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**NEWS: Environment**

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## Revamp of Chicken Island could make it a model

### Environment the ultimate showcase

By **KELLY CUCULIANSKY**  
Staff Writer

NEW SMYRNA BEACH -- Changes in store for Chicken Island could make it an example of environmental restoration to all Volusia County.

Many have sailed past the island in the Intracoastal Waterway between the north and south causeways which is being proposed for a habitat restoration program. Officials hope to improve the marine habitat, water quality and marine wildlife populations through restoration techniques.

Kelli McGee, county natural resources director, said Chicken Island has the potential to be used as a pilot project for the county's new Estuarine Habitat Restoration Program. The Marine Discovery Center is also partnering with the county to volunteer with the project and use the island as a living laboratory to supplement the organization's educational programs.

But before it can be used as an example to demonstrate habitat restoration techniques throughout the county, city officials have to approve removing all invasive plant species. The plans include removing exotic invasive plant species such as Brazilian pepper and Australian pine, planting red and black mangroves and restoring an oyster reef.

Last month when the City Commission discussed the project, commissioners approved it under the condition that the Australian pine trees not be removed, McGee said.

Some worried that the island would be left bare.

"I'd have a hard time using (the island) as a model if we've got an invasive species out there," McGee said. "We don't want to send the message that we're somehow endorsing invasive exotic species."

Restoration will still take place on the island, McGee said, but Chicken Island will not be used as a county model unless the commission approves the removal of all invasive species.

The problem with Australian pines is that the tree dominates and competes against native plants, said Chad Truxall, education director for the Marine Discovery Center.

"Their blanket of needles is so thick that it changes the pH of the soil chemistry and doesn't allow for other plants to grow," he said.

The seeds are also airborne, so leaving them on Chicken Island would mean the invasive species could spread to other islands.

Reached by telephone Thursday, City Commissioner Randy Richenberg said it wouldn't make sense to partially restore the island to its original state, especially if it could stand out as an example. "We all like the nostalgia of Australian pines and the wind whistling through them, but in reality they are very competitive invasive species," he said.

Fielding Cooley, director of the Marine Discovery Center, said he met with Mayor Jim Vandergriff on Thursday to discuss the possibility of revising the project. Cooley proposed removing the Australian pines and replacing them with native long leaf pines or cedars.

"He indicated that he would certainly be interested in seeing a new proposal," said Cooley, who hopes to have the proposal before the City Commission within the next month.

The mayor could not be reached for comment.

One more hurdle remains. McGee said the Florida Inland Navigation District must also approve a revision to the proposal before plans can go before the City Commission again.

In order to use the island as the pilot project, McGee said the district must approve the location for the shoreline stabilization, which could include reef balls --concrete structures that look similar to coral reefs that are used to plant mangroves or for oysters and other organisms to attach to. If the reef balls are approved by the district, mangrove shoreline stabilization can be completed on the north end of the island.

If the district and the commission approve the changes, McGee said the island definitely will be used as the county model.

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