives near the shoreline. Again, when more than 55 percent of the U.S. population is on or near a coastal area, any smart politician is going to work to protect the interests of that bloc whenever possible. That's just pragmatism – and those interests usually don't include the idea of retreat.

- **Legally viable**, particularly in places where failure to protect private property carries a considerable cost to government. Many coastal management programs came into being because the alternative was to allow each property to do whatever they wanted (or needed) to do to protect an eroding shoreline. And they have that right by the law of the land... in fact, in many states anything the government does that takes away value from a property can be subject to a lawsuit to require that government to pay the property owner for that loss of value. So the millions governments spend in coastal protection is cheap compared to the billions they might have to pay to compensate owners for a "taking"... and that's not even imagining a scenario where all that private land would be bought and turned into public property that would be left to the waves to decide its fate.

- **Desirable**, when coastal retreat would undermine one of our country's biggest industries – tourism. Studies have documented that U.S. beaches generate billions of day visits and trillions in revenues – contributions which would be severely reduced if retreat was the norm and the coastal infrastructure necessary for a viable tourism economy was dismantled. Yes, the beaches would still be there post-retreat – but people's ability to get to them would be severely diminished, and many of those tourism and travel dollars would simply go to places where one could easily get to the beach. If that meant another country, that's a huge hole in the U.S. economy where tourism is the third

largest contributor.

- **Necessary on many coastlines**, because viable and affordable management is possible. By encouraging "soft" protection measures such as more sand and coastal marshes, combined with sane coastal building policies and preserving or restoring natural coastal elements, it is possible to achieve an equilibrium between human desires and natural forces in a majority of locations, without having to abandon the coast altogether.

- **Going to stop coastal management**, dredging and other activities its proponents find so abhorrent. Inlets and channels will need to be maintained, harbors and waterways will need to be navigable and, unless every piece of structure and infrastructure is removed, coastlines will still need to be managed.

This is not to argue that coastal retreat should never be considered. As we said before, it needs to be part of any list of options when coastal problems are being analyzed.

There are places where retreat is likely the best solution, where due to geologic and hydrologic forces the best answer is to remove (or not rebuild) structures and infrastructure rather than spend more money and material protecting things that just should not be there any more.

But when so-called "experts" routinely push retreat as the *only* solution to coastal problems, discounting all the other viable options and even denying reality itself, well, they may just be more interested in provocation than in problem-solving. That's simply not sound coastal management or policy.

Founded in 1926, the American Shore & Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA) advocates for healthy coastlines by promoting the integration of science, policies and actions that maintain, protect and enhance the coasts of America. Additional information about ASBPA is available by visiting www.asbpa.org.

A Beautiful Pine Barrens Late-Bloomer

By Michele S. Byers

Of all the Garden State's native wildflowers, few are more exciting in the fall than the spectacular, rare Pine Barrens gentians.

Pine Barrens gentians (*Gentiana autumnalis*) are listed as a Species of Special Concern by the state Department of Environmental Protection, and their habitats are protected by the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan.

Gentians bloom from September through early November, a time when most other wildflowers have long turned to seed. Lucky indeed are those who spot patches of the deep blue gentians along roadsides and trails, since their numbers have dwindled as a result of modern civilization.

Pine Barrens gentians thrive in areas of disturbance, especially places that have been scorched by wildfire. Large wildfires were once common in the Pine Barrens, ignited by lightning and Native Americans, spreading across tens of thousands of acres. But for well over a century, wildfires have been greatly suppressed, resulting in habitat loss for Pine Barrens gentians and scores of other rare species.

But wild gentians still survive in a handful of patches scattered throughout the Pine Barrens,

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and they're being studied by Drexel University researcher Ryan Rebozo, a Ph.D. candidate and New Jersey native.

Rebozo noted that Pine Barrens gentians are "early successional" plants, meaning they colonize open, disturbed sites. "They're one of the first species that come into these areas that are burned or disturbed," he said.

Rebozo is studying multiple Pine Barrens gentian populations to find out how they fare in three sets of conditions: areas cleared by "prescribed burns," areas that are mowed, and areas that haven't been touched.

What he's learned is that any type of disturbance is helpful to these perennials because it eliminates competing plants and opens up the forest canopy to create patches of sunlight. "Generally, I found that disturbed sites have more flowers, greater seed set and more insects visiting flowers," he said.

But populations charred by fire, like those at the U.S. Air Force Warren Grove Gunnery Range, seem to do the best, Rebozo said, because burned organic matter adds nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus and carbon to the sandy Pine Barrens soil.

He's also learned that Pine Barrens gentians can lie dormant below the soil – seemingly gone – but come back strong after a hot fire sweeps the landscape. His research indicates that hot controlled or "prescribed" burns at selected locations can be a good strategy for preserving gentian populations.

Rebozo is also studying how beneficial fungi living in the roots of Pine Barrens gentians can help them draw in extra nutrients from the soil.

At New Jersey Conservation Foundation's Franklin Parker Preserve in Chatsworth, a population of Pine Barrens gentians is thriving. What a stunning sight they are! The vivid and bright blue petals attract pollinators.

"Blue flowers are more easily spotted by insects in the fall than red, yellow or orange flowers, because blue doesn't get lost among the changing fall foliage," said Dr. Emile DeVito, New Jersey Conservation Foundation's staff ecologist. "Blue flowers found in many asters and gentians native to the eastern US predominate in the autumn."

Gentian petals have showy spots or stripes that serve as "nectar guides," leading the insects to the center of the flowers. Occasionally, a pink or white-petaled variant is mixed in with the blues, adding to the fun of searching for gentians.

Pine Barrens gentians may be New Jersey's most beautiful native flower – and they're a valuable late-season food source for pollinating insects that need a boost of nutrition to aid in over-winter survival.

If you're hiking the Franklin Parker Preserve during the next month, keep your eyes peeled for the Pine Barrens gentians!

To learn more about Pine Barrens gentians – and other Pine Barrens flora and fauna – go to the Pinelands Preservation Alliance website at www.pinelandsalliance.org.

And for more information about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S. Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.



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Two River Moment

This scene is looking north along Bay Avenue, Highlands, during what is believed to be the 1920s.