



Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Conservation Conflict (Center Books)

Lary M. Dilsaver

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Located off the coast of Georgia, Cumberland Island was once the retreat of some of America's wealthiest families, most notably the family of Thomas Carnegie, brother of steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, and his wife Lucy. The death in 1962 of their last child, Florence Carnegie Perkins, ended the restrictions of a complex family trust arrangement and led to the division of their land among Carnegie descendants. These parties and the other landowners, both old and new, clashed over their conflicting interests in retaining land for personal use, selling to developers, or entrusting parcels to the National Park Service for public use. Today, more than three decades after its legal designation as the Cumberland Island National Seashore, the island is home to a magnificent array of natural resources, including a seventeen-mile beach and the largest surviving stand of maritime oak forest in the United States; more than half is currently designated a wilderness area and is a serene and beautiful public space. The story of how the park arrived at its current status, however, is as rugged and wild as the land itself.

In *Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Conservation Conflict*, Lary M. Dilsaver uses the island as an example of the difficulty of converting privately owned lands into public space. The fate of the island has galvanized national environmental groups, the descendants of powerful families, historic preservation organizations, and African American heritage societies. The local populace wanted to enjoy the beaches and the fishing but also to attract as many visitors as possible from the nearby I-95.

First a history of the establishment, management, and conservation issues of the site, Cumberland Island National Seashore also serves as a revealing look at the ongoing national battle between ecosystem preservation, historic conservation, and lingering private use in the park system. By focusing on the history of one national park, Dilsaver shows vividly the difficulties of preserving land and wildlife while providing recreational opportunities for the public.

The core of Dilsaver's story is interest-group lobbying and conflict, involving wealthy and powerful opponents, and the Park Service's sometimes fruitless attempts to run a middle course following agency tradition and a web of legal constraints. Engagingly written and supplemented with historical illustrations and maps, Cumberland Island National Seashore offers a fascinating glimpse behind the process of establishing a national park area. It will interest scholars and students of historical geography, environmental history, and conservation and preservation, professionals in park and recreation management, and, perhaps above all, those who have come away from an enjoyable visit to the seashore and wondered about its complete, albeit rocky, history. Lary M. Dilsaver, Professor of Geography at the University of South Alabama, is the author or editor of several books about national parkland and natural history, including *America's National Parks*.

Published in association with the Center for American Places

Tag: The controversial history of how a vacation island for the wealthy became a national seashore, and how that designation is threatened today

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