



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

February 1, 2011

**Wilmington, NC, December 28, 2010:** *The Village of Bald Head Island today commenced a civil action in United States District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina, against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Village has filed this action because the Corps has failed to fulfill its commitments relating to the re-alignment, deepening and maintenance of the Wilmington Harbor Shipping Channel which has resulted in substantial erosion of Bald Head Island beaches and near-shore shoals.*

–Village of Bald Head Island press release

## ***A Sediment Sink***

The Cape Fear River is not naturally deep. In colonial times, the natural channel was 12 to 20 feet deep. When the US Army Corps of Engineers closed New Inlet below Fort Fisher in the period 1870-1881 (in case the South should rise again), the channel at the mouth of the river was only about nine feet deep. The Corps then undertook a series of projects to deepen and widen the channel from Wilmington to the sea. The river resists by filling it back in.

During the Second World War the channel was maintained at a depth of 30 feet. In 1956-1958, to accommodate the new Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point, the entrance to the river channel at Bald Head was deepened to 35 feet. In 1971-1973, that was increased to 40 feet.

In 1998, the Corps received authorization and funding to increase the channel depth to 42 feet in the river, 44 feet at the ocean entrance. This was regarded with alarm by the Village of Bald Head Island, because the deeper and longer channel would aggravate a growing problem of beach sand being interrupted in its natural drift along the shore and being captured by the channel instead of moving to the next beach. The sand would have to be dredged out of the channel and placed back on the beach constantly—and perpetually.

The Corps of Engineers proposed to do exactly that. A plan of maintenance dredging at regular intervals was established, with the sand to be restored to Bald Head Island in two dredging cycles out of three and the third going to Caswell Beach. Alas, the Corps of Engineers does not have the wherewithal to do that, unless Congress gives it the money. Every time. The annual bill for maintenance dredging of the Cape Fear River is about \$12 million.

Sand eroding from the beaches and falling into the river channel happened as expected. Money arriving from Congress did not. The Village of Bald Head Island resorted to law.

An unstable situation. A century and a half of navigation improvements have exceeded the capacity of the Cape Fear River to absorb abuse. A large, artificial sediment sink now relentlessly collects sand from the beaches. Without regular and expensive pipeline dredging to restore the sand, the beaches shrink. All for the sake of container ships from China. Perhaps we should fill the channel back in, and let the Chinese sneakers arrive through Hampton Roads and Charleston.