



# Natural Resources 4

The Town of Bluffton is located in southern Beaufort County and is the mainland's easternmost coastal town. It is bordered by the New River to the west, the Okatie River to the north, and the Cooper River to the south. The May River runs to the south of Old Town and north of Palmetto Bluff. These four water bodies help form fragile ecosystems that are located in Bluffton and its surrounding environs.

Bluffton's quality of life is based on the fundamental principal that healthy ecosystems support healthy people, which in turn, promote a healthy economy. While quality of life can be preserved by protecting and enhancing the area's natural resources, unchecked development pressure may negatively affect local ecology and result in a wide range of environmental and economic problems.

In order to grow economically, preserve our natural heritage, and promote a high quality of life, there is an overarching desire to achieve

## Vision

*We will inventory and protect critical resources in a manner which sustains the vitality, function, and beauty of Bluffton's natural heritage.*

watershed has a diverse and valuable landscape with little man-made impacts. As such, it is a prime candidate to be nominated for National Wild and Scenic River designation as a Ramsar International Wetland of Importance. A more detailed description of the New River can be found in Appendix A.

**Okatie River:** According to the Okatie River Baseline Study, the Okatie is a narrow tidal creek which flows into the Colleton River. Tides can fluctuate 8.5 feet every six hours and is considered one of the highest along the southeast coast. The Okatie has great historic and ecological significance. The river once supported a healthy and prosperous shellfish population but agriculture and development have reduced its overall harvest. The Okatie is currently being studied under a five-year, multidisciplinary research and outreach program funded by the NOAA Coastal Ocean Program, South Carolina and Georgia Sea Grant, known as LUC-ES. Scientists from South Carolina and Georgia are working collaboratively to examine how changes in land use affect marine resources. In addition, the headwaters of the Okatie River have been an area of great interest to Beaufort County. The purchase of development rights from property adjacent to its headwaters is a tool that can help restore water quality.

## Floodplains

Floodplains are flat or nearly flat lands adjacent to a stream or river that experience occasional or periodic flooding, particularly during wet seasons. It includes the floodway (the stream channel and the area adjacent carrying flood flows) and the flood fringe (the area inundated by flood waters but not experiencing strong currents). The May, New, and Okatie floodplains provide benefits that are essential to a healthy community and must be protected. These include: enhancing stormwater management, water quality, control of flooding and erosion, and preservation of biological productivity and wildlife habitats.

In 1993, Bluffton adopted a Flood Prevention Ordinance to promote public health, safety and welfare by minimizing losses resulting from floods. The floodplain map referenced in the Ordinance is from the Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) and is used to calculate flood insurance ratings, land use regulations and for lenders, to determine where flood insurance must be purchased. Bluffton should use the latest information, collected as part of local developments and from Beaufort County, to prepare an official floodplain map. This map can

## 4.5 Open Space

Open space includes undeveloped, public or private land that is used to preserve or protect natural resources. Open space may include passive and/or active recreational areas, wetlands, and stormwater lagoons. Planned unit developments (PUDs) currently require that at least 35% of a site be maintained as open space. For individual developments the minimum is 10%.

To address the national campaign encouraging children, adults, and senior citizens to be active, Bluffton needs more usable open space. Unfortunately, in PUDs, wetlands typically comprise the overwhelming majority of open space. While it is important to preserve them, wetlands should comprise only a small percentage of a development's total open space area. When connected and located outside of fragile and dynamic systems like wetlands, useable open spaces are more effective for recreation purposes. Therefore, Bluffton should research and establish a standard that requires a minimum percentage of upland open space based on acres per household, which is higher than the national average. A campaign to eliminate "Nature Deficit Disorder" in children could generate public enthusiasm and support for securing adequate upland open space.

### Financing Open Space, Land Acquisition

As the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources develops a statewide conservation plan, federal funds to buy land will become available. Bluffton has established a Community Infrastructure Bank, which contains \$1 million to purchase land. This resource should also be considered for grants where matching funds are required. Bluffton must employ several methods to preserve land including: outright purchase; purchase of development rights; acquisition by installments; lease development rights; and/or a combination of these. In addition, Bluffton could utilize multi-year tax revenues, bonds, and special taxes for this purpose.

The Trust for Public Lands (TPL) has been retained by Beaufort County to help plan, prioritize, negotiate and purchase land for public purposes. Among the supporting objectives are:

- Reduce traffic impacts

- Protect water quality
- Provide opportunities for public enjoyment and recreation

Since TPL funds are relatively limited, Bluffton will end up competing with the entire county for financing. Therefore, for the long-term, successful completion of a viable open space and habitat conservation plan, and to offset increasingly limited federal, state, and county funds, Bluffton must plan for and employ local control and funding to acquire land.

## Habitat Conservation

Wildlife habitat conservation can help prevent unpleasant interfaces between wildlife and residents. This can be accomplished by providing wildlife with the essentials of water, shelter, and food. In support of this, the fragmentation of their habitats must be minimized by establishing interconnected open space areas and corridors. Whenever possible, it is extremely important that large, contiguous, undisturbed tracts, similar to the Palmetto Bluff conservation easements within the Headwaters Tract, the Managed Forest, and Phase Two, be protected. Connecting these areas to the Jones and Buckwalter tracts would result in conserving prime habitats and corridors.

The Critical Resource Survey provides a preliminary list of areas and habitat types and should be prioritized based on attributes such as:

- Size
- Connectivity
- Habitat quality
- Local habitat diversity
- Local ecological importance
- Compatibility with existing and anticipated needs

Once the Critical Resources Survey and Map have been completed, Bluffton should focus on protecting the priority areas and incorporating them into the Land Use Map.

## Wildlife Corridors

Wildlife corridors are interconnected land and landscape features that support and facilitate effective animal movement between their habitats. These are transitional areas with sizes that vary from 50 to