



# Fire Island Land Trust

## Protecting Sensitive Lands on Fire Island



Photo by Ed Sambolin

**The Fire Island Land Trust**, a grassroots not-for-profit organization, was founded by property owners on Fire Island in 2006. The Trust is a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to preserving the unique natural habitats, scenic views, and community character of Fire Island. The Trust aims to fill the gap left by federal, state, and local authorities in coastal protection and works to abate a series of threats to Fire Island.

### THREATS TO FIRE ISLAND

Fire Island's unique natural environment and historical character are under serious threat. In 1964, the Fire Island National Seashore was created in order to recognize and protect this unique and vulnerable habitat while maintaining the seventeen existing communities on the barrier island. Due to a pervasive lack of staff and funding, however, the National Park Service and others have been unable to accomplish their programmatic goals on Fire Island. The result of this gap leaves government officials with no choice but to permit unwise development on Fire Island. This unwise development is causing the destruction of sensitive coastal natural resources, which increases the vulnerability of human communities to rising sea level and storms.

Expensive projects to "manage" the natural erosion process of Fire Island also contribute to the alteration of the barrier island and, if they are allowed to continue, will actually make communities less resilient to coastal storms and sea level rise. The largest of these projects undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is the Fire Island to Montauk Point Reformulation Study, which has the potential to dramatically reshape Fire Island's coast.

Climate change will have a dramatic effect on Fire Island within our lifetime. Sea level is rising more rapidly than anyone envisioned even five years ago. In the next twenty years it is predicted that sea levels could rise one foot and coastal areas, especially low lying barrier islands, will experience accelerated changes.

Without proper planning, sea level rise will cause devastation to coastal properties, and envelop beaches and coastal habitats, which cannot migrate due to development along the coast.

*"The justification for this proposed National Seashore may be simply stated. A unique combination of factors – the existence of some of the Nation's finest beaches in close proximity to the largest concentration of people in the entire United States – is urgent reason that the area be protected in perpetuity for the use and enjoyment of the American people."* Secretary of the Interior providing comments on the bill proposing the establishment of Fire Island National Seashore, June 10, 1963.



Photo by Ed Sambolin

*“Expanding the Seashore’s partnerships is the best way to ensure that the Seashore will be preserved for future generations to enjoy.”*

Fire Island National Seashore, Business Plan, Fiscal Year 2004

### **AN URGENT NEED FOR COASTAL LAND PROTECTION ON FIRE ISLAND**

Over 2.2 million people enjoy Fire Island every year as visitors or permanent residents on the island. Yet Fire Island is also a habitat for a diversity of rare, threatened and endangered plants and animals and holds the only federally designated wilderness in the State of New York – the Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness area.

The interaction between this habitat and developed areas can cause conflict with natural resources, beach access. Recreational areas often lose in the long term. Voluntary action to protect land is well recognized as an effective way to diffuse this conflict.

Land protection is the one tool that can simultaneously protect natural habitat and enhance community resilience and restores the dynamic equilibrium of the beach in the face of sea level rise. Protecting coastal property creates a natural buffer: it reduces damage from coastal storms and alleviates the pressure on natural resources – species, habitats and water quality – that are impacted by their close proximity to human communities. Although Long Island has a number of local programs that provide funding for land protection generally, coastal land often receives insufficient attention because the costs are so high and the parcels are relatively small.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS**

The protection of coastal lands on Fire Island is a conservation priority for federal, state and local governments, but limited funds for land protection and the tendency to favor large-parcel acquisition has left these lands unprotected:

- The National Park Service has the authority to acquire property but it has not been funded to do so in recent years. An annual funding gap of more than a \$1.5 million causes the Fire Island National Seashore to heavily rely on partnerships.
- The New York State Open Space Plan targets parcels with frontage on the Atlantic Ocean but has not been successful at acquiring these lands.
- The Towns of Brookhaven and Islip are committed to preserving the remaining undeveloped parcels on Fire Island but have not been successful due to a funding shortfall.

The Fire Island Land Trust is positioned to work with these and other partners on advancing the shared goal of protecting vulnerable land on Fire Island.

### **THE OPPORTUNITY**

The Fire Island Land Trust is a locally conceived, privately-funded voice for land protection. This grassroots Land Trust must position itself now to assist the barrier island to address unwise development and adapt to the increasing threats of sea level rise and coastal storms. With the support and collaboration of public and private partners, the Land Trust will provide a mechanism for local participation in land protection on Fire Island. By protecting the most sensitive lands we can contribute to the long term health of Fire Island, and help protect it from unwise development and sea level rise.