

Hilton Head Island—A Sustainable Place to Live and Play

Location: Hilton Head Island, SC

Population: 40,000

Size: 54 square miles

Type of property: Public municipality

Type of membership: Sustainable Communities Program

Member since: June 2010

Certified since: December 2017



Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

The Town of Hilton Head Island is a popular tourist destination, famous for its thirteen miles of pristine beaches, but it is also home to a permanent population of approximately 40,000 residents. This barrier island off the coast of South Carolina encompasses 54 square miles and since incorporating in 1983 the Town has been known for its “green culture” and saw sustainability as the next logical step in its evolution.

Hilton Head Island is in an amazing position to be a leader in the sustainability movement because not only is the Town thinking about sustainable practices, but their recreational sites (i.e. golf courses), hotels, and businesses are adopting sustainable business models as well, and it is through the collective impact of thinking more sustainably in every facet of what we do that we make a difference. With the amount of tourism that Hilton Head Island receives, their sustainability initiatives are seen by the many who vacation there, and hopefully these ideas are brought back to their own communities.



Hilton Head Island is home to a beautiful xeriscape interpretive garden complete with information about ‘The Seven Xeriscape Principles.’

Hilton Head Island’s community-scale work began in Audubon International’s Green Neighborhoods Program, and in late 2010, Hilton Head Island joined Audubon International’s Sustainable Communities Program. There are three stages to the program: assessment, planning and implementation. Through the program, systems and policies are evaluated through an assessment process, looking at challenges and opportunities. A community is designated “sustainable” when goals chosen in the planning process are implemented. There

are 15 focus areas in the program, and each focus area has a series of goals, and progress is evaluated through tracking indicators. Hilton Head Island was the first municipality in South Carolina to be designated as an Audubon International Certified Sustainable Community, and they achieved certification in December of 2017.

This community has created a strong foundation for their sustainability vision that will not only support their continued efforts for the future, but will also help to preserve their unique settings and enhance quality of life for all residents over the long run. This in turn will help connect Hilton Head Island with the next generation of residents who want to continue the tradition of preserving all that makes Hilton Head a great place to live. Hilton Head Island's accomplishments include:

- **Food Sourcing:** The Town hopes to encourage the growth of community gardens on the island, and there are currently 34 acres of land that are used for agriculture. Annually, about 2,000 pounds of food are donated to charity from the gardens.
- **Wildlife Protection:** To preserve and enhance wildlife habitat, Hilton Head Island monitors sea turtle disorientations caused by artificial lighting, and educates residents about specialized lighting regulations with the hopes of decreasing the disturbance to the sea turtles. The Town also monitors piping plovers and red knots, two federally threatened shorebirds that spend winters on the island, providing public education on sharing the beaches with shorebirds and posting resting areas for the birds to discourage disturbance.
- **Transportation:** With an overall goal to reduce the percentage of vehicular trips on roadways within the Town, the Town has a robust, 64-mile multi-use pathway with 100% connectivity. To further meet this goal, the Town has ample bicycle parking to complement their designation as a Bicycle Friendly Community.
- **Urban Forestry:** Hilton Head Island has been a Tree City USA Community since 2002, and they have a strong tree ordinance. In addition, they've completed an urban forest canopy analysis to determine the natural services that their urban forest provides and the economic value of those services.



Cyclists on the pathway in Hilton Head Island, which is complete with signage. Since 2011, the Town has been designated a Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists.



The largest freshwater reptile on Hilton Head Island is the American alligator.

- **Education:** Hilton Head has established a goal to raise awareness of sustainable practices in the community, and in addition to tracking the hits on the town's sustainability webpages, they're also achieving this goal by having articles in the Hilton Head Monthly magazine and other print and social media about sustainability. Furthermore, the Town is working with local schools to incorporate material on sustainability into lesson plans, beginning with presentations on recycling.
- **Green Building:** With an overall goal to increase energy efficiency in all Town buildings by 10% by 2019, all new town buildings are to be LEED certified.

- **Affordable Housing:** The Town is supporting the construction of new, moderate income housing. In 2010, the Town donated 14 acres to build the first Habitat for Humanity community on Hilton Head Island, and as of summer 2015, five building permits had been issued for Habitat for Humanity homes.
- **Sustainable Economies:** The number of 'green' businesses is tracked by the Town, with a goal to see more. As of 2018 there are seven hotels participating in the Audubon Green Lodging Program, one business participating in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, and five golf courses Certified in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Due to the high volume of tourists at Hilton Head Island, the Town has set a goal to encourage more tourism businesses to offer visitors carbon travel footprint mitigation opportunities. For example, one island business offers biannual clean-up opportunities on Broad Creek.
- **Waste Reduction:** To reduce the town's environmental impact, they are working to increase the amount of electronics and hazardous materials that are recycled. For example, in 2015, over 25,000 pounds of residential hazardous materials and over 35,000 pounds of electronic waste were recovered. Similarly, the Town sponsors and operates a Christmas tree recycling program every year called "Grinding of the Greens."
- **Native Plants:** One of the goals of the Tree Ordinance, Comprehensive Plan and Design Guide is to preserve overall biodiversity on the island. Therefore, the preservation of native plant communities is important and the percent used on Town property is tracked.



Left to Right: Christine Kane (Audubon International) awards Marcy Benson (Town of Hilton Head Island) + Mayor David Bennett (Town of Hilton Head Island) Audubon International Sustainable Communities Certification at the South Carolina Sustainable Communities Press Event in March 2018.



Hilton Head Island is home to 13 miles of prime beaches.

Sally Krebs, the Town's Sustainable Practices Coordinator, and Marcy Benson, Senior Grants Administrator, are to be commended for their hard work and dedication to this process. Marcy and Sally collaborated over seven years with community organizations and stakeholders to achieve the Audubon International Sustainable Communities designation. This recognition emphasizes Hilton Head's environmental stewardship, including their sea turtle protection, beach re-nourishment, planned green space development, flood mitigation efforts, high water quality standards, and comprehensive tree protection program. "Development on our Island was born in a climate of sustainability, and the Town of Hilton Head Island strives to continue our partnership with nature via public education, public-private partnerships, the use of green building techniques and a deep respect for our natural environment and the many natural services it provides our residents and visitors," said Sally Krebs.

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