The Grand Isle, Louisiana Resort Cycle

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Abstract

Grand Isle, the most popular resort on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, has experienced an increase in shoreline erosion and a decrease in attractiveness in recent decades. Viewing the historical evolution of the resort within the framework of Butler's "resort cycle" reveals that cultural processes are largely responsible for these developments. Individual stages of resort evolution on Grand Isle have been accompanied by changes in settlement patterns, changes in environmental perception, and increasing effort to "fix" a naturally dynamic shoreline. Attempts to maintain a stable beachfront have only heightened the problem and helped propel Grand Isle into the stagnation stage of the resort cycle. Past adherence to the resort evolution model indicates onset of the decline stage. Whether a major beach nourishment/island protection project completed in late 1984 represents more than a temporary rejuvenation of the resort depends upon its effectiveness.

Keywords: Louisiana, resort evolution, settlement patterns, coastal erosion, beach restoration.

Introduction

Beginning with W. Christaller (1963), who first observed that sites of tourism location follow a relatively consistent process of evolution—from discovery to growth to decline—the concept of a resort "cycle" has become more accepted in recent years. Studies of resort evolution have, for the most part, concentrated upon the social and economic characteristics of either specific or generic tourist areas over the course of the evolutionary cycle (e.g., Butler 1980; Noronha 1976; Plog 1977; Snow and Wright 1976; Stansfield 1978). Man's changing relationship with his environment within the life cycle of a resort area has been addressed only in a peripheral sense. Yet environmental attitudes, constantly changing over time, may help explain settlement growth patterns, specific modifications of the physical setting, and perhaps even the passing of the resort cycle phases. The environmental component plays a significant role in the evolution of recreation areas, particularly seaside...
resorts, and warrants further investigation in studies of resort genesis and development.

Grand Isle, Louisiana has been settled for over 2 centuries, yet only in the past several decades has shoreline erosion become such a serious problem that the beach has narrowed to a fraction of its former size and numerous summer homes have toppled into the surf. Detecting a correlation between the perceived severity of erosion and intensity of recreational development, the evolution of tourism on the island was examined, by means of the resort cycle framework proposed by R. W. Butler (1980), to better understand the processes of resort settlement evolution, the associated imprints upon the landscape, and the increasing perception of shoreline retreat as a "problem."

RESORT CYCLE MODEL

In Butler's (1980) "cycle of evolution," tourist areas are described as passing through six distinct stages (Figure 1). From an initial exploration stage, characterized by few, adventurous tourists and no public facilities, an involvement stage is entered. Here, limited involvement with tourism by local residents leads to provision of basic services and perhaps advertising thereof, and definable patterns of seasonal visitation and recreational hinterland (i.e., market area) begin to emerge. The development stage is marked by more facilities, more advertising, increasing control of the tourist trade by outsiders, an excess of tourists over locals at peak periods, and increasing antagonism by the latter toward the former. In the consolidation stage, tourism has become a major (if not the major) part of the local economy, but growth rates have begun to level off. A recreational business district (RBD) has taken shape, some of the older, deteriorating facilities are perceived as second-rate, and local efforts are made to extend the tourist season. The stagnation stage witnesses peak numbers of tourists as capacity levels are reached. Although the resort now has a well-established image, it is no longer in fashion and property ownership turnover rates are high. Paraphrasing Roy Wolfe, the divorce from the geographic environment becomes final as the original physical attraction of the site is obscured by the cultural overlay (Wolfe 1952). As the tourist market wanes, the decline stage is entered. However, countermeasures such as redirected foci of tourist attraction, beautification/urban renewal projects, or legalization of gambling may offset the decline and spur on varying levels of rejuvenations (Butler 1980).

PHYSICAL SETTING

Grand Isle, a 7-mile long and 1/2-mile wide barrier island 50 miles south of New Orleans, is the premier seaside resort along the sand-deficient and generally inaccessible Louisiana Gulf Coast (Figure 2). Physically, the island is a detached barrier spit formed by longshore processes in conjunction with transgression of the Bayou Lafourche deltaic headland to the west (Penland and Boyd 1981). Longshore sediment movement is to the northeast, and historic maps indicate a pattern of net erosion along the western half of the island and net accretion along the eastern half. Sand spits at both ends of the island recurve into the deep tidal passes that separate Grand Isle from adjacent coastal areas. The western Caminada Pass has historically migrated eastward and contributed to the erosion of the west end of Grand Isle. A low beach ridge plain, which comprises much of the island, reaches its highest elevations (about 7 feet above mean sea level) near the shoreline retreat/shoreline
advance "nodal point" (Conatser 1969), and the higher ridges are densely colonized by live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*). Frequently inundated saline marshes predominate in the backbarrier environment.

**EXPLORATION STAGE (1811–1866)**

The initial Spanish land concessions along the Lower Barataria Coast were granted by the 1780s, and by 1800 nuclei of predominantly French-speaking communities had become established at Grand Isle, Cheniere Caminada, and Grand Terre, where the privateer Jean Lafitte headquartered (Evans et al. 1979). The local economies were originally based upon fishing and smuggling, but plantation agriculture (sugarcane, cotton) was introduced early in the nineteenth century. The occasional summer visitors—primarily wealthy New Orleanians—arrived by private vessels as personal guests of the coastal antebellum bourgeoisie. By the 1850s, the first summer cottages had been built, and a small boarding house was constructed at Cheniere Caminada (Stielow 1977). During most of this period, however, the impact of tourism upon the island’s environment or social structure was negligible.

Settlement strategies along the Lower Coast reflected adjustment to periodic storms and shoreline erosion. On Grand Isle, the locus of settlement was among the higher beach ridges (*chenières*), and even the few dispersed plantations were situated mostly away from the beach. The protection value of the ridges was realized, and not only was it forbidden to cut the oaks that grew on them, but also the trees were actively planted (Stielow 1977). Houses were built with shipped-in cypress wood, and cottage floors were elevated 2 or 3 feet off the ground. (Later, with successive storms, floor levels gradually rose.) Driftwood was left in situ on the beach as an erosion retardant, and only basic fuel requirements were gathered. The outward focus of the village and the plantations was toward the back bay, where the boat docks were located and levees and drainage ditches were constructed to minimize bayside flooding (Evans et al. 1979).

**INVOLVEMENT STAGE (1866–1890)**

Salinization of the soil and the Civil War effectively ended the plantation era on Grand Isle, and the *involvement stage* began with the conversion of the defunct Barataria Plantation to a tourist facility. The main sugarhouse became the Grand Isle Hotel and the 38 slave shacks were transformed into guest cottages. Streetcar tracks were laid, and a mule-drawn tram transported visitors from the dock to the hotel and on to the beach, where bath houses were erected (Swanson 1977; see Figure 3). Steamship excursions from New Orleans were actively promoted, and twice-weekly service (8 hours each way) was soon available. By 1878 a post office was established, and at least one more guesthouse was built. Escape from disease- and crime-wrecked New Orleans and national popularization of sea-bathing attracted the well-to-do to Grand Isle. Several writers, including Lafcadio Hearn (1884, 1889), George Washington Cable (1884), and Kate Chopin (1899) sojourned on the...
"idyllic subtropical isle" that became the setting for their novels and feature articles.

Settlement pattern changes during the involvement stage entailed a shift away from the village proper — toward the beachfront and adjacent vicinage (the zone landward of, yet in visual and olfactory contact with, the shore) (Figure 4). An awareness of storm surge potential persisted, and beach cottages were occupied only during the summer tourist season, which ended prior to onset of the hurricane season (Evans et al. 1979). Also, the driftwood-covered beach was not noticeably altered, although increasing amounts of wood were gathered to meet the hotels’ rising fuel needs (Cole 1892).

DEVELOPMENT STAGE (1890–1960)

By 1890, a well-established pattern of summer visitation had evolved, and plans for more intense development stimulated onset of the development stage. Because of a series of meteorologic, political, and economic events which periodically checked tourism development on Grand Isle, this stage lasted about 70 years and can be subdivided into three distinct phases: rapid development until 1893, when a severe hurricane temporarily halted recreational expansion; piecemeal speculation and spurts of development from 1893 to 1945, interrupted by world wars and economic depressions; and a post-World War II “take-off” phase of rapid development until about 1960.

The incipience of tourism during the involvement stage led to rapid recreational development by 1890. Construction of the New Orleans, Grand Isle, and Fort Jackson railroad along the west bank of the lower Mississippi River (steamer connections were made at Myrtle Grove) halved the travel time to Grand Isle to 4 hours each way. A 417-ft long E-shaped Ocean View Hotel was built “two blocks from the beach” and 60 changing cabins were erected along the shorefront. One additional major hotel was under construction, and resort development was also planned for nearby Grand Terre and Cheniere Caminada (Stielow 1977). Extensive advertising in New Orleans steadily increased demand for sea breezes, gentle surf, and quaint island life. Summer visitors soon outnumbered the residents (officially 301 in 1890), and confrontations between the
two factions led to completion of the first jail in 1891 (Stielow 1977). Although several boarding houses were in the village proper, the locus of hotel and cottage construction remained along the shoreline and vicinage.

The rapid development was checked by the infamous October 1, 1893 hurricane, which made landfall at Cheniere Caminada. Two thousand lives were lost statewide—700 at Cheniere Caminada alone, where only 4 of 400 structures were left standing. Grand Isle, inundated by a storm surge estimated at 10 feet, was affected only at its resort facilities. All beachfront structures and hotels were destroyed or severely damaged, and 12 hotel employees lost their lives. The village proper, sheltered by the oak ridges, experienced no deaths and only minor damage (Falls 1893; Forrest 1893; Van Pelt 1943).

Not until 3 decades later did Grand Isle again attain the level of recreational development that characterized the early 1890s (Stielow 1982). Two hotels reopened a few years after the storm (only to be permanently destroyed in a 1915 hurricane). Various New York and Florida real estate developers arrived in Grand Isle in the early decades of the twentieth century, and proposed promotion schemes included seawall construction (inspired by the Galveston seawall built after the 1900 hurricane there), a monorail to New Orleans, and various beach "improvements." Yet memories of the 1893 hurricane (reactivated by the 1915 hurricane), economic depressions, and World War I all contributed to a postponement of a tourism boom. Tent-camping was briefly popular in the early 1900s, but cottage construction did not become popular again until the latter 1920s. In 1928, the Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo (allegedly America's oldest organized fishing tournament) was established. The boom years of the Roaring Twenties saw Grand Isle headed for rapid expansion of tourism, but the stock market crash of 1929 curtailed this incipient boom.

The Depression proved to be the catalyst for the "take-off" phase of the development stage (although rapid growth did not take place until after World War II). First, the depressed economy forced many islanders to sell their landholdings to real estate developers, some of whom envisioned a new Palm Springs or a French Riviera. Fifteen hundred acres, flanking the village proper, were subdivided and a crude street network put in. A major beachfront hotel—the Grand Isle Inn—was constructed at the east end of the island, near the main dock where the tourists disembarked. Second, a highway to the island was completed in 1934. This facilitated beach access and expanded the recreational hinterland, which presently conforms to predictive recreational gravity models (Fournier 1984). Beach-front cottage construction was renewed, and a small settlement was re-established at Cheniere Caminada (the first reoccupation there since 1893).

The post-1934 resurgence of tourism was accompanied by a renewed focus upon the shorefront and vicinage. All driftwood was removed from the beach and burned, and beach "maintenance" subsequently became a village responsibility. Beach ridges in the recreational subdivisions were levelled to provide more homesites and also a better view of the sea (Conatser 1969). Shoreline erosion was soon noted to be increasing, and lobbying for erosion protection began. A survey by the federal Beach Erosion Board (1937) concluded that only a seawall would insure protection, but even the fallback choice—a groin field—was deemed not economically justifiable.

The "take-off" phase, delayed by the Depression and World War II, took place between 1945 and 1960—as evidenced by high growth rates of both permanent population (Figure 5) and housing units. By 1950, half of the subdivided lots had been developed (Times-Picayune 1950) and three hotels and numerous rental cabins comprised the lodging facilities (James 1950). A Grand Isle...
information center was set up in New Orleans' French Quarter, the remaining free-ranging cattle were removed from the island, and lobbying for a state park began. Summer homes, ranging from elegant stilt houses to shacks, soon proliferated along the beachfront and in the western vicinage, and an offshore oil support base was established along the eastern backbarrier. Weekend visitors numbered as high as 10,000 (Stielow 1977), and tourism on Grand Isle was at its peak.

As the beachfront filled with summer camps, public pressures for a stabilized shoreline increased. Private erosion control efforts were largely ineffective, and in the early 1950s, two sets of groin fields were constructed by the state (Myers and Theis 1956). The net effect of the groin emplacement was an increase in downdrift erosion, especially at the western half, where retreat rates approached 100 ft per year (Kohlmann 1955). Beach fill, pumped in from offshore to restore the eroded beach, also proved ineffective because of incompatible sediment grain size and passage of Hurricane Flossy in 1956, which removed the fill (USACE 1972). (Flossy, the worst storm in 40 years, also destroyed numerous summer homes as well as the Grand Isle Inn.) To offset the beach erosion trend, a 935-ft jetty (later extended by 400 ft) was constructed at the east end of the island (Myers 1959). The jetty was successful in trapping sand, but the benefits of shore accretion did not extend to the central or western portions of the island, where recreational development was most intense. (A handy source of fill material to replenish the eroding beaches was created, however, and in the early 1970s, the Grand Isle State Park was established on the accreted sand.)

CONSOLIDATION STAGE (1960–1975)

By 1960 the post-World War II appeal of Grand Isle was diminishing. This is attributed to the increasingly ramshackle appearance of recreational housing on the island, accelerated beachfront deterioration resulting from both storm passages and futile efforts at shoreline stabilization, and quicker access to the more attractive beaches of Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle, especially for New Orleans- and Baton Rouge-based recreationists (Hubbert 1983). Postwar growth rates levelled off (see Figure 5), although rates of fishing camp construction remained high—about 50 per year—well into the 1970s. By 1965, over half of all residences on the island were summer homes and camps (Gary and Davis 1979; Morgan 1965).

Grand Isle incorporated in 1959, connected with Bayou Lafourche water and gas lines in 1963, and commissioned a comprehensive city plan (Carter-Horan and Chapin 1962–3) which recommended extensive landuse guidelines and implementation of a comprehensive erosion control program. Construction of a 12-ft high ring levee around the island (or at least along the gulf) was suggested, but lack of funds precluded any action other than periodic renourishment of the beaches. Piecemeal private bulkheading along the shorefront continued.

In 1965, Hurricane Betsy struck the Louisiana coast, making landfall at Grand Isle. A 9-ft storm surge crossed the island, destroying or damaging 85% of all structures and leaving 750 permanent residents homeless. Most erosion occurred on the western half of the island, where destruction approached 100%. The beach was eroded up to the coastal highway, and the elongated recreational business district (RBD) that had developed there was, in practical terms, totally destroyed (USACE 1966).

The impact of the hurricane was mixed. Although Grand Isle experienced much destruction and hundreds of residents subsequently moved "up the bayou" (Lafourche), the ramshackle appearance of the island was removed, at least temporarily. Insurance payoffs and low-interest loans stimulated summer home reconstruction, new motels sprang up along the RBD strip, the beach was renourished with sand from the accreted eastern spit, and tourists flocked to Grand Isle in record numbers (Conaway 1966; Tarleton 1966). Hurricane Betsy provided the "facelift" necessary to revitalize the resort and also renewed pressures for federal involvement in erosion control efforts (Cook 1968).

By the early 1970s, the post-Betsy boom had passed, and Grand Isle approached equilibrium conditions. The 1970 census showed a slight gain in population since 1960, but the rate of growth did not reflect projections previously made (see Figure 5). The anticipated post-storm upgrading of landuse was only partly realized, as many mobile homes that were introduced as temporary relief shelters quickly became permanent fixtures (many elevated upon stilts). Absence of zoning regulations encouraged a wide spectrum of summer homes—from primitive to fancy—to be built.

Post-Betsy beach nourishment projects also proved shortlived, and even minor storms caused net loss of beachfill to the offshore, especially from within the groin fields (Theis 1969). In a 6-year period, the beach was nourished three times, and each time all material was lost within 2 years. Also, the western tip of Grand Isle was subjected to high erosion rates, partly attributed to continued...
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The eastward migration of Caminada Pass. Since the erosion left numerous cabins standing in the surf and threatened to undermine the highway link to the mainland, the entire spit was stabilized with a riprap/concrete revetment (USACE 1972), which in turn caused downdrift erosion. When Hurricane Carmen struck Grand Isle in 1974, again destroying several summer homes and causing shoreline retreat, the island's role as an attractive seaside resort became increasingly questioned.

STAGNATION STAGE (1975–1984)

The last decade has seen Grand Isle slip into the stagnation stage. Piecemeal beachfill projects and sand-filled Longard tube installation (Dement 1977) proved ineffective; the beachfront continued to deteriorate and homes fell victim to the sea. Rates of camp construction slowed, and turnover of property became more frequent. Fishing remained the key attraction of the island, however, and camp construction continued especially in the lower-priced, lower-elevation west end vicinage (Figure 4E). The permanent population decreased, however. Visitation at Grand Isle State Park has also been generally declining. Though designed to handle an annual 600,000 visitor-day capacity, the park recorded less than 200,000 visitor-days for 1983 (Office of State Parks 1984).

In the late 1970s, a $14 million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project to construct an 11.5-ft high, vegetatively stabilized sand dune, fronted by a graded 225-ft wide beach, was authorized (USACE 1978), but due to various delays, construction did not take place until 1984. The project, utilizing sand dredged from offshore, has created a wide beach attractive to recreationists and ostensibly protects the island from destructive erosion. In view of the high local rates of subsidence/sea level rise, currently estimated at 1/2 inch per year at Grand Isle (Baumann 1980; Nummedal 1983), combined with the potential erosive energy that accompanies hurricanes (van Beek & Meyer-Arendt 1982), the anticipated lifespan of the project is open to debate (by local residents, recreationists, and coastal scientists alike).

Nonetheless, in terms of the resort cycle, Grand Isle is experiencing a transition from a stage of stagnation to one of rejuvenation (see Figure 1). A boom has been triggered: recently a modern marina and the island's first condominiums were completed. A local bank was built, the real estate market and summer home construction rates are up, and rumors of major hotel development abound. Plans have been drawn up to convert the remaining backbarrier wetlands

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of Grand Isle as a seaside resort can be described by the resort cycle model proposed by Butler (1980). Each stage of the cycle is characterized by distinctive settlement patterns that reflect changing environmental perceptions and/or conditions in addition to areal expansion (Figure 6). From an initial settlement nestled among the higher beach ridges and focused toward the back bay and away from the environmentally hazardous beachfront, tourism development extended out to the shore and into the exposed

Figure 6

Schematicized Settlement Evolution on Grand Isle

The stagnation stage that prevailed on Grand Isle from about 1975 until 1984 represented a stage of relative equilibrium in which capacity levels were reached. The sand levee project has (at least temporarily) restored the beachfront and stimulated a rejuvenation. Whether the current trend represents more than a mini-boom (similar to the post-Betsy boom) that is merely delaying Grand Isle's slippage into the decline stage partly depends on the effectiveness of the dune and beach restoration project.

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vicinage zone. With construction of a beach highway, settlement spread laterally and gradually intensified. Environmental degradation in the form of beach ridge levelling and driftwood removal accelerated the shoreline retreat processes that originally created Grand Isle. Summer home construction along the dynamic beachfront led to a need to stabilize the shoreline. The efforts to accomplish this led to a tampering with beach processes that locally accelerated erosion even further, reduced the aesthetic appeal of the island, and propelled Grand Isle into the advanced stages of the resort cycle. Fishing supplanted sea-bathing as the dominant recreational attraction, and more modest summer and weekend camps of diehard recreational fishermen began to occupy (with increasing density) the lower-elevation vicinage zone. A recent $14 million comprehensive beach restoration/island protection project has rejuvenated the resort, and recreational expansion into the backbarrier wetlands is underway. Whether the present boom is more than short-term depends in part upon the lifespan of the shore protection project.

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