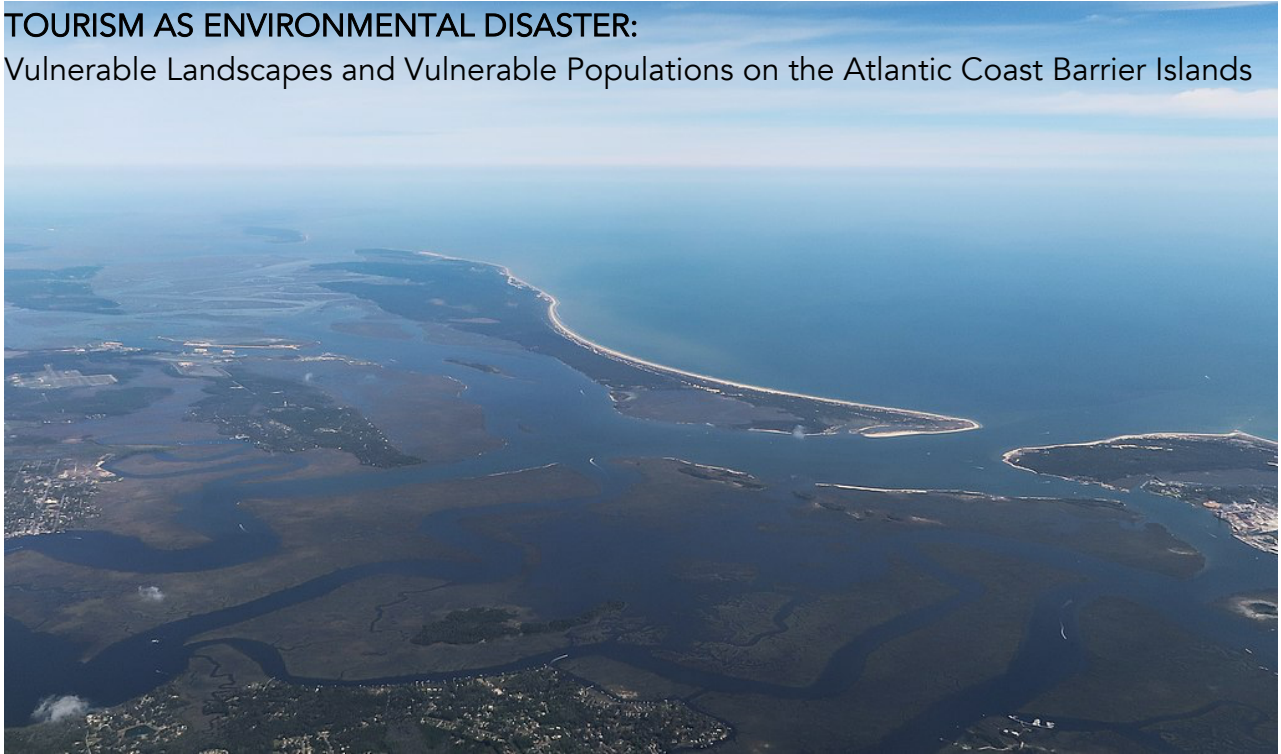


TOURISM AS ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER:

Vulnerable Landscapes and Vulnerable Populations on the Atlantic Coast Barrier Islands



Cumberland Island, Georgia. Photograph: Tim Kiser.

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1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This semester-long graduate interdisciplinary course explores sustainable alternatives to tourist developments on the East Coast barrier islands and brings together three pedagogical components: an architecture design studio; a research and theory seminar, and a building and environmental technology course. From Maine to Florida barrier islands, a particularly valuable and delicate coastal landform, stretch along the US Atlantic seaboard. On the one hand, barrier islands formed by “constantly changing deposits of sand”[1] are critical for the protection of coastal ecosystems and communities, as they absorb the waves’ energy before hitting the coast, thus reducing both storm surge and flooding. On the other, they are also unique landscapes, with long white beaches and rich vegetation that merges with water in gorgeous marshlands. During the Jim Crow era, it was on these islands that the self-sustaining Gullah-Geechee communities found a safe haven in Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas.

Once the first bridges were built in the 1950s, a massive invasion of the tourist industry took over the islands, bringing new infrastructure projects, higher ship traffic, travel-oriented constructions at various scales, from vacation homes to hotels of all sizes, and gated all-inclusive resorts. The short and long-term consequences have impacted both the ecosystems of the islands, and the communities inhabiting them, leading to the commodification of these coastal landscapes. Understanding the notion of the environment in its broadest sense and acknowledging the disastrous impact of abusive tourist practices, our course will address three major intertwined challenges that are threatening the existence of barrier islands and their specific cultures.

Social and cultural challenges. As tourist developments spread, degrading the very landscapes they were attracted to, they systematically displaced low-income groups from the most natural areas of the islands to the mainland. Ironically, though not unexpectedly, the African American communities originally established on the islands during the 19th and 20th century were the first ones to be removed through unregulated real estate practices, gentrification, and abuse of property rights.

Climate challenges. Once air-conditioning technologies became easily available, the hot and humid islands turned into “desirable ocean-side property”[2]. Unlike the low-impact Gullah-Geechee villages, the alterations of the landscape brought by the tourist industry led to sand erosion, rapid sea level rises, and extreme weather events, thus causing a progressive reduction of barrier islands’ surface and, in a downward spiral, reducing the protections they provide for the mainland.

Sustenance challenges. Thriving on consumption, tourism gradually erases self-sustained practices of land cultivation and production, which results in food deserts – an unfortunate paradox in an area where the natural climate, along with modern agricultural practices, would allow for sustainable farming.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

The main objective of this course proposal is to explore strategies for the restoration and alternative occupation of 3 barrier island sites: Daufuskie Island, SC; Sapelo Island, GA and Cumberland Island, GA. We propose to look at tourism as a socially and environmentally problematic industry, for which we need to formulate alternatives that are socially responsible, environmentally respectful and economically sustainable. To do it we propose to group three different courses— (A) Design; (B) Research and History; and (C) Environmental Technologies— as three components in a coordinated sequence. Each of the components will hold a different role during the different parts of the semester.

Component A. DESIGN STUDIO: In response to the environmental effects of travel industry and aggressive real-estate developments, we will explore the design of self-sustaining communities on barrier islands through an integrated approach that brings together sustainability and social, cultural, and historic matters.

Component B. RESEARCH AND HISTORY SEMINAR: We will study the histories and cultures of the communities traditionally occupying these islands, along with the mechanisms that led to their erasure by tourism. Understanding the specificities of communities that are affected by travel industries is critical in proposing new modes of inhabitation and land-occupation that not only recognize what was lost in this process, but also contribute to the development of guidelines for future interventions.

Component C. ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNOLOGIES SEMINAR: We will study the climatic and geographic conditions of the sites, as well as technologies, materials, and building techniques that respond and adapt to these conditions. We will explore creative alternatives to conventional conditioning technologies.

COURSE RESOURCES

Tourism in Coastal Areas:

- 2.5% The Osa Peninsula, dir. Elterman, E. & Bollinger, M. (2015).
- Becken, S. et al. (2014). The Tourism Disaster Vulnerability Framework: An application to tourism in small island destinations. *Natural Hazards*, 71(1), 955-972.
- Gormsen, E. (1997). The impact of tourism on coastal areas. *GeoJournal*, 42(1), 39–54.
- Lacher, R. G. et al (2013). The Role of Heritage and Cultural Elements in Coastal Tourism Destination Preferences: A Choice Modeling–Based Analysis. *Journal of Travel Research*, 52(4), 534–546.
- McLaren, B. and Lasansky M. (2008). Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place (
- Nsizwazikhona, Simon Chili et al. (2017). The radical outcomes of tourism development on the natural environment in coastal areas. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 6(4).
- Weaver, D. B. (2019). Resort Structure and “Plantation” Dynamics in Antigua and Coastal South Carolina. In *Managing Coastal Tourism Resorts* (pp. 204–215). *Multilingual Matters*.
- Zahedi, S. (2008). Tourism impact on coastal environment. *Transactions on the Built Environment*, 99.

Barrier Islands:

- Cooper, J. A. G., Pilkey, O. H., & Lewis, D. A. (2007). Islands behind Islands: An Unappreciated Coastal Landform Category. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 907–911.
- Grzegorzewski, A. S., Cialone, M. A., & Wamsley, T. V. (2011). Interaction of Barrier Islands and Storms: Implications for Flood Risk Reduction in Louisiana and Mississippi. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 156–164.
- Hansen, G. (1996) *Islands at the Edge of Time: A Journey To America's Barrier Islands*
- Our Island Home, dir. James Spione (2010)
- Pilkey, O. H., & Tonya D. Clayton. (1989). Summary of Beach Replenishment Experience on U.S. East Coast Barrier Islands. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 5(1), 147–159.

Gullah Geechee Heritage:

- Beoku-Betts, J. (1995), 'Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity among the Gullah', *Gender and Society* Vol. 9, No. 5.
- Ghahramani, L. et al. (2020) *Minority Community Resilience and Cultural Heritage Preservation: A Case Study of the Gullah Geechee Community*, *Sustainability* 12(6)
- Gullah roots, dir. Newman, B. & Blake, X. (2006) [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Florida.
- Kumanyika, C. (2017), *There Deed*, *Uncivil Podcast*, Gimlet Media.
- Manning, Thomas J. (1980). The Impact of Corporate Tourism on Gullah Blacks: Notes on Issues of Employment. *Phylon*, 41(1), 1–11.
- Matory, J. Lorand (1995), 'The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Oct., 2008)
- Thompson, R. (2019). *Destructionment: Gates & Fakes Invade the Gullah/Geechee's Sea Islands*

Rural Poverty and Food Deserts:

- A Place at the Table, dir. Lori Silverbush and Kristi Jacobson (2021).
- Lichter, D. T., & Brown, D. L. (2011). Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, 565–592.
- Lichter, D. T., & Ziliak, J. P. (2017). The Rural-Urban Interface: New Patterns of Spatial Interdependence and Inequality In America. *The Annals of The American Academy of Political And Social Science*, 672.
- Living in a Food Desert, dir. Jesse Vaughn (2015)