



The Story About Understory Why Everyone on Bald Head Island Should Care

*B*ald Head Island is truly unique. As a barrier island, it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and Cape Fear River. BHI has 14 miles of pristine beaches; 12,400 acres, of which 10,000 acres are protected; over 244 species of birds, including the bald eagle; and the North Carolina Forest Preserve of nearly 200 acres.

Many extreme forces of nature that have helped shape this very special island include hurricane-force winds, salt water and salt spray, flooding and drought. There is another force of nature that impacts BHI — humans — and with us, development. The Bald Head Association is mandated by its Covenants to help sustain BHI by managing the buildout of homes and by managing vegetation trimming/removal, to help protect its members' property values. In order to do just that, the Design Guidelines (click on "Unified Design Guidelines" on the home page BaldHeadAssociation.com) specify what requires approval for building and landscaping.

What is understory?

The understory layer of the forest lies between the tree canopy layer, with plenty of sunlight, and the forest floor layer, where there is little to none (depending on your location on the Island). Conditions in this layer are just right for a large variety of insects, microorganisms and certain types of vegetation. It also provides small creatures, insects and wildlife protection from predators.

From the BHI Conservancy (BHIC), "The understory and herbaceous layer of the maritime forest makes up an important part of our forest. It is here where you find diverse and rich plant life. Understory plants enrich the soil through decomposition. The understory plants also provide a wind-buffering function

at ground level. Bald Head Island's latitudinal position supports both northern and southern species of plants." Important understory plants include vines, small plants and trees, mosses, lichens and even weeds. All are needed to have a healthy forest habitat.

The BHIC explains, "Vines play an important role. The vines and herbaceous plants intertwine, further developing the structural integrity of the forest and forming pockets of vegetation that provide a base for songbirds to build nests. The vines twist around the canopy and are the secret to wind protection. These vines actually weave together the canopy so blowing winds don't penetrate through the top layer and keep homes, plants, and animals below safe and protected."

Why is understory protected?

Did you know that winds from Hurricane Dorian in September 2019 did more damage where property owners had improperly cleared understory? Without defense from the wind, you can clearly understand the significance of understory and the importance of protecting the "scrubby-looking stuff" on your lot.

From the BHIC, "The canopy of Bald Head Island's unique, globally imperiled, maritime forest provides protection from hurricanes. The tops of trees in the forest protect homes and nature from wind shear. Forest roots hold the island's soil together, similar to rebar in a concrete foundation. Without our forest, the Island would be much more susceptible to the damaging effects of storms. Our two- to three-hundred-year-old live oaks and some half-a-century-old laurel oaks are part of the equation that sustains the Island during battering coastal storms."

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Why should I care?

The beauty of the trees on BHI, especially the live oaks, capture a lot of attention, simply because of their visible prominence. But there's a lot happening between the sand and soil on BHI and the canopy area that tends to be overlooked and, therefore, isn't understood. When you see "scrubby-looking" areas full of understory around your lot, for some property owners who are used to a well-manicured lawn back on the mainland, it's hard to understand that "cleaning up" understory has much more of a negative impact than you may realize.

From the BHIC, "Since the understory vegetation supports a larger variety of plant species, it also supports a larger variety of animal species. For example, the Palmedes Swallowtail butterflies, several species of dragonflies, Yellow-Rumped Warblers, Green Treefrogs, Carolina Anole, Grey Fox and Whitetailed Deer are all residents of Bald Head Island that have direct relationships with the understory layer of the forest.

"Removing vegetation from the understory area to 'open up' your yard or landscape will also open up the area to the negative impacts from salt spray. For these plants, exposure to salt winds causes the plants to dry up, losing their leaves and eventually dying. **When you clear out around your home and reduce the understory vegetation, you take out good-quality soils and, thus, weaken your trees' ability to protect your home.**"

From the National Center for Biotechnology Information,

"Biodiversity plays a crucial role in ecosystem function and processes not only because of its importance in production of food, fiber and fuel, but also because of its roles in ground water replenishment, flooding controls, prevention of soil erosion and ecological invasion, influences on restoration succession and so on."

What goes on underneath that we don't see — from the biological, chemical, structural standpoint or the micro-organism and wildlife perspective — all plays a part and all works together. When you affect one domino piece, you affect all other domino pieces, especially on a barrier island. Do your part to help protect Bald Head Island — limit or stop the removal of understory vegetation (remember, anything over 1 inch in diameter must first be approved by ARC) and allow your land to be as natural as possible. This approach not only protects your investment, it helps the overall health and sustainability of the Island.

Educate yourself and share with your BHI neighbors about the importance of understory and about the Design Guidelines that explain what needs to be approved. Leave the history-engrained concept of a well-manicured suburban lawn back on the mainland and enjoy BHI for what many originally fell in love with — its wild nature.

For these and many reasons more, BHA manages the trimming and removal of vegetation with a pre-approval process. For understory, **anything over one inch in diameter on your property must be pre-approved by the Architectural Review Committee (ARC)**. Contact Karen Mosteller, ARC Coordinator, at 910-457-4676, ext. 22 or Karen@BaldHeadAssociation.com.

