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Sapelo Island steward gives a look into the island's management

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Looking at a map of the jurisdictions of Sapelo Island, it's made up of a patchwork of several groups, one of which is the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Brittany Dodege, a coastal training program coordinator with SINERR, spoke with the Glynn Environmental Coalition on Friday. Of the 16,500 acres, SINERR manages 6,100 acres, she said. Its work falls into four primary categories: research, education, stewardship and sound management of coastal resources.

Dodege's job primarily falls in the stewardship category, but she's also involved in education. Mostly, she helps by balancing out different interests — mostly those of preservationists and those who want to use the island for other purposes.



"You can't have it purely for animals. You can't have it purely for people. You have to cohabitate," she said.

It's her job to be the go-between and find a compromise between the two.

She's also involved in helping outside groups with training and prepares informational and educational materials for classes, training sessions and presentations.

"I take the science and put it in plain language," Dodege says.

In the research department, Rachel Guy is typically the lead. She's the research coordinator and runs the System-wide Monitoring Project, referred to as SWMP. It's basically a single database through which all the data collected by SINERR is made available to the public.

Real-time data on the weather and water conditions on the island can be viewed at sapelonerr.org/research-monitoring/monitoring-programs. The data does suggest the water is getting warmer and some species are disappearing from this area.

"They're not huge. It's the small, slow changes that affect species in our area," she said.



That's far from Guy's only job, Dodege said, as she also manages regular fish trawls, oyster monitoring and coordinates with the 31 other national estuarine research reserves in the country.

There are plenty of others employed by the reserve, including Colby Peffer and Adam McKinnon. Peffer spends a lot of time trying to preserve the natural parts of the island. Right now, she's working on propagating native species in an area that was once planned to be an airstrip and was clear-cut in preparation.

McKinnon spends much of his time in classrooms educating K-12 students about Sapelo Island's environment and the work that goes into researching and preserving it.

SINERR is always looking for volunteers, primarily to help with the reforestation program. For more information, visit sapelonerr.org.

Native Americans of the Guale culture were the first known humans to inhabit the island. In 1573, the Spanish established a mission called San José de Zápala, from which the island derives its current-day name. It passed through many hands, most prominently those of Mary Musgrove, Thomas Spaulding, Howard Coffin and finally Richard Reynolds.

Reynolds worked with the University of Georgia to establish the first areas on the island set aside for research purposes. The reserve was established in 1976.

Now several groups, from local landowners in Hog Hammock to government research, parks and preservation agencies, manage the island.

SINERR covers most of the eastern coast of the island and its southern tip. Marshland is the primary area under SINERR's jurisdiction, with some intertidal land and a little upland in the reserve.

The federal government has designated 31 such reserves, each with its own internal management and research processes. While the Sapelo Island reserve works closely with others, she said their structures are all "very local."



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