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Considerations for Control of House Construction in Coastal Dunes

Karl F. Nordstrom
James M. McCluskey

Center for Coastal and Environmental Studies
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, New Jersey

Abstract This study was conducted to determine if maintenance of the integrity of coastal dunes as a form of storm protection should require restrictions on the types of buildings located within the dune zone. A properly built house does not appear to endanger the integrity of the dune to a point where the hazard potential is increased. Active human uses of the dune and programs of dune stabilization can play a more important role in changing the configuration of coastal dunes than elevated structures. Buildings constructed landward of the dune should be built in a manner which is compatible with an eventual location within the dune. Construction standards should be specified in land-use controls along with regulations to control the active human uses such as sand stabilization programs.

Purpose

Coastal dunes are an important component of the shoreline for their ecological values and for the protection they provide to buildings (Clark, 1977; CERC, 1977). Dunes are fragile landforms, however, and they can be easily destroyed by human

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activities or displaced by natural processes. Because of this, scientists and planners have called for more stringent controls over the use of the dune zone (Nordstrom and Psuty, 1980; Gares, 1983), and some states and local jurisdictions have implemented restrictions to prohibit the construction of buildings in the dunes (Hildreth, 1980). The most frequently cited goal of these restrictions is to minimize hazards to public health and safety by locating buildings landward of the zone of greatest damage potential. The dune is thus viewed as an indicator of safe development. Some regulations which restrict construction in the dunes have as a goal the need to prohibit uses that endanger the physical integrity of the dune because destruction of the dune would increase the potential for damage from flooding and overwash during severe storms (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1978; Town of Islip, 1978; Town of Brookhaven, 1981). This kind of restriction stresses the specific protective qualities of the dune.

The exclusion of new buildings from the dune will not necessarily achieve these two goals. Attention should also be focused on houses and support infrastructure constructed landward of the dune and on active uses of the dune. In most locations where shoreline erosion occurs, the response of the natural system is onshore displacement of the beach and dune through a combination of erosion and subsequent construction of these features landward of their original location (Godfrey, 1977). At some future time, buildings which were at one time located landward of the dune will be within the dune. The buildings will then be subject to increased damage resulting from their proximity to the water. The land-use controls which have been implemented by many jurisdictions allow buildings and support facilities behind the dune to be constructed in a manner that is incompatible with an eventual location in the dune. The presence of these buildings in the dune may disrupt natural processes to the point where alterations to the dune will diminish its value as a barrier against storm waves.

We suggest that attention should be devoted to the design of structures in addition to the specific location of their placement. This study was intended to identify how buildings should be



FIGURE 1. Long Island, New York, from Westhampton Beach to Fire Island.

designed to minimize impact. The goal is to create a protective dune system on a morphologic basis for legal restrictions on coastal dunes on eroding shorelines. A comparison of the form of developed communities on the shore of Long Island, New York.

Characteristics of the Shoreline

Fire Island (Figure 1) is a barrier island because the communities developed (Figure 2) with the dunes are natural areas near the shore. The dimensions in the community frontage occupied by the dunes are of the length of developed areas, elevated on pilings, and the buildings by elevated walls. Houses (Figure 3). These houses, with breakaway walls, and the house type interacts differently across the dune. Communities developed were selected

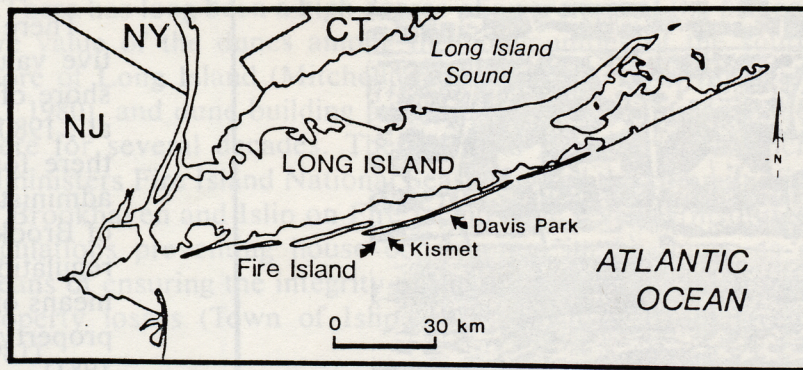


FIGURE 1. Long Island, New York, showing location of study area from Fire Island to Westhampton Beach and field site at Watch Hill.

designed to minimize interference with the processes which create a protective dune. The assessment provides the geomorphic basis for legal restrictions on buildings in and behind coastal dunes on eroding shorelines. The analysis is based on comparison of the form of the dune in undeveloped areas and in developed communities on an eroding barrier island at Fire Island, New York.

Characteristics of the Study Area

Fire Island (Figure 1) is considered a good prototype location because the communities there have a moderate level of development (Figure 2) with a good mix of house types, and there are natural areas near the communities for comparison. Building dimensions in the communities are 105 m² on the average. The frontage occupied by the first row of houses averages 43 percent of the length of developed shoreline. Many of the buildings are elevated on pilings, and access is frequently provided to the buildings by elevated walkways. There are three general types of houses (Figure 3). These are houses on pilings, houses on pilings with breakaway walls, and houses with solid foundations. Each house type interacts differently with the flow of wind and sand across the dune. Communities which have a moderate amount of development were selected because the intent of the study is to



FIGURE 2. Davis Park, New York. (1976 National Park Service photo no. 3216-4-143).

provide suggestions for management of communities which can be designed to be compatible with a dynamic, migrating barrier island. The suggestions are not directly applicable to the management of highly developed shorelines which emphasize a static shoreline position and engineering solutions to shoreline erosion.

The south shore of Long Island has been the focus of many geomorphic investigations (reviewed in Taney, 1961; Leatherman and Joneja, 1980). The shoreline is very mobile, with a rate of erosion as high as 2–3 m per year in places (Panuzio, 1968). In the last five years, the dune crest at Fire Island has migrated as much as 27 m landward and 28 m seaward in places. During that period approximately 9 km of the length of Fire Island were stable, 6 km were erosional, and 5 km were accretional (Psuty, 1982). The communities on Fire Island are subject to damage by hurricanes and northeasters. The last major storm to strike the area occurred in February 1978, when much of the foredune along Fire Island was eroded back to the location of the first row of houses, and 8 houses were destroyed.

Control of Construction

There has long been a high value of the dunes and shore of Long Island (Mitchell et al., 1980), and dune building there for several decades. The Town of Fire Island administers Fire Island National Park and Islip on regulations preventing house construction as a means of ensuring the integrity of the dunes and property losses (Town of Fire Island, 1981).

Beach and Dune Processes

The beach and dunes undergo change from the interaction of wind and waves of storms. The winds on the north shore with the highest frequency are from the northwest. These winds move sand from the dunes to the beach. Sediment removed from the dunes is deposited on the seaward side in the form of a beach or is moved onto the beach by waves. Vegetation landward (upwind) reduces wind velocity on the surface of the dune, which limits the amount of sand transport that occurs over bare ground. Dune blowouts and at gaps in the dune are channelized. Isolated lobes of sand exist seaward of these areas.

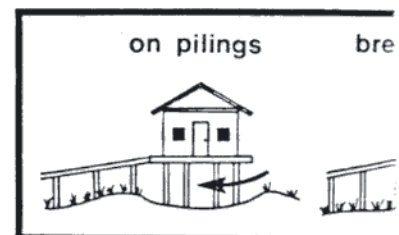


FIGURE 3. House foundation type.

There has long been a high degree of awareness of the protective value of the dunes among the communities of the south shore of Long Island (Mitchell, 1974; Heikoff, 1976; Butler et al., 1980), and dune building programs have been implemented there for several decades. The National Park Service, which administers Fire Island National Seashore, and the communities of Brookhaven and Islip on Fire Island have recently instituted regulations preventing house construction in the dunes as a means of ensuring the integrity of the dune and reducing future property losses (Town of Islip, 1978; Town of Brookhaven, 1981).

Beach and Dune Processes

The beach and dunes undergo cyclic changes (Figure 4) resulting from the interaction of wind and waves associated with passage of storms. The winds on the northeast coast of the United States with the highest frequency and velocity blow from the west and northwest. These winds move sediment offshore (Figure 4a). Sediment removed from the landward side of the dune is deposited on the seaward side in the wind shadow formed by the dune or is moved onto the beach where it is transported into the water. Vegetation landward (upwind) of the dune crest lowers the wind velocity on the surface of the dune, and traps sand moving through it, which limits the amount of sand moved. High rates of transport occur over bare ground in unvegetated portions of the dune (blowouts) and at gaps in the dune crest where winds are channelized. Isolated lobes of accretion form on the beach landward of these areas.

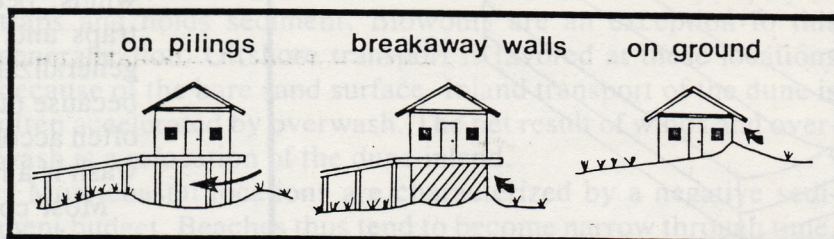


FIGURE 3. House foundation types found in the shorefront communities.

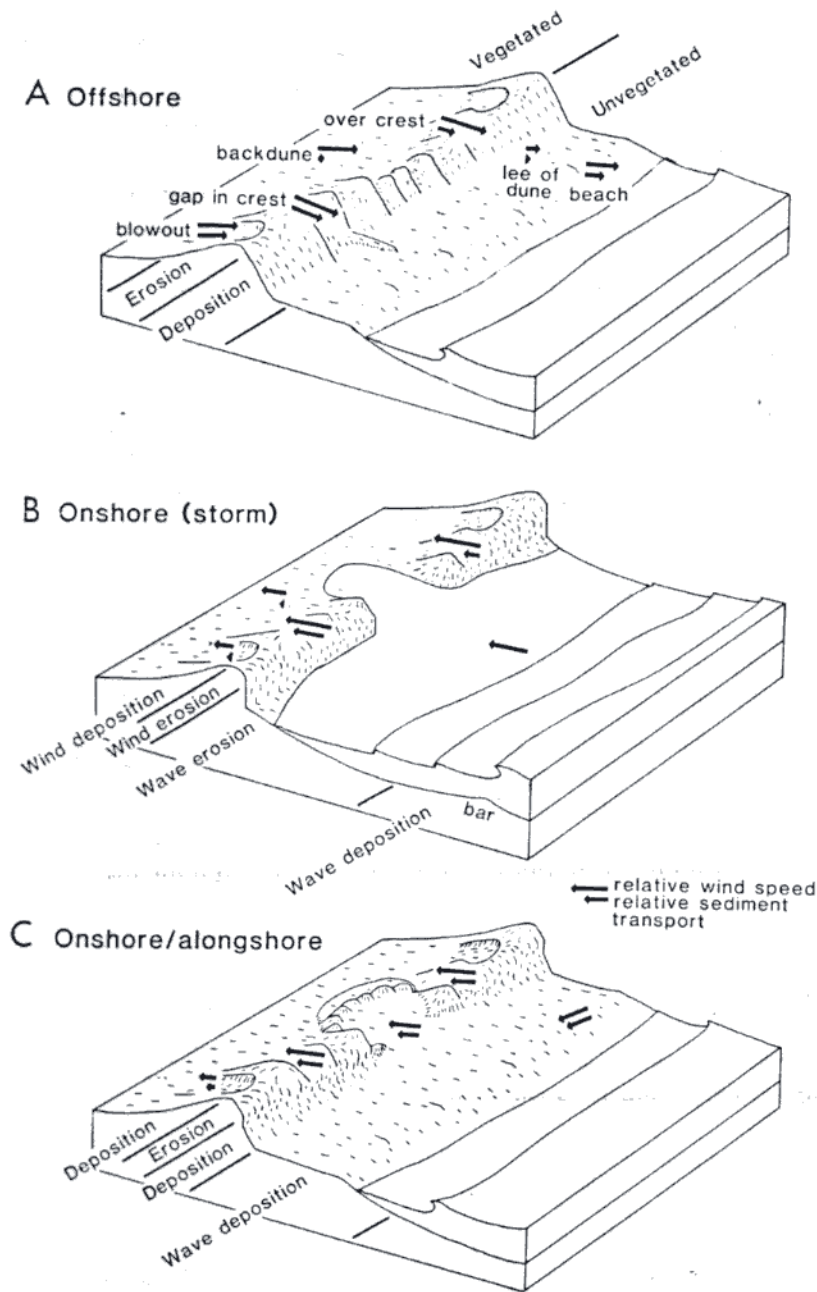


FIGURE 4. Processes causing change on coastal dunes on undeveloped north-east coast barrier islands.

Storms bring strong on the height and frequency. These waves and winds can in direct attack on the dune forming a scarp on the seaward side. Overwash occurs when the dune, transporting sand, is then deposited. Much of the sand and upper beach is moved on. Wetting of the beach surface during storms reduces the sand but some sediment will be deposited seaward side of the dune where there is little vegetation. The sediment passing through the vegetation on the landward side is increased. The sediment passing through the vegetation on the landward side is increased.

Post-storm waves replenish the sand deposited on the overwash. Dunes begin to form. Seeds and debris result in growth of vegetation. The sand and increases the size of the dune (Parker 1979). A considerable amount of sand is deposited because the dune scarp acts as a barrier through low gaps in the dune. The sand is usually created seaward of the dune location or due to the collapse of sediment from the dune.

Net movement of sand by the wind, despite the greater frequency of winds, because vegetation traps and holds sediment. This is a generalization. Offshore transport is because of the bare sand surface. Offshore transport is often accelerated by overwash. Overwash is a relocation of the sand.

Most coastal locations are in a sediment budget. Beaches thus migrate. If the dune did not migrate

Storms bring strong onshore (easterly) winds which increase the height and frequency of occurrence of waves (Figure 4b). These waves and winds cause a rise in water level which results in direct attack on the dune by waves. Large dunes are cut back forming a scarp on the seaward side, while small dunes are obliterated. Overwash occurs as waves pass through these gaps in the dune, transporting sand landward of the crestline where it is then deposited. Much of the sediment removed from the dune and upper beach is moved offshore to form a bar in deeper water. Wetting of the beach surface by wave uprush and precipitation during storms reduces the ability of the wind to transport sand, but some sediment will be moved inland, particularly from the seaward side of the dune crest and through gaps in the dune where there is little vegetation and where wind velocity is increased. The sediment passing the dune crest line is trapped by vegetation on the landward side.

Post-storm waves replenish the beach (Figure 4c). Flotsam deposited on the overwash surface traps wind-blown sand and dunes begin to form. Seeds and bits of beach grass deposited in the debris result in growth of new vegetation which traps more sand and increases the size of the new dune (Godfrey et al., 1979). A considerable amount of sand will be moved alongshore because the dune scarp acts as a barrier, but sand can pass freely through low gaps in the dune (Rosen, 1979). A ramp is eventually created seaward of the dune scarp by sand blown to that location or due to the collapse of the scarp when it dries. Movement of sediment from the beach to the dune is then facilitated.

Net movement of sand by wind is generally in the inland direction, despite the greater frequency and magnitude of offshore winds, because vegetation on the landward side of the crest traps and holds sediment. Blowouts are an exception to this generalization. Offshore transport is favored at these locations because of the bare sand surface. Inland transport of the dune is often accelerated by overwash. The net result of winds and overwash is a relocation of the dune inland.

Most coastal locations are characterized by a negative sediment budget. Beaches thus tend to become narrow through time. If the dune did not migrate inland, sediment starvation would

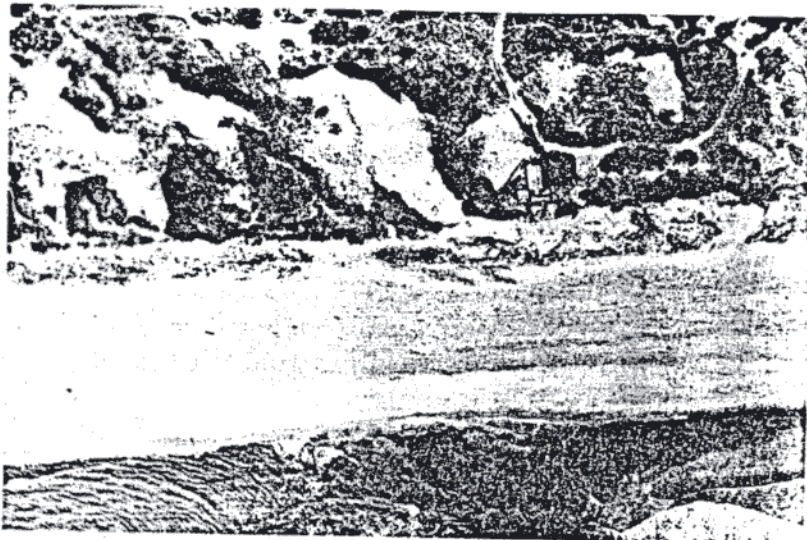


FIGURE 5. Dunes in the undeveloped portion of Fire Island east of Davis Park. (1976 National Park Service photo no. 3216-4-163).

result in more frequent attack on the dune and increase the likelihood of overwash.

Contrasts in Dune Conditions on Developed and Undeveloped Shorelines

The characteristics of the dunes in the developed communities on Fire Island contrast markedly with the dune forms in the undeveloped areas adjacent to them. There is generally more bare ground in the undeveloped areas (Figures 2 and 5). Bare areas can occur under natural conditions and are common in undeveloped dune locations (Gares, 1983). Many of the large expanses of bare ground in the undeveloped areas on Fire Island, however, appear to have been initially created as a result of former human activity, through removal of houses by the National Park Service. These bare areas do not recover rapidly, and they frequently become blowouts, increasing in size and migrating seaward as a result of net southeastward movement of sediment by the dominant northwesterly winds. When these active

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bare areas (blowouts) migrate through the dune crest line, the resulting low elevations become subject to overwash by sediment-laden storm waves (Leatherman, 1979). This cycle of accelerated sediment exchange can be altered by revegetating areas of bare ground and by repairing any breaches in the dune crest using sand fences or fill, although the National Park Service does not revegetate these areas because of the costs involved and the lack of a need for a dune as a protection for human investment.

There is less bare ground in many of the developed communities (Figure 2) because destruction of vegetation by human activity is prevented by proper house construction or by keeping people off the dunes, or it is mitigated by using sand fences and vegetation. These human modifications help stabilize the position of the dune and create a high, linear crest line. The dune form is the result of the conscious attempts of shorefront residents to maintain a continuous foredune for shore protection. Dunes in developed areas like these are mobile, but they do not undergo the rapid changes in position which occur in regard to undeveloped dunes.

Some Fire Island communities have more bare ground around houses and a more variable dune crest elevation (Figure 6). This generally occurs where increased pedestrian and vehicle traffic destroys vegetation. Bare areas are also created where large houses block the sediment exchanges and the sunlight, which are necessary for growth of stabilizing vegetation. Close spacing of buildings can channelize winds, increasing their velocity and reducing the likelihood of survival of vegetation. The bare areas then become subject to increased deflation. The manner in which buildings are constructed and the way the property is managed are thus important in causing changes to the dune.

Most of the houses built on pilings without breakaway walls have a scour pit of bare ground beneath them and a well-vegetated lip of sand around the building on all sides (Figure 3). The scour is due to high wind velocities beneath the structure coupled with the absence of stabilizing vegetation there. The lip of sand around the houses appears to be the result of deposition due to reduced wind velocity in the lee of the structure. The



FIGURE 6. Kismet, New York. (1976 National Park Service photo no. 3216-3-053).

bottoms of scour pits under houses that are on the dune crest are commonly about 0.5 m below the line of the undisturbed ground surface next to the house; the lip may be about 0.5 m above the surface. Observations by the authors and long-term shorefront residents indicate that the pits do not show much evidence of growth, either downward or outward, once the typical configuration has been reached, and wind and sediments can pass under the house.

Houses on pilings landward of the dune crest and at a lower elevation cause greater modification of the dune form than similar houses located on top of the dune. Landward migration of the dune crest does not always bury these buildings because channelization of wind under the structures maintains relatively high wind velocities which prevent deposition. The dimensions of the depression created by this process are a function of the elevation of the bottom floor of the structure and the height of the dune crest. The gap which is created in the dune at houses built at low elevations may be quite large.

Some of the elevated houses in the study area have breakaway walls composed of wooden slats. The breakaway walls are bar-

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riers which cause some house. The deposition of elevation at which time the ground on a solid foundation as a barrier to the wind in all directions, and they are elevated houses. If these crest at lower elevations become weak points in the

House sites are not near shoreline along Fire Island the damaging storm of February the dune crest after the location of the houses. In crest line resulted from houses which had low first cases, however, there was the dune line beneath houses within the communities (tations were elevated a sufficient

Implications for Manag

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Building Site Characterist

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riers which cause some deposition of sand at the sides of the house. The deposition can be sufficient to reach the first floor elevation at which time the structure functions like one built on the ground on a solid foundation. Houses built on the ground act as a barrier to the wind and to the movement of sediment from all directions, and they are more complete sediment traps than elevated houses. If these structures are located behind the dune crest at lower elevations, they would eventually be buried and become weak points in the dune.

House sites are not necessarily weak points in the dune. The shoreline along Fire Island was examined following passage of the damaging storm of February 7, 1978 to determine the condition of the dune crest after the dune had been eroded back to the location of the houses. In a few locations, low points in the dune crest line resulted from erosion of the dune where it fronted houses which had low first floor elevations (Figure 7a). In most cases, however, there was no major difference in the integrity of the dune line beneath houses and at adjacent areas of the dune within the communities (Figure 7b). The houses at these locations were elevated a sufficient distance above the crest.

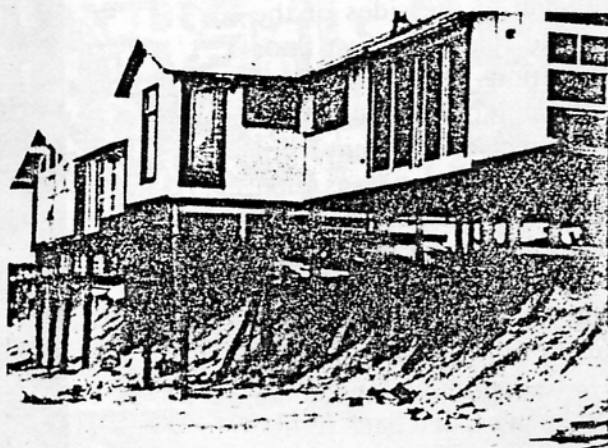
Implications for Management

The developed scenario can result in a lower likelihood of dune breaching by waves under present management conditions than the undeveloped scenario, given the same sediment in the beach and dune profile. The presence of buildings on pilings does not appear to endanger the integrity of the dune as a barrier against storm wave overwash and flooding and therefore does not jeopardize the lives and property of residents landward of the dune during severe storms. Restrictions on use of the dune based on the need for the dune to provide protection should not exclude buildings but should be designed around performance standards for their construction and use.

Building Site Characteristics

It is likely that most future shorefront buildings will be constructed on pilings as awareness of the safety values of this mode

A



B



FIGURE 7. Condition of the dune beneath houses elevated on pilings after passage of the storm of February 7, 1978.

of construction increases. Many buildings have already been constructed on pilings because this method of construction was required in communities in the Federal Insurance Administration National Flood Insurance Program (FEMA, 1981). The emphasis of these old criteria has been on the effects of natural

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Existing performance standards for protection of coastal structures generally specify that the minimum first floor elevation should be above the elevation of the highest calculated breaking wave cresting on a 100-year storm tide (Collier et al., 1977; Machemehl, 1978). The application of these standards may not result in a house that is elevated above the ground surface a sufficient distance to allow for natural exchange of sediment. Also, there is nothing in regulations designed to meet FEMA standards which prevents the use of breakaway walls between the pilings. Buildings constructed to meet existing standards thus may result in a dune crest which will be displaced at different rates along its length.

The elevations of unmodified dunes will vary along the shoreline, and the elevations within a particular shoreline segment may change through time. Dune height under natural conditions will thus fluctuate around some mean condition which may be interpreted as the equilibrium dune height. Houses should be built to be compatible with the mean crest elevation rather than with some arbitrary elevation. In this way the dune will be closer to equilibrium with the natural processes.

A maximum plot occupancy requirement would be a means of ensuring that there is sufficient open ground available between structures for natural processes to prevail. For example, regulations could state that structures occupy no more than 25 percent of the lot on which they are located. This will reduce interference with eolian sediment movement by about 13 percent relative to the present housing density of 43 percent (Nordstrom and McCluskey, 1982).

Regulations should also consider where a structure is located within each parcel of land, the distance of the structure from its neighbor, and the method of construction (height, size, shape, and orientation). The least interference with eolian processes, vegetation growth, and dune formation and migration should occur where structures are small, isolated, and elevated. Round buildings will not interfere with the wind stream as much as

rectangular structures (Pilkey et al., 1980). If the buildings are rectangular, they should have the long axis parallel to the dominant winds (northwest-southeast on Long Island).

An attempt to maintain the dune crest in a static position on an eroding shoreline will result in greater frequency of wave attack on the dune, which will result in a narrower dune fronting the buildings (Figure 6). The erosion will eventually extend landward of the crest of the dune and destroy its integrity as a barrier against overwash. The dune crest line must be allowed to be displaced inland by eolian processes at a rate which corresponds to the rate of beach retreat. This will allow for continued maintenance of the bulk and shape of the dune, thereby providing adequate protection for buildings which remain landward of it (Nordstrom and Psuty, 1980). This means that buildings constructed behind the dune should be built to be compatible with a location which, in the future, will be at the dune crest, and floors would have to be built at an elevation which would be high enough for the dune to form beneath them.

The use of a building does not affect its impact on geomorphic processes, as long as the requirements for such use do not result in a significant departure from the size, shape, and method of construction of the building. Public buildings and commercial structures may be treated conceptually in the same manner as single-family dwellings except that they may have a greater intensity of use. The effects of the more intense use can be mitigated by confining access to elevated walkways. The size of these structures should be kept as small as possible, consistent with their use. If they must be large, the adverse effects can be minimized by placing them on the landward side of the barrier island within the woody shrub vegetation zone where there is little eolian activity. The useful lives of such structures should reflect the rate of migration of the dune, and the buildings should be removed before they become obstructions to sand transfers by wind. Support infrastructure, such as roads, parking areas, and utility lines, should also be removed or simply abandoned if their continued use would begin to interfere with dune processes.

Control of Construction

Mitigating Measures

The actual construction of buildings may endanger dune vegetation and create bare ground, such as walking, driving, and parking, leading to rapid destruction of the dune. (Vogt, 1979; Gares, 1980) fences and vegetation plantings in disturbed areas, and the dune should be controlled.

Dune building programs, activities, but control may be accomplished. Dune building programs will accomplish the dune seaward through localities, create irregularities in the dune zone of development, subject to wave attack more subject to migrate inland to retain protection. Regulations are an issue. The importance of dune well as the ease with which indicates that sand fences, community-level adjustment, ra-

Application to Policy

Buildings alter winds and, if constructed, they do not erode. At a point where the hazard is excluded from the dune, regulations to control new construction the problem of shoreline erosion, emphasizing the control of building makers may lose sight of buildings and support infrastructure use of active means of m-

Mitigating Measures

The actual construction of new buildings or removal of existing buildings may endanger the dune system by destroying the vegetation and creating bare ground. Active human uses of the dune, such as walking, driving, and bulldozing can also result in the rapid destruction of the form of the dune (Godfrey et al., 1978; Vogt, 1979; Gares, 1983). Mitigating measures such as sand fences and vegetation planting should be employed in these disturbed areas, and the activities of dune-dwellers and others should be controlled.

Dune building programs should be retained as permissible activities, but control may be required to ensure that these programs will accomplish the intended purposes. Extending the dune seaward through local implementation of sand fences can create irregularities in the crest line and advance the location of the zone of development seaward. The dune would then be subject to wave attack more frequently. Dunes must be allowed to migrate inland to retain their value as a resource and as a form of protection. Regulations on sand fences should address this issue. The importance of the dune to the entire community, as well as the ease with which the dune can be altered by fencing, indicates that sand fencing should be undertaken as a community-level adjustment, rather than as individual action.

Application to Policy

Buildings alter winds and cause local accretion. If properly constructed, they do not endanger the integrity of the dune to the point where the hazard is increased. Buildings should not be excluded from the dune on these grounds alone. Passage of regulations to control new construction in the dunes will not solve the problem of shoreline erosion and dune maintenance. By emphasizing the control of new buildings in the dunes, policy-makers may lose sight of the need to control the construction of buildings and support infrastructure behind the dunes and the use of active means of modifying dunes.

It may be desirable to prevent the construction of buildings in the dunes in order to maintain the shoreline in an undeveloped state for habitat, for aesthetic values, for recreation, or to minimize expenditures for relief and protection. The achievement of these goals will require the application of different restrictions from those designed to maintain a protective dune.

The effects of shorefront development presented in this study were monitored in shorefront communities characterized by a moderate level of development and where the residents are aware of the value of the dunes as a form of shore protection. Alterations to coastal dunes have been more severe in many other coastal communities. The results of this study provide an estimate of effects of construction which are conservative in terms of adverse effects on the dune. The results suggest that people can occupy fixed buildings on migrating barrier islands, as long as the buildings are properly constructed and used. This conclusion should not be used to justify intensive development of shorefront land. Barrier islands are dynamic, environmentally sensitive, and hazardous landforms, and buildings should not exceed the minimum number required to accommodate essential uses.

Acknowledgments

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Book Review

Chesapeake Waters: Pollution 1607-1972, by John Shivers, Jr. Tidewater Press. 1972. 192 pages. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Kevin Sullivan
Formerly Director, Chesapeake Bay Studies,
Smithsonian Institution

It is hard to imagine a region with such a profound impact on the economy and culture of the United States that has an enormous economic, recreational and commercial industry. The symbolic importance of the Chesapeake Bay is so important. It is an intense expression of cultural identity for the tidewater Virginia, and the Chesapeake Bay's fishery products. "Save the Bay" bumper stickers are everywhere. Middle-Atlantic states in his State of the Union address, the pollution control effort has gained notoriety.

As state and federal governments grapple with these problems, it is helpful to have a book that covers over 350 years of Chesapeake history. *Chesapeake Waters: Pollution 1607-1972* provides a comprehensive background with Capper, Garrett Power and man's attempts to control the background of the eco-