



The LowCountry Institute

2007 Annual Report



photo by Eric Horan

LCI Matures as an Organization in 2007

In 1998, Executive Director Dr. Chris Marsh recognized that there was a need in the community that was not being met by other environmental organizations. While other organizations were effective in one or two aspects of environmental protection, there was no one to help local decision makers and interested citizens integrate all the pertinent information critical to making policy decisions. In addition, science-based information about the local environment was not in a user-friendly form designed for non-scientists.

Over the past nine years, the LowCountry Institute has matured into an organization recognized as an invaluable resource by government and community leaders. This success has occurred because the Institute has focused on establishing attainable goals. We have identified key decision makers, developed working relationships, and been successful in advocating the importance of protecting our local environment.

...The Institute is now recognized by both local environmentalists and developers as the definitive source for reliable information about the environment and the effects of its development...

The Institute serves as a “rudder”, helping to steer efforts of the region’s environmental community. The Institute developed a three-pronged approach for its projects:

- (1) To gather information from both scientific and non-scientific sources on specific topics.
- (2) To listen to all parties before making statements.
- (3) To deliver messages in ways that are most appropriate for the audience being targeted.

As a result of this approach, the Institute is now recognized by both local environmentalists and developers as the definitive source for reliable information about the environment and the effects of its development (see article on page 2). We have created an environmental training program that is now recognized as a “must do” for agency staff, naturalists and local residents interested in learning about the ecology of the Low Country. Our Pilot Schools program extends this training to include local teachers.

As the Institute reaches its 10-year anniversary in 2008, we are well prepared to continue this success during the next decade. The Institute will continue to help the community sustain a strong environmental ethic that will shape future development in the Lowcountry. Our Trustees’ experience and commitment will ensure the Institute’s continued growth. Thanks to the generous support of its donors, the Institute is able to attract topnotch staff with impressive experience and credentials. Our past successes have established a firm foundation upon which to build for the years to come.

Protecting Port Royal Sound by Creating a Sense of Community



A Port Royal Sound red drum

The Institute began working on local water quality in January 2001 when Nancy Schilling, founder of *Friends of the Rivers*, asked Chris to give a program about the Okatie River to Sun City residents. At that time Chris recognized that while local residents were most concerned about the river nearest to where they lived, the key to establishing effective water quality legislation was to have all residents of Beaufort County recognize that their respective rivers were part of a larger water body, shared by everyone, and that this system was truly unique and worthy of protection.

From this original collaboration arose the "Protecting Port Royal Sound" initiative, which has been a partnership of the Institute, *Friends of the Rivers* and the *Hilton Head Island Sport Fishing Club*. The first phase of this effort has been to educate as

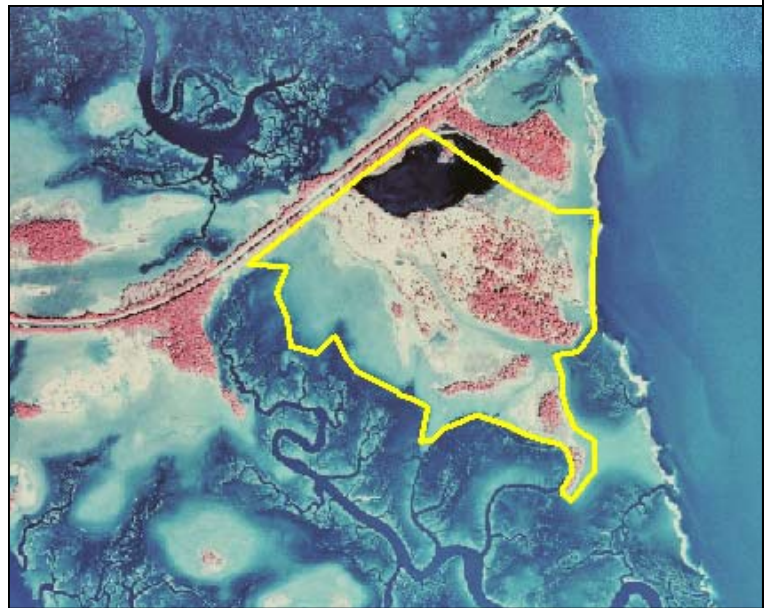
many people as possible about what makes Port Royal Sound unique and what has to be done to protect it. For the past seven years Institute staff and volunteers have been presenting this program to Rotary Clubs, community associations, and Beaufort County Leadership classes. In 2007 U.S. Representative Joe Wilson further promoted this message by drafting a bill to recognize Port Royal Sound as an EPA National Estuary. That bill is still pending and efforts are underway to have it move through Congress during 2008.

The second phase of this effort began in November 2007 when the Institute helped create and release an environmental report card to the media summarizing how well the community was doing in its efforts to protect Port Royal Sound. The report card accomplished two things: it further educated the public about protecting Port Royal Sound, and it engaged state agencies and local governmental bodies in conversations about the efficacy of current efforts. For example, Chris was asked by the Beaufort County Stormwater Utility Board to give a presentation and explain why the report card gave its stormwater protection efforts a C. As a result of this presentation, the county and the town of Bluffton staff are working together to agree on standards of stormwater treatment. Chris was asked to serve as an evaluator of the upcoming revised county stormwater management manual.

Protecting Water Quality by Protecting Land

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Institute in 2007 was working with the Beaufort County Open Land Trust to acquire a 161 acre marsh island called Widgeon Point that was slated for development. This property is in close proximity to the 411 acre Lemon Island and also is within a half a mile of the state's only in-shore cobia fishing area. Chris gave guided tours of the property to council members and presented the case for the purchase of the property to both Beaufort County Council and to the S.C. Conservation Bank.

The Widgeon Point tract, outlined in yellow.



Providing Environmental Education to a Large Audience: An Evolving Approach

Environmental education has been an important part of the Institute's mission since it was created in 1998. The foundation of the Institute's education program is its partnership with Spring Island, which it uses as a teaching site. The Institute funds the education exhibits at the Mobley Nature Center, located on Spring Island, and brings groups of adults and schoolchildren to visit the Nature Center. While on Spring Island these groups also explore the Gillespie Nature Trail, established by the Institute in 2005, or take a habitat safari on the Spring Island Traveling Classroom, a hay wagon refurbished by Spring Island member Warren Williamson this past summer. These Institute-sponsored programs are very popular because participants get to experience local habitats and animals first-hand.

The success of programs at the Mobley Nature Center during the early years brought increased requests for programs by Institute staff. Recognizing that the Institute did not have the mission or the capacity to meet all the requests for providing comprehensive environmental education programs directly to other communities, the Institute has begun a shift to a "train the trainers" approach. This began with the Institute becoming the primary sponsor for the Master Naturalist program in 2003. In order to meet the growing demand for this program, the Institute expanded its offerings by teaching a spring class in 2007 as well as the original fall class.

Excerpt from SC Wildlife Magazine:

"In 1999, three Lowcountry conservationists – Beaufort County Agent Jack Keener, Extension Forester Bob Franklin and LowCountry Institute Director Chris Marsh – partnered to create what is fast becoming one of South Carolina's crown jewels of conservation: Celmsom University's S.C. Master Naturalist Program."

As of December 2007, 181 people have taken this class. The course has become the training program for environmental educators and biologists working at other programs and state agencies as well as residents who want to be well-informed about the



Participants Annie Judd and Lindsay Fairchilds examine a chicken turtle during their Master Naturalist class.

unique habitats of the Low Country. Many of these local residents use the knowledge they acquired in the course to help improve the environmental sensitivity of their own communities and neighborhoods.

With the addition of Tony Mills as the Institute's Education Director in June 2007, the Institute has begun shifting the way in which it supports environmental education in local schools. In September Tony began a training program for two teams of teachers from Shanklin and Okatie Elementary Schools. The two schools were selected for the Institute program by the Beaufort County School District administration. By working with school-based teams of teachers, the Institute is able to influence what is taught to all the children in a school year-round, rather than providing an isolated three-hour program for 25-60 students at a time. The Institute continues to provide programs at Spring Island for school groups, but is targeting classes of teachers who are in the teacher training program.

Teacher's responses:

"This Saturday program for teachers has been an inspiration to me. Every visit gives me hands-on experience that I can tell my students about on Monday. It has opened up a whole new world to me even though I have lived here all my life. Chris and Tony are remarkable teachers. The way they engage us in the lesson reminds us that we should do the same for our students. I wish every teacher in Beaufort County could have these experiences."

Helen Goodman, *Okatie Elementary*

"The LowCountry Institute has provided us with a wonderful opportunity to learn about the lowcountry environment. Despite having lived in Beaufort for 25 years, I was not aware of the wide variety of plants and wildlife that inhabit the area. We have some truly unique flora and fauna, and it has been very exciting to have a hands-on experience with them. I have taken the knowledge and experiences I have gained back to my classroom – our school's science lab. The students are fascinated to learn about our environment, and the lessons tie in to the state standards. Overall, a wonderful educational experience."

Lisa Carlton, *Shanklin Elementary*

"Being able to attend LCI has been a blessing to me and the students I teach. Nothing outside looks the same anymore, as Chris and Tony have given us new "eyes" to see everything differently through hands on "in-your-face" experiences that I will never forget. I can't say when I've ever been so excited about getting up on a Saturday morning to go to that day's location to read the landscape, pull traps, make inferences, and learn new ways to make science interesting and fun for my students. Thank you for helping me to rev up my instruction and get my students so excited about what's around them. I just can't express how much I have enjoyed everything."

Gail Burkes, *Shanklin Elementary*



Education Director Tony Mills models outdoor instruction to a teacher while leading a field trip for her third grade class to Hunting Island State Park.



A group of teachers from Okatie and Shanklin Elementary Schools explore the salt marsh by measuring the density of periwinkle snails, ribbed mussels, and mud crabs. This activity demonstrates to teachers how to teach math skills while also teaching science.

Using LCI Research to Advance Protection of Port Royal Sound

All of the research studies funded by the LowCountry Institute have one thing in common—they provide information about species that have the potential of evaluating environmental health in the wake of increasing development. One such example is the shark survey begun in 2007. A copy of the project's first year report was sent to the SC Office of Coastal Resource Management (OCRM) to encourage them to deny a proposed permit for a *de facto* marina on the upper Okatie River.

The results of the 2007 season is perhaps best summarized by these comments provided by Dr. Dan Abel in his e-mail to OCRM.

"I concur with Chris Marsh's conclusion about the need for more survey work before dock permits are issued. We have been surveying the shark fauna of Murrells Inlet which, as you know is heavily impacted by humans, and comparing the results to a survey in pristine North Inlet. The difference is stunning: extensive effort in Murrells Inlet this spring and summer resulted in only a single shark — a juvenile bon-



Tags placed on the dorsal fin allow researchers to follow shark movements throughout Port Royal Sound.

nethead, whereas numerous sharks comprising several species were caught in North Inlet. Informal surveys of recreational fishers support our findings. Unfortunately, we do not have data to pinpoint the cause. It could be due to the degree of isolation of Murrells Inlet, or it could be because of poor water quality (e.g. PAHs), food chain disruption (perhaps due to water quality), or physical disturbance (boat traffic). At any rate, this is the first evidence showing the virtual absence of sharks in a human-impacted system.

It is too early to tell whether the Colleton and Okatie are important nurseries. Future work will allow us to make this conclusion. These systems are not degraded like Murrells Inlet. However, our study is showing that, from the perspective of sharks, the entire Port Royal Sound is an area unique to our state. The shark fauna is rich, perhaps the most diverse and numerous in SC estuarine waters (with more species than North Inlet, which is a National Estuarine Research Reserve). With limited sampling we caught or observed 14 species of sharks in Port Royal Sound."

Studies such as this shark survey emphasize that there is still much we do not know - but need to - in order to make wise decisions about the use of our waterways and the lands that surround them.



Researchers pull in a tiger shark.

LCI Annual Fund Report

The important work of the LowCountry Institute is 100% funded by tax-deductible contributions. We are grateful for the support of 217 donors whose gifts totaled \$384,999.19. This is an increase of \$70,009.70 over our 2006 results and \$125,007.27 over our 2005 results. We were especially pleased to welcome eleven new members to our Leadership Circle (\$5,000 and above).

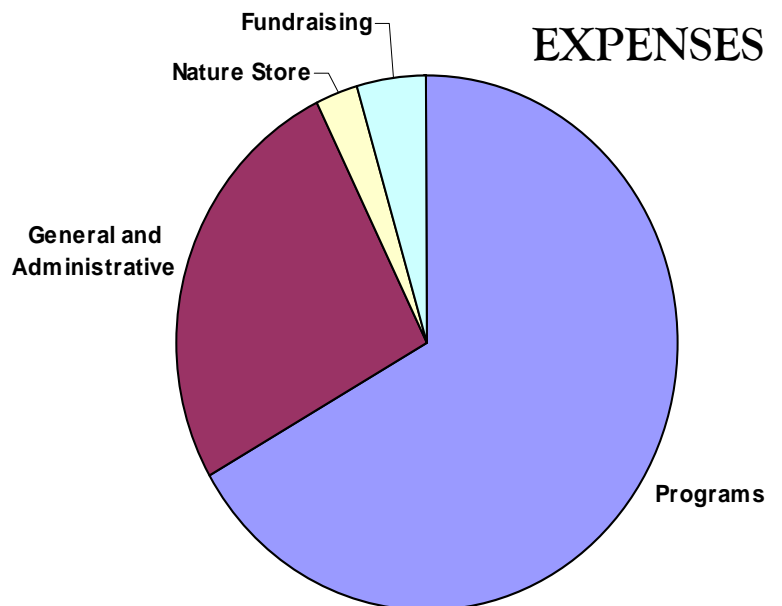
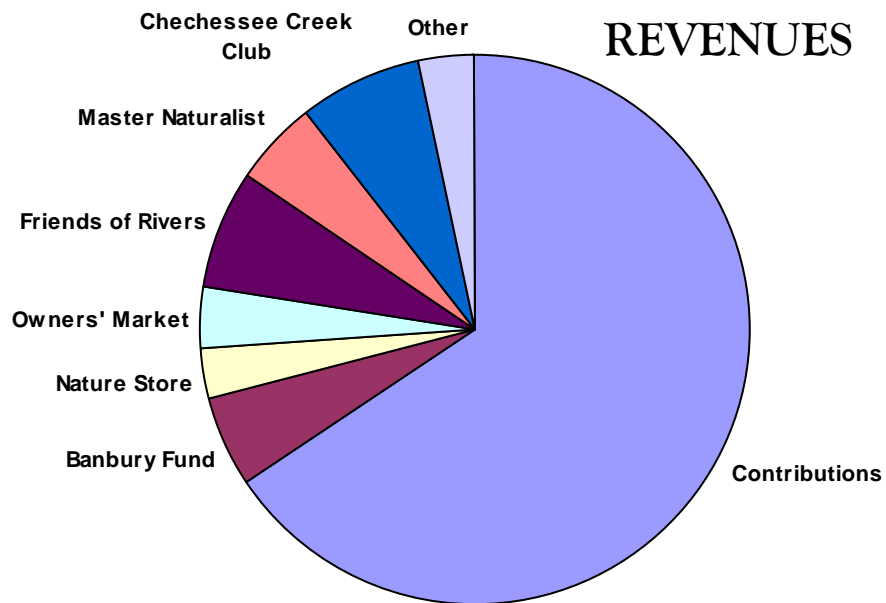
The LCI is viewed by both local environmentalists and developers as the definitive source for reliable information about the environment and the effects of development. The Institute's work is increasingly important as the pressure of development in the Low Country continues to threaten our precious natural resources.

Many thanks to our donors and our 21 solicitors whose generosity and hard work resulted in the wonderful success of the 2007 Annual Fund.

LCI 2007 Financials

REVENUES	
Contributions	\$308,761
Banbury Fund	\$25,000
Nature Store	\$13,785
Owners' Market	\$16,753
Friends of Rivers	\$33,379
Master Naturalist	\$23,900
Chechessee Creek Club	\$33,078
Other	\$16,025
TOTAL	\$470,681

EXPENSES	
Programs	\$312,889
General and Administrative	\$123,758
Nature Store	\$13,282
Fundraising	\$20,289
TOTAL	\$470,218



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*Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the donor list. Please excuse any errors and contact Lisa Gravil at 987-7008 with corrections.

Institute Becomes Corporate Sponsor of the SC ETV Series "Expeditions"



In the "Backyard Wilderness - Spring Island" episode, Patrick describes how the armadillo has spread from its native range in Texas to SC

One of the Institute's most significant accomplishments was to bring the ETV series "Expeditions" to the region to begin filming three programs that will air in 2008 and 2009.

The Institute will be recognized during these seasons as the corporate sponsor for this award-winning nature series. One of the benefits of this partnership will be providing local schools with copies of the programs that highlight local habitats.

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Dolphins strand feeding in the May River. This footage will be used in an Expeditions episode about Port Royal Sound to be aired in 2009.



Patrick and Tony search for amphibians at the Duck Ponds on Spring Island.



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