

# Kiawah Island

## *Jewels In The Crown*



Published by the Town of Kiawah Island Environmental Committee

# PROLOGUE

In the fall of 2007 the Town of Kiawah Island Environmental Committee developed a strategic mission to promote preservation of the island's ecological heritage and biodiversity. The first step was to create and publish a series of six articles entitled "Jewels in the Crown". The objective of these articles was to focus the reader's attention on the importance, appeal and value of Kiawah's unique natural beauty and abundant wildlife. In undertaking this strategic mission the Committee enlisted the support of key Island entities; the Town, Community Association, Kiawah Conservancy, Kiawah Resort Associates and Kiawah Island Golf Resort.

The Environmental Committee's following steps, in concert with other island entities, will be to encourage the support and commitment of property owners to this mission and to sensitize all visitors and guests to the goals.

The six articles were published from November, 2007 to April, 2008.



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# JEWELS IN THE CROWN

Kiawah Island is a very unique residential and resort community. The Kiawah Environmental Committee believes that the best jewels in Kiawah's crown are a pristine maritime forest, lush natural vegetation and understory, marsh, creeks, beach and abundant wildlife. As Kiawah Island continues to develop it becomes increasingly important that we strive to preserve the natural beauty and diversity found here on Kiawah. Presently, there are approximately 3,250 dwelling units in place and 850 platted, undeveloped lots, yielding a total of 4,100 lots. An estimated 1,500 additional lots may be platted by buildout, resulting in a grand total of 5,600 residential properties.

In upcoming issues of Town Notes, the Kiawah Island Environmental Committee will be publishing a series of articles that will highlight the importance and value of maritime forest and native understory vegetation. These articles will also provide individual property owners with specific things that they can do to preserve habitat in their own yards. The overall intent of these articles is to develop strategies and plans that will help to maintain the unique beauty and diversity that continues to draw people to Kiawah Island year after year. Currently, several other island entities, including Kiawah Island Community Association and Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Conservancy, are working on similar plans to foster the creation and preservation of vital natural habitats. The Town Environmental Committee is striving to complement and strengthen the efforts of these and other island entities.



# Resident Perspectives



A 2006 Kiawah Island Community Association survey of more than 1,000 property owners revealed the top two reasons for purchasing property on Kiawah Island. These are the island's 10 miles of beach, followed closely by the island's natural setting and abundant wildlife.

The Freeburgs and Tedescos, both long time residents of Bufflehead Drive, are two such couples that thoroughly enjoy the wildlife. They take great pleasure in observing the birds, bobcats and other critters from their porches and decks. Their yards and feeders promote both frequent sighting and activity.

Low Oak Woods resident, Dale Anderson, took a unique but effective approach to attracting wildlife. "We were lucky in that our lot was natural when we bought it. But we made a conscious decision that we would keep it that way. As a result, we don't use water for irrigation; we use no pesticides, no herbicides, no insecticides, no landscaping service, and no lawn service. This allows 82% of our lot to be natural habitat! Looks like a win/win situation to me! If we don't make a

conscious effort, we will lose what we love, one lot at a time". This might seem extreme to some and certainly not all residents would care to "landscape" a major portion of their yards in this manner. Even so, setting aside just a small portion of a lot can, in the aggregate, make a very significant difference.

Visitors are also drawn to Kiawah Island by the wildlife. Alastair Harris, Dungannon Hall resident and Kiawah Island golf course starter, notes that, "There is always great fascination with alligators, the various kinds of herons, the mullet jumping, the deer roaming and the nesting of the ospreys and the hawks." Just recently, "a couple of golfers came to get me several minutes prior to their tee time. They were very excited about the presence of a bobcat perched peacefully by the scoreboard. While obviously quite young it (the bobcat) generated a lot of interest and discussion about other wildlife that Kiawah has to offer; these visitors soon had their camera out hoping to catch more excitement".

Living with, and enjoying wildlife has always been a big part of the "Kiawah experience". Most island residents have great stories of personal encounters with the island's unique wildlife. Long-time island resident Greg Brown recalls a recent episode involving one of the island's many bobcats. "It went down the porch steps and met another juvenile on the patio and both proceeded to wrestle with each other and eventually wound up rolling around together on a landing heading up to the porch. They finally tired of the game and strolled off the patio into the understory". While witnessing an interaction like this would be extremely rare in most suburban communities, it is a fairly common occurrence here on Kiawah Island. We must all work together to keep it that way.

The Town of Kiawah Island's Environmental Committee wants to do it's part to preserve these unique natural experiences. As we approach island wide build-out, which entails clearing an additional 2300 lots, we must all make an effort to do our part. We can accomplish this with small but significant measures.

# The Importance of Wildlife Research

Kiawah Island is a very unique and special place, a fact that has drawn residents and visitors to the island for many years. One of Kiawah's biggest attractions is the abundant and diverse assortment of wildlife that can be found throughout the island's lush maritime forest, freshwater and brackish ponds, expansive dunes, and pristine beaches.

Kiawah provides vital habitat for many wildlife species, including white-tailed deer, bobcats, grey fox, raccoons, alligators, wading birds, painted buntings, bald eagles, and piping plovers, to name a few. All of the animals that inhabit Kiawah are quite different from each other, with one notable exception; they all need the same 4 things to survive: food, cover, water, and space. To determine and maintain the specific resources needed by each of Kiawah's animals would be a very daunting task. Fortunately, by focusing research and management on an "umbrella species", the needs of many animals can be met.

The bobcat is a perfect example of an "umbrella species" because as the pinnacle predator on the island, they require the largest amount of habitat and food resources to survive. For this and other reasons, researchers have been studying the island's bobcat population continually for more than 10 years. Research has provided a wealth of information on this species which has been and will continue to be used to identify, create, and preserve important habitat areas.

Bobcats on Kiawah show a very strong preference for scrub/shrub habitat, often found along marsh and ponds edges or in the secondary dunes. This dense understory is used intensively by bobcats for daytime

resting cover, denning activities, travel corridors, and for hunting. Maintaining a network of scrub/shrub habitat throughout the island, particularly in certain key areas, will help to ensure that bobcats remain on Kiawah Island indefinitely. If the habitat is available to support a large predator like the bobcat, then the habitat will be there for many species that have similar habitat needs, albeit on a much smaller scale.

The painted bunting is an excellent example of a species that will benefit from

the conservation of scrub/shrub habitat. While a bobcat needs 1500 acres of land to survive, a painted bunting may only need 10 acres and may actually spend the majority of its time in just 1 or 2 backyards, if suitable habitat is present.

These tiny, stunningly beautiful birds spend the spring and summer on Kiawah Island nesting and raising young before they fly to Central and South America for the winter. Last year, researchers initiated a pilot painted bunting telemetry study to identify specific habitat needs and preferences of the painted bunting on Kiawah. With the support of the Town of Kiawah Island and the Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Conservancy, this research will be significantly expanded during 2008. Research results will provide critical information on the painted bunting that will lead to the development of specific backyard habitat improvement plans that can be undertaken to help this beleaguered species, as well as the many other birds that utilize and depend on this same type of habitat.

As a property owner on Kiawah Island, you have an important role to play in maintaining the environmental health of the island. A simple and easy way to make a difference is to extend the width and increase the density of the buffer strips along your lot boundary. By adding 5-10 feet to each buffer strip and reducing or even eliminating pruning, you can encourage the creation of your very own scrub/shrub habitat. These strips of cover provide nesting areas for many species of songbirds as well as a movement and feeding corridor for larger animals such as bobcats. Replacing sod with native bunchgrasses and low shrubs is another quick way to greatly improve the habitat value of your yard.

Small habitat improvement projects in a single lot can make a big difference to a small bird like the painted bunting. A number of small projects in a neighborhood can make a big difference to a grey fox. An island-wide initiative can meet the needs of bobcats and all those that fall in its' shadow.

The wildlife here on Kiawah Island depends on quality habitat, especially scrub/shrub understory habitat in which they can rest, feed, travel, hide, and raise their young. With over 10 years of wildlife research completed and many projects in progress, the key habitat components that must be preserved and enhanced to maintain the diverse wildlife on Kiawah Island are being identified. It is now up to all of us to take the necessary steps to ensure a healthy future for our island's wildlife.



# Landscaping Naturally

As one travels throughout the island the vegetation and landscaping of developed property is a major determinate of the look and feel of Kiawah. If screening and buffer strips are dense, common, and natural looking, we have a good chance of maintaining the natural look and feel of Kiawah as we approach build out. This will also help substantially to maintain the wildlife habitat value of the land and the ecological health of the island.

When Community Association members were asked, “Why did you choose Kiawah as a place to live?” the top answers were the beach, and the natural beauty of the island itself. Beauty, when it comes to landscaping, is definitely in the eye of the beholder and much of that beauty comes from native plants. Native plants in the landscape provide a sense of place. In other words, our native plants distinguish Kiawah as being Kiawah. It makes Kiawah Island truly unique and is one of the main reasons many residents choose to make their homes here.

The use of native species also preserves and enhances the habitat value of the land. Wildlife populations have evolved to utilize the native Kiawah plant communities for food, cover, and nesting habitat. These relationships have developed through centuries of evolution. Someday, the island will be completely developed; now is the time to establish native plant populations wherever possible. This will not only preserve the native biodiversity, but will also help to maintain sustainable wildlife habitat on the island.

In addition to the ecological advantages of native plants, there are also economic advantages to their use. Native plants are more adapted to their surroundings and are less prone to insects and disease; therefore, they require little to no pesticide applications. They are also naturally suited to the island’s soil conditions and often do not require fertilization. Depending on the size of the yard or landscaped area, this could result in a savings of \$500 to \$600 per year in chemical costs alone. Additionally, there is the cost of maintaining a landscaped property. The average maintenance contract in the southeastern United States is \$2500 to \$3500 per year. Native plants, once established, require very little maintenance. Periodically, there may be some dead wooding and pruning involved, but native landscaping can severely reduce or eliminate maintenance costs all together. It is important to note that turf grass areas require the most maintenance. Any time these sites can be reduced in size, or eliminated completely, the cost of maintaining a landscape will go down substantially. A great alternative is the use of low-cost, low maintenance native plants that have the added benefit of being essential to wildlife.

Due to their adaptation to local soil and climate conditions, native plant species are also more drought tolerant than non-native plantings. An irrigation source may not be needed at all after the plants have grown

in. The average cost for irrigation water for a residential landscaper can be \$1200 annually. Native plants require much less water and can be self sustaining within a year or two. The type of irrigation system required is also more efficient to use. Sprinklers (used to water turf grass area) are only 85% efficient in their delivery of water. Native plants do better with a drip irrigation system, which is about 95% efficient. It requires less water to irrigate this way and since the drip emitter is located on the ground next to the plant, it gets the maximum benefit. As water conservation becomes more and more important, our management of this most critical resource will play an even bigger role in the maintenance of our landscape.

We have an opportunity to significantly improve the habitat value of our developed property. The Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Conservancy’s Environmental Sciences Committee, a working group with active members from Kiawah Island Community Association, Town of Kiawah Island, Architectural Review Board, the Resort, and individual property owners, is putting the final touches on a Habitat Improvement Initiative. The objective of this initiative is to significantly improve habitat value of developed property on Kiawah for our bobcats, painted bunting and other species. The Initiative will also help maintain the natural beauty of Kiawah. Key elements of the Initiative are (1) education, including information and examples, (2) assessment and improvement opportunities specifically for your property, (3) expert help, and (4) recognition. Properties which qualify for high habitat value would be eligible for the Kiawah Conservancy’s Sweet Grass Award.

The Habitat Improvement Initiative will help you, or your landscape maintenance crew, identify habitat improvement opportunities that are consistent with your vision for your property. You can assess your opportunities on your own with an evaluation form or get expert help. You can see examples of high habitat value properties with different landscaping concepts. You can find sources of plants that can work well for you. You can learn more about landscaping practices that will benefit Kiawah’s wildlife population, and you can be recognized for good habitat and help others to follow your example. Resources such as Landscaping for the Legacy, available through Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Conservancy, and the Kiawah Island Community Association Landscape Management Guidelines, available on their website, are also great resources to help you get started. Keep your eye out for the new Habitat Improvement Initiative which will be released later this year. Let’s all work together to keep Kiawah natural.





# Natural Beauty Equals High Real Estate Value

Since 1988, surveys have asked new buyers of Kiawah property the most important reasons for purchasing at Kiawah. Consistently, the two most important reasons have been “natural beauty” and “the beach”.

Also, since 1988, the annual average price of all real estate sold on Kiawah has grown from \$175,000 to 1.4 million in 2006. In 2007 alone, \$369 million worth of property was sold by Kiawah Island Real Estate – the fourth best year in history – despite a soft nationwide real estate market.

The connection between natural beauty, beach, and property value is very clear. Homesites with natural beauty and landscaping, giving them a secluded feeling, consistently sell for more money than comparable sites without these features. The biggest factor in preserving the overall natural beauty of the island was the creation of the 1976 environmentally sensitive master plan, which has been faithfully executed ever since.

The beauty of the beach is the result of at least four key factors. First, from the beginning, ocean front development has observed a 3 dune setback. Second, the Architectural Review Board has worked hard to maintain the aesthetics of everything built along the ocean. Third, in 1990, Kiawah Resort Associates chose to allow the Ocean Course Golf Course to occupy nearly 4 miles of highly valuable beachfront property. The value of this decision was transferred back to the value of every property on the island. Finally, Kiawah’s beach has been naturally accreting (gaining) sand and growing in size. All of these factors have resulted in a beautiful, stable beach with a uniquely natural feel. Moving inland, Kiawah owners and visitors enjoy a beautiful maritime forest and marsh. Of Kiawah’s 10,000 acres, 5,000 is marshland, 305 acres are lakes and ponds, and 123 acres are parks and common land. Night Heron Park, at 21 acres, is a big asset. The landscaping along roads and leisure trails is designed and maintained to provide a natural feel throughout the island. An interconnected lake and pond system and 6 golf courses also add to the natural beauty and habitat.

As development has continued over 30 years, much effort has gone into preserving as much of the forest as possible. On main roadways, vegetation screens homes and provides cover for wildlife. There are filtered views of golf courses, marsh, and ponds.

Real estate planning has carefully controlled housing density. Strong efforts are made to draw property lines which avoid major trees. Additionally, front, back, and side setbacks are established to preserve as many trees, shrubs, and natural thickets as possible. Homes are not allowed to cover more than 33% of a lot, and landscaping with natural plants and materials is strongly encouraged.

Every home and property owner can make an important contribution to the island’s natural beauty. When clearing a homesite in preparation for building, the Architectural Review Board asks that side and rear setbacks be preserved. Major trees should be avoided and areas of existing vegetation should be left intact whenever possible. Following construction, owners should minimize the use of sod/pine straw and create as much natural habitat as possible.

By “Designing With Nature” homesites are carefully planned additions to the natural setting. This becomes even more important as more of the island is developed and more of the island’s look and feel is determined by developed property. Appropriate native landscaping is essential for maintaining the natural beauty of Kiawah—and the associated high property values.

Finally, for the past 10+ years, the Kiawah Conservancy has been actively preserving homesites and vacant land throughout the island. Twelve sites have been preserved so far with a goal of 40 or more. This is an island-wide effort supported by the Town of Kiawah Island, Kiawah Island Community Association, Kiawah Island Golf Resort, Kiawah Island Development Partners, and individual property owners. Property values have appreciated annually from 3 to 30% since 1988 making Kiawah a leader along the southeast coast without question. Surveys prove that the natural beauty is a major factor in this result.

# The Seventh Jewel in the Crown



*The three insets show the life of a typical building lot; (1) before development, a densely vegetated domain; (2) during construction, where much if not most of the vegetation is removed; and (3) Sweet Grass Award level property, properly landscaped and maintained to Kiawah's standards.*

We often take things for granted and only realize their importance and immense value when they disappear. It's like the old saying, "you never know what you've got until it's gone". Over the past five months, the "Jewels in the Crown" article series has taken the time to remind each of us that Kiawah Island is a special place with a wonderful natural landscape and an intact, functioning ecosystem. The series has emphasized the fact that a small conscious effort by many individuals will combine to produce a significant positive result, and assure that the natural beauty/biodiversity of Kiawah Island doesn't disappear right before our eyes.

The six physical Jewels in the Kiawah Island crown are: pristine maritime forests, lush natural vegetation and understory, marsh, creeks, beach, and abundant and diverse wildlife. The seventh jewel is us, the property owners of Kiawah Island. With 3,250 developed lots already in place and an estimated 2,300 lots still to be developed, it is essential that we the property owners do our part to maintain the unique beauty and diversity that brought us all to Kiawah in the first place.

Over the past decade, researchers have studied and monitored many of the island's wildlife species in order to better understand their specific needs. The bobcat has taken the forefront as the primary research "umbrella species" on the island. Researchers have studied bobcats on the island for almost 10 years and have a thorough understanding of the specific importance of various habitat types on the island. Some habitat types, such as dense shrub understory and vegetated marsh edges, appear to be more important than others, although each type of habitat has value. Densely vegetated areas not only provide essential habitat for many different birds and animals, but they also serve to screen development and to provide privacy for individual property owners.

Each time a new lot is cleared, Kiawah loses another piece of habitat, but dense screening and naturally vegetated buffer strips around homes can go a long way toward maintaining the natural look and feel of Kiawah Island. By landscaping with and preserving existing native vegetation, a property owner can increase privacy, provide valuable wildlife habitat and food, reduce landscape maintenance costs, and increase future property values.

The value of real estate on Kiawah Island has climbed rapidly over the last 20 years, due in large part to the unique and natural look and feel of the island. Home sites with natural beauty and landscaping, giving them a secluded feeling, consistently sell at a higher price than comparable sites without these features.

It is the responsibility of each of us as property owners to make the right decisions and to make the effort to preserve the natural beauty and biodiversity found on Kiawah Island. Resources such as the Kiawah Island Community Association's Landscape Management Guidelines, the Architectural Review Board's Designing with Nature, and the Kiawah Conservancy's Landscaping for the Legacy can help us get started. Additionally, the Conservancy will be unveiling a new Habitat Improvement Initiative program in the spring of 2008 to help individual property owners assess and improve the wildlife value of their own yards. Owners of a high habitat value lot will be eligible for a Sweet Grass Award.

Property owners are truly the seventh jewel in Kiawah's crown. Their dedication and efforts would serve to protect and improve our island's beauty, heritage, and value.

## Special Thanks To:

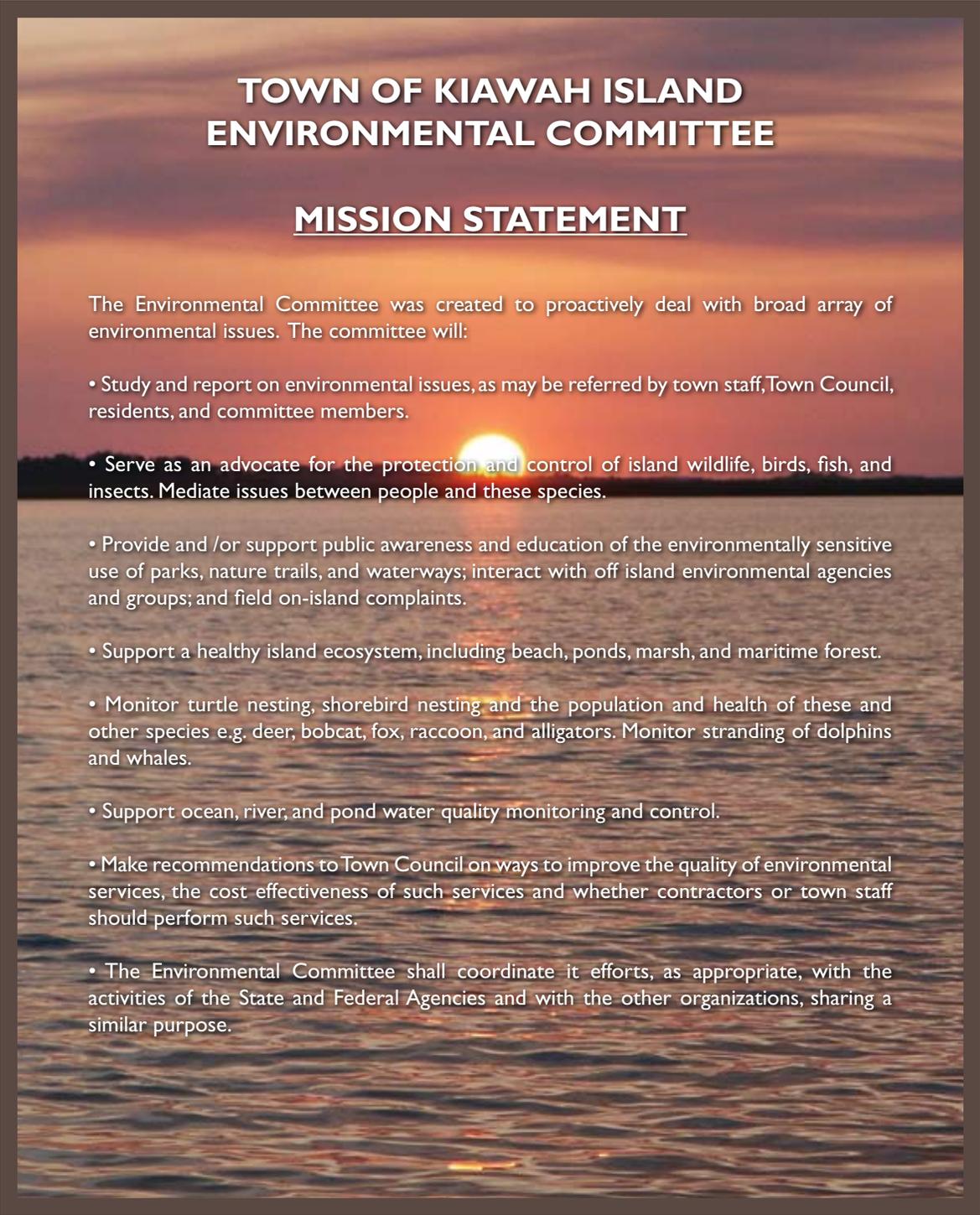
Town of Kiawah Island  
Environmental Committee

Kiawah Island  
Community Association

Kiawah Island Natural  
Habitat Conservancy

Kiawah Resort Associates



A background image of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow that reflects on the water's surface. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a darker, muted purple and blue at the top. The water in the foreground shows gentle ripples and reflects the colors of the sky and the sun.

# TOWN OF KIAWAH ISLAND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE

## MISSION STATEMENT

The Environmental Committee was created to proactively deal with broad array of environmental issues. The committee will:

- Study and report on environmental issues, as may be referred by town staff, Town Council, residents, and committee members.
- Serve as an advocate for the protection and control of island wildlife, birds, fish, and insects. Mediate issues between people and these species.
- Provide and /or support public awareness and education of the environmentally sensitive use of parks, nature trails, and waterways; interact with off island environmental agencies and groups; and field on-island complaints.
- Support a healthy island ecosystem, including beach, ponds, marsh, and maritime forest.
- Monitor turtle nesting, shorebird nesting and the population and health of these and other species e.g. deer, bobcat, fox, raccoon, and alligators. Monitor stranding of dolphins and whales.
- Support ocean, river, and pond water quality monitoring and control.
- Make recommendations to Town Council on ways to improve the quality of environmental services, the cost effectiveness of such services and whether contractors or town staff should perform such services.
- The Environmental Committee shall coordinate its efforts, as appropriate, with the activities of the State and Federal Agencies and with the other organizations, sharing a similar purpose.

**Courtesy of  
The Town of Kiawah Island  
Environmental Committee**

