



THE ISLAND PACKET

Southern Beaufort County's Newspaper

Nature's best friend

Environmentalist tapped to help make Hampton Lake a development where flora and fauna flourish

BY CAROL WEIR
The Island Packet

Award-winning environmentalist Todd Ballantine has been hired to help preserve and interpret nature at Hampton Lake, while engineers are working to make sure the new development's 165-acre man-made lake is a first-class amenity.

Ballantine, the author of Lowcountry field guide "Tideland Treasure" and many newspaper and magazine articles about the local environment, has worked with Hampton Lake developer John Reed before to plan the 10-mile system of greenways in Berkeley Hall. The naturalist also designed Sun City Hilton Head's nature trail boardwalk and interpretive exhibits, and worked on the environmental aspects of Sea Pines' interconnected lagoon system.

The 955-acre Hampton Lake property, which will have about 900 houses, contains rare hardwood wetlands that are part of a larger regional wetland system draining into the May River. Trees in these wetlands include red oaks, black tupelo, sweet gum and water oaks. The wetlands provide important habitat for migratory birds including warblers, buntings and vireos, which spend part of the year in South America and Mexico and other months in the U.S.

"We expect to see a lot of painted buntings as the water rises and the shrubs grow along the banks," Ballantine said.

Ballantine said he also expects the gently sloping lake shores to attract wading birds such as herons and egrets, while ospreys will come to fish in the lake.

Ballantine created the original master plan for Hampton Lake's walking trail and boardwalk system several years ago. The seven or eight boardwalks will allow people to cross sensitive areas including protected wetlands, he said, adding that he's also creating interpretative signs to go alongside the nature trails. The trails should open by next summer.

Ballantine is teaching the Hampton Lake sales staff about ecological, historical and cultural aspects of the area, including how Native Americans 500 years ago probably hunted in the low lying areas. The sales agents also are learning about the area's modern history as a timber plantation owned by first Union Camp and then International Paper.

Ballantine also is writing and illustrating a book about the Hampton Lake environment to be given to all property owners. It will include a "water-proof hard copy for people to take in their boat" and an accompanying DVD, he said. The author also is creating several pamphlets for participants in Hampton Lake's kayak and canoe nature tours, which will be run by Outside Hilton Head. Ballantine is training the company's guides.

"This will be a great place to watch birds and see wildflowers along the edges of the lake. Explorers will love being able to move through the various parts of the waterway," he said, adding that over time it's likely ducks will use the lake in the winter.

Motor boat traffic on the lake will be restricted to low speeds and possibly electric motors, Ballantine said.

A small nature museum including dioramas and aquariums with the lake's fish species will be built at the lake's boat house, and Ballantine is designing all the exhibits for it.



Crescent Moon Pictures/Special to the Packet

Hampton Lake's 165-acre man-made lake meanders through hardwood wetlands. The lake is 80 percent complete now, the community's developers say.

Fishing

Tiger bass, large mouth bass, sunfish and blue gill are some species that will live in Hampton Lake, where property owners surely will try to catch them. Don Keller and Barry Smith of American Sport Hatchery have been hired as consultants to transform the lake into a top fishing destination.

To develop the fish habitat and encourage stocked fish to breed, the community's developers plan to install stumps and artificial structures under the surface. Aeration will be provided by bubblers on the bottom, which will circulate oxygen throughout the lake.

"The key to having a healthy lake is having that dissolved oxygen," Ballantine said. "You'll find plenty of small lakes or lagoons in other communities, but many of them are stagnant and filled with silt. They are not part of the reciprocal dynamic that is being created at Hampton Lake, between the lake's waterways and hardwood wetlands, so the range of wildlife is lacking."

Aquatic plants including pickerel weed, flowering plants, lily and irises will be planted to create shallow water habitat for small fish. The plants growing on the lake's sloping banks and underwater terraces will also help purify stormwater.

The lake will fluctuate in depth up to a foot after storms, and will be about eight feet at its deepest point. It looks somewhat like a series of smaller lakes, and ranges from 60 to 500 feet wide.

Wetland restoration and storm water

The developers of Hampton Lake also are restoring damage done to the wetlands by the timber companies, which cut ditches and logging roads through the swampy areas to move water and timber off the property faster. The goal is to restore the original hydrology of the area, said Gary Wiggin, a civil engineer and vice-president of development for Reed Development Co.

Stormwater from about 2,500 acres in the region will drain into Hampton Lake, including run off from neighborhoods Lawton Station, Baynard Park, The Willows, and Grande Oaks. These developments also have their own stormwater systems where water is treated first.

Swimming won't be allowed in the lake, but Wiggin said that the water quality "won't be any different than that in other man made ponds around here." Hampton Lake will have a giant pool and a lazy river for swimmers.

The developers will test the water quality as stormwater leaves the property, and are working with University of South Carolina-Beaufort to set up a partnership for student research about water quality.



Special to the Packet

Information about white-tailed deer will be part of a nature museum at Hampton Lake being designed by award winning environmentalist and author Todd Ballantine.

Reproduction does not imply endorsement.