E NEC 698: Managing Lands Along the Great Coharie Creek

A Report by students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Lastly, the team would like to give a warm thank you to Dr. David Salvesen for supervising the project. The capstone team could not have accomplished its goals to the extent that it has without David, our fearless leader.
Executive Summary

The Coharie Indian tribe is located in North Carolina in Harnett and Sampson Counties and has been recognized by the state since 1971 (CoharieTribe.org). The authors of this report are senior UNC Chapel Hill students who worked on a semester-long project for the Tribe. The tribe has strong cultural and historic ties to the Great Coharie Creek and is looking for ways for its people to reconnect with the river; in part by providing greater access for the people to the river and by building a culture and education center on lands bordering the river with the hope of teaching children of the tribe as well as visitors about the river’s significance. We were able to interact with the people of this tribe and learn about their history, culture, and goals through several methods including research, interviews, attending a pow wow, and a kayaking trip on the creek with members of the tribe.

Goals

The goal of this capstone class was to work with the Coharie Tribe to develop strategies for managing key parcels of land along the Great Coharie Creek as part of the tribe’s Creek Restoration Initiative. The creek holds special historical and spiritual meaning to the tribe, and it would like to see the creek become more accessible to tribal members. The project’s primary goal was to create a strategy for creating a culture and education center on a 64-acre parcel of undeveloped land that lies along the Coharie Creek, not far from the Tribal Center, in order to, in time, utilize the parcel in their own best interests.

Methods

We conducted interviews with 14 members of the tribe in an effort to develop a better understanding of the tribe, its history and its connection to the Coharie River. The interviews were conducted on September 23rd, 2017 at the Coharie Tribal Center off of Highway 421 near Clinton, North Carolina. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Some of the interviews were videotaped. In addition to the interviews, the class also kayaked on the Coharie River with members of the tribe and attended a Pow Wow at the Tribal Center on September 9, 2017. Footage taken at the Pow Wow, on the kayak trip and from a 2016 capstone classes was combined and edited to create an educational video about the tribe. Photographs of the interviewees and inspiring quotes chosen by the authors were used to create a photo essay that combines photographs of members with selected excerpts from the interviews.

In addition, we assessed the potential restrictions on using the 64-acre parcel for a cultural and education center. This involved an analysis of the deed and conservation easement of the property. Finally, using SketchUp software and ideas from visiting the Occaneechi Tribe’s recreated village in downtown Hillsborough, North Carolina, we created renderings or images of what the 64-acre parcel could look like as a culture and education center.

* We use creek and river interchangeably when referring to the Great Coharie Creek, as the tribe did in its interviews with us.
Outcomes
The project resulted in four main outcomes:
1. A spatial and historical analysis of the 64-acre parcel bordering the Coharie Creek that could provide space for a cultural and educational center,
2. Computer generated renderings of a proposed cultural and educational center,
3. A video about the tribe and its connections to the Coharie Creek, and
4. A photo essay that includes a photograph of each person interviewed by the class along with relevant quotes from the interviews.

Recommendations
Given the Tribe’s interest in providing greater access to the Coharie River and in building a culture and education center on the 64-acre parcel that abuts the river, we recommend that the tribe provide a briefing for the state, both the Governor’s office and the Wildlife Resources Commission, that includes the following:
• Document the historic use of the 64-acre parcel by the tribe.
• Describe the lack of access to and management of the 64-acre parcel.
• Provide documentation of an agreement by a landowner whose property lies adjacent to the 64-acre parcel to allow access to the parcel.
• Describe the Tribe’s proposed uses for the site, including a cultural and education center, a small boat launch for canoes and kayaks, wigwams, a longhouse and a small footpath. Use the illustrations from this report.
• Describe how the Tribe’s proposed use of the parcel will help achieve the goals of the Coharie River Initiative
• Explain how the Tribe, through its River Initiative, will improve access to the River and improve the quality of the river as well.

Finally, in presenting its case to the state, the Tribe should request that the state donate the 64-acre parcel, or provide the Tribe with a long-term lease to the property.
Introduction

The Coharie Indian tribe is located in North Carolina in Harnett and Sampson Counties and has been recognized by the state since 1971 (CoharieTribe.org). The authors of this report are senior UNC Chapel Hill students who worked on a semester-long project for the Tribe. The tribe has strong cultural and historic ties to the Great Coharie Creek* and is looking for ways for its people to reconnect with the river; in part by providing greater access for the people to the river and by building a culture and education center on lands bordering the river with the hope of teaching children of the tribe as well as visitors about the river’s significance. We were able to interact with the people of this tribe and learn about their history, culture, and goals through several methods including research, interviews, attending a pow wow, and a kayaking trip on the creek with members of the tribe.

*We use creek and river interchangeably when referring to the Great Coharie, as the tribe did in their interviews.

1.0 Interviews

1.1 Methods

In an attempt to familiarize ourselves with the Coharie people and community, we participated in a kayaking trip down the Coharie Creek and conducted interviews with members of the Coharie Tribe. We took steps to prepare ourselves by becoming familiar with the interviewing process as well as the cameras and recorders we would be using by conducting practice interviews in Chapel Hill. The practice interviews were done with members of our personal communities to familiarize ourselves with the interview process as well to become familiar using the technology.

The interview questions for the Coharie were written and discussed with the team and received feedback from the course instructor Dr. David Salvesen and from Christina Theodorou at the American Indian Center at UNC Chapel Hill. The interviews included questions about the importance of the Coharie Creek to the tribe, tribal history, and preferred uses for property along the creek. The full set of interview questions is shown in the appendix.

On September 23rd 2017, our class kayaked down the river along with Greg Jacobs, Phillip Bell and other members of the tribe, and afterwards we convened at the Coharie Tribal Center off of US Highway 421 in Clinton, North Carolina, to interview members of the tribe. All
of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition, some of the interviews were videotaped.

1.2 Findings

In analysing the interview transcripts, some key themes emerged, including spirituality, cultural pride, and connection to the creek. Many interviewees spoke of pride in themselves as members of the Coharie Tribe, their families, and their community. They took pride in how long the Coharie have survived and stayed true to their beliefs, and the fact that they are still here despite years of adversity. Their faith was unwavering: members of the tribe had faith in the power of the river, its healing and medicinal qualities, and its strength to endure. Also, the Coharie expressed faith in younger generations to be the next in line. Tribal elders trust in the younger generations to receive the torch of caring for the river and carry it without hesitation. Their hope for the future was filled with positivity; many hoped that their children and grandchildren would one day get to experience the Coharie Creek as they had in their youth. Others hoped that the future would simply hold a place for them, and that things would continue how they have. They hoped that progress would still come to a people characterized by adaptation, survival, and grit.

Some of our favorite quotes are as follows:

“I think we give life to the creek and to the river ... we need the river and the creek just as much as it needs us to survive.” - Magic Gomez

“You can tell the river whatever you want, and you can guarantee it’s hearing you and it’ll hold it there.” - Phillip Bell

“It means fulfillment. It means family... Shake their hand, hug their neck. That's what it means to be a Coharie.” - Johnny Brewington

“We are loving and kind people, who will go out of their way to help you ... Everybody is somebody to us.” - Wilbert Ammons

We incorporated quotes from the interviews into the video and the photo essay portions of the project. We found that interviewing the members of the tribe was not only beneficial to finding meaningful quotes for these purposes, but led us to a greater understanding of their culture and history. This allowed us to understand the challenges of gaining the rights to use and manage the land along the Coharie Creek.

2.0 Parcel Analysis
2.1 Description of the Parcel
2.1.1 Parcel Location

Along the Coharie Creek, a few miles north of the Tribal Center in Sampson County, lies a 64-acre parcel of property that holds a special significance to the tribe (Figure 1). The parcel was once owned by a member of the tribe, but over the years its
ownership changed hands and now it is owned and managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NC WRC). Properties that border the 64-acre tract on the north and south are privately owned, while access from the west is gated off by private property owners. Additionally, state owned property across the river is under water. The current allowed uses of the 64-acre property are recreational, including hiking, biking, and other outdoor activities. There is no current management plan for this property, however, and public access to the parcel is also difficult: only by air or water. Our contact at the WRC mentioned that this property is likely not used much due to the difficulties associated with accessing it.

2.1.2 Cultural and Historical Significance

The tribe is looking for ways for its people to reconnect with the river, in part by providing greater access and by building a culture and education center on lands bordering the river. The tribe would like to acquire and manage the 64-acre parcel of land because of its cultural and historical significance and creek access.

In our interviews, tribal members discussed the the creek’s spiritual significance, as many of them have been baptized there and feel a spiritual connection to God while on the river. According to Alpha Bryant, a member of the tribe: “You could go to the river and you could just see the work of God in the creation of that river.” Other members of the Coharie highlighted the historical significance of this parcel of land. Brittany Locklear, member of the Coharie, said that the river “is where we got our name from. It runs through our county, almost like a vein, and then connects us to other counties. So it’s pretty important.” Other tribal members discussed how their predecessors once set up camp on the property and that the river was used for hunting, fishing, and other purposes for survival. Carol Brewington, a member of the Coharie, said that “in my younger years my father fished and hunted here. We always lived here [and] used the river for survival.” The Coharie Complex also holds significance because in 1922 it became the first piece of property ever purchased by a member of the Coharie Tribe.
2.1.3 Goals for the Property

The Sixth Tract (63.69 acres) is the 64-acre parcel of significance. The state of North Carolina (and the US Fish and Wildlife Service before them) has a restrictive covenant on 49.67 acres of the land.

Figure 3: The Sixth Tract (63.69 acres) is the 64-acre parcel of significance. The state of North Carolina (and the US Fish and Wildlife Service before them) has a restrictive covenant on 49.67 acres of the land.

The 64-acre parcel could help achieve the goals of the tribe’s Coharie River Initiative, which seeks to improve access to the river. In recent years, the Coharie Creek became obstructed by downed trees, many of which resulted from hurricanes. In addition, beavers constructed dams that changed the morphology of the river from free-flowing to swampy. The Great Coharie River Initiative involves a river clean-up that will help restore the river to its former glory. This initiative aims to return the creek to the clarity and flow it had a generation earlier. Work is already underway with Coharie volunteers working to clear fallen trees and other obstructions from the waterway. This Initiative demonstrates that there is immense interest in improving the condition of river and strengthening past ties to it.

The 64-acre parcel of land could provide a place for river access, cultural enrichment, education, recreation, and would support tribal programs. Specific goals for the property are two-fold, with the first being to return the land to the Coharie Tribe. This could occur through leasing or deeding from the state. A second goal for the property is to construct a culture and education center and a place for boat and kayak access. The culture and education center could include a longhouse and wigwams on the higher ground section (on the west) of the tract to provide space for activities like experiential learning, classrooms, a location for community events or gatherings, and interpretive trails (a model of a potential design can be seen in Figures 8 & 9). Access to this property would serve many important purposes including educational opportunities, an access point for elders and others to enjoy the river, a natural outdoor location for tribal gatherings, a location for cultural enhancement and an established meeting place in the community for Native American activities. The tribe has also expressed interest in using the
parcel as a way to teach visitors outside of the tribe about the Coharie community. A more comprehensive description of our suggestions for the parcel can be found in sections 3.2 and 3.3 under “Parcel Plan”.

2.2 Allowable Uses

According to our analysis of the deeds, the property, initially called The Lowgrounds, was purchased in 1922 by the Amans’ family—members of the Coharie Tribe. They cleared the land and planted crops and fruit trees. Between 1923 and 2004, the property changed hands several times until it was finally sold by the Nature Conservancy to the state in 2004 for $10.00. In the deed, the property is known as the Coharie Complex and includes four parcels (Parcel A, B, C, and D) that sum to approximately 64 acres of land (63.69 acres exactly). The state of NC holds a conservation easement on 45.67 acres of the property. A conservation easement is a restriction placed on a piece of property that limits development and keeps the property in its natural state. The easement places permanent restrictions on how the property is used, which is intended to preserve the property in its natural state.

The restrictions are as follows:

- Use of motorized vehicles in the Restricted Area* is prohibited
- No cutting of trees in the Restricted Area, except to remove non-native plants
- All industrial, agricultural, residential and commercial uses are restricted
- No building, facility, mobile home, antenna, utility pole, tower, or other structure can be constructed or placed in the Restricted Area
- No new roads, trails, walkways, or paving in the Restricted Area

*Restricted Area: The restricted area covers about 2/3 of the property (outlined in red on figure 4) and is heavily vegetated.

![Figure 4](image-url)

*Figure 4: This aerial view of the 64-acre parcel shows the restricted area in red on the eastern side of the parcel. The section highlighted in white represents the section of the parcel that is not under any deed restrictions.*
According to the deed, permission to vary from the restrictions and the easements may be granted by the North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement program “for good cause shown.” Permission must be obtained in writing from the NC Ecosystem Enhancement Program. As of September 2015, this program is now called the Division of Mitigation Services (DMS) within the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality. DMS seeks to “restore and protect wetlands and waterways for future generations while offsetting unavoidable environmental damage from economic development.”

2.3 Potential Uses of the Property
We spoke with the NC WRC about the tribe’s interest in the 64-acre parcel and potential uses of the property. A WRC spokesperson indicated that the commission might be willing to lease the property to the tribe, although he was unaware of any precedent where the state of North Carolina has leased, donated, or sold land to a municipality or tribe. In addition, we contacting the Conservation Fund to inquire about examples where the state has donated or leased land to a municipal or tribal government. We found no examples or cases where states had leased, donated, or sold land to a municipality or tribe. Nonetheless, the lack of a precedent does not mean that the WRC would necessarily be opposed to leasing the land to the Coharie tribe. The process for leasing the land would have to be approved by the Wildlife Resources Commission, as well as the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) because the agency holds the conservation easement.

2.4 Alternate Parcels
Because the 64-acre parcel is so significant to the Coharie, we have focused our efforts on this parcel. However, there are other nearby parcels abutting the creek that the tribe could also turn to if plans for the 64-acre parcel fall through. We identified four such parcels along the Coharie Creek and prepared a map of their locations (see figure 6). We did not analyze the deeds, restrictive covenants (if any), or easements to these properties. For these properties, the tribe would have to assess what could be built on them by analyzing whether or not the parcels contain use restrictions.

3.0 Parcel Plan
3.1 Maps and Descriptions
The land use map (figure 7) for Sampson County shows general use descriptions of parcels near the Coharie River. Overall, the area in Sampson County surrounding the Coharie River is widely a mixture of cropland and homesites with pastures and woodland interspersed. Most of the area around the creek is woodland. Furthermore, surrounding the 64-acre parcel (outlined in thick black in figure 7), is a mixture of mostly cropland, pasture, and woodland, with one homesite.
Figure 5: Sampson County land ownership map showing mostly state-owned land along the Coharie River satellite image
Figure 6: A parcel map showing potential alternate parcels in yellow and the 64-acre parcel in green (circled in black).
Figure 7: Sampson County land use map showing land use of areas surrounding the Coharie River
The land ownership map (figure 5) highlights parcels owned by the State of North Carolina and Sampson County. There were also several plots owned by the Federal Government, but they were too small to show up on the map and far from the area of Sampson County near the Coharie River. For these reasons, they are not highlighted on the map. This map indicates that all the land along the Coharie Creek is state owned. Furthermore, the map helped us narrow down the range of other plots that could fulfill most of the goals of the tribe if it was unable to gain access to the 64-acre parcel.

The alternate parcel map (figure 6) highlights the parcels that could fulfill the purpose of the 64-acre parcel by meeting river access, current ownership, and size requirements. The sizes range from 67 to 143 acres, and they lie along the Coharie River. They are all owned by the State of North Carolina.

3.2 Planning and Design

We used Sketchup 3D Modeling software to develop renderings of the proposed culture and education center. To create this model, we took inspiration from other local tribes around this area. The Occaneechi Tribe in particular was studied because it has a recreated village in downtown Hillsborough, North Carolina. Most notably, the Occaneechi recreation contains replica wigwams and fences as well as posted informational boards that describe how the Occaneechi Tribe lived and survived when it was the dominant population of the town. We wanted to incorporate similar structures into our design for the Coharie culture and education center (see figures 8, and 9 below).

Figure 8 shows a simplified model of the 64-acre parcel. On the bottom-left corner of the model lies the main area for proposed development and includes a small parking lot (max capacity at about 4 cars), a small wooden sheltered picnic area, and an outdoor education center based on traditional Native American structures. The parking lot could be made of a permeable surface, such as wood mulch or gravel. The curves throughout the model represent a walking path down to the water. A small path is already present on the parcel. Down at the end of the path at the top right edge of the parcel is the proposed location for the wooden launch point for kayaks.

The exact layout and aspects of the proposed culture and education center will be determined by what the tribal members specifically want to include and what is permitted at the site, but for our model we included non-permanent structures (the longhouses and wigwams) as well as trees. The design includes signs around the inside of the educational area that provide information on the history, culture, livelihood, and people of the tribe. The model also includes a pavilion, in the event of rainy or hot days. We imagine having picnic tables underneath it for gathering during events. Another part of the model is the kayak launch, (not shown), which we included near the pavilion along the river edge. This could be a temporary structure that people can tow back and forth down a small access road when they want to use it. We also imagine some benches and potentially a platform near the launch along the bank for people to sit on and enjoy the scenery of the river.
4.0 Photo Essay

We produced a photo essay to further illustrate the Coharie tribe’s connection to the Great Coharie Creek and who they were as a people. The essay consists of quotes from our interviews with Coharie community members and a photograph of each person interviewed. Quotes were selected with two themes in mind: the individual’s connections to the river and to the Tribe. Each interviewee was given their own page on the photo essay with their respective photograph and selected quotes. The finished product was printed and mounted on foam board so it could be displayed on the wall at the Coharie Tribal Center. This photo essay could also be published online.

Although many of the interview questions focused on how the Coharie people have lost access to the river or how it has been degraded, the most powerful quotes chosen for the photo essay are overwhelmingly positive. They focus largely on how the community still feels a strong connection to the river or their fond memories of it. Their comments on the community are also
very positive, with many centered around the trust, pride, and generosity of the Coharie people. The photo essay attempts to convey their hopefulness and the special place the creek hold in the hearts and minds of the Coharie people. These sentiments are exemplified by Phillip Bell in his quote about the Coharie River Initiative:

“That’s my goal... to someway get that open so everyone can have that opportunity that I had to access it, to enjoy it, to have another home to go to.”

The photo essay is an engaging and interactive way to convey the Coharie people’s feelings about their river and their community as well as to introduce members to the general public. The photo essay is intended to help people understand the connection between the Coharie River and the Coharie people on a more emotional and personal level. The following are sample pages from the project:

**ON THE COHARIE RIVER:**
“I think we give life to the creek and to the river...we need the river and the creek just as much as it needs us to survive.”

**ON THE COHARIE PEOPLE:**
“We still take those blows and keep walkin’ cause we know somebody is going to help us in return. And if not, we’ll pray about it. That’s just how it goes.”

**ON THE COHARIE RIVER:**
“That’s my goal... to someway get that open so everyone can have that opportunity that I had to access it, to enjoy it, to have another home to go to.”

**ON THE COHARIE PEOPLE:**
“...we’re here, we’re vibrant... I think that’s the most important thing, that we’re here, and a vital part of Sampson County.”
5.0 Video

By request of the Coharie Tribe, our class created a short video about the Coharie people, highlighting their connection to the Coharie River and the importance of its restoration. Footage used in the video was acquired by students in settings such as the Pow Wow attended the weekend of September 9th, the kayak trip and interviews conducted the weekend of September 23rd, and an additional meeting with tribal members on November 12th. Pow Wow footage included tribal members participating in dancing, music performance, and some dressed in regalia. Footage from the weekend of September 23rd included the kayak trip where the class paddled down the Great Coharie River along with members of the tribe. This footage also included activity at the Coharie Tribal Center in addition to the interviews conducted there. During a site visit on November 12, we took video footage of the parcel as well as Phillip Bell presenting some maps of the surrounding area to members of the class. The video also included footage of future possibilities for land usage of the parcel, including kayak launch points and a cultural education center, all developed using Sketchup 3D Modeling software.

The video can be used to inform people about the tribe of the importance of the relationship between the Great Coharie River and the Coharie people.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the central role that the Great Coharie Creek plays in the tribe’s culture and history, the tribe should propose that the state donate or lease the 64-acre property to the tribe, for example
through a long-term lease. The tribe’s proposal to the state should include the following key points:

1. Through its Coharie River Initiative, the tribe has been working to restore and provide greater access to the river and to improve its quality and flow. Being able to manage the 64-acre parcel would help the tribe achieve these goals.

2. The tribe has strong historic and cultural ties to the river, its namesake. The 64-acre parcel was once owned by a member of the tribe and served as a gathering place for the Coharie people. The tribe would like to restore its connection to the property and the river, and it has a plan to build a cultural and education center on the site (include renderings).

3. The state owns the land, but there is no access to the property, other than by boat, and no active management by the State Wildlife Resources Commission. As part of its River Initiative, the tribe would actively manage the river and adjacent lands. It has already undertaken efforts to remove fallen logs that clog the river as well as control invasive plants and beavers. Also, an adjacent landowner has granted the tribe, in writing, access to the parcel. All structures would be built on the portion of the property that is not subject to deed restrictions.

4. The proposed culture and education center will avoid the environmentally sensitive lands (wetlands) on the 64-acre parcel and would minimize its overall environmental footprint. For example, the wigwams and longhouse would be made of local wood and all footpaths would be made of woodchips.

5. Finally, part of the plan for the 64-acre parcel includes a small footpath to a proposed kayak launch on the river. Both the path and boat launch would be built in the area of the parcel that is subject to land use restrictions. However, the tribe could petition the Division of Mitigation Service of the NC Department of Environmental Quality to allow a deviation from the restrictions for “good cause shown.”

The tribe has already met with the Governor and should follow-up with a proposal that includes the points outlined above.

**Works Cited**


Appendix

Full Interview Script:

ENEC 698.001 Environmental Capstone
Fall 2017
Interviews with the Coharie Tribe

Name of Interviewee_______________________

Date____________________

Interviewer_____________________

Thank you for coming. My name is ...........
Before we get started, do you have any questions?

1. Where are you from?

2. How long have you lived in (name of place)?

3. Would you mind if I asked you your age?

4. What do you like about living in (name of place)?

5. What has been your experience with the Coharie River?

6. Do you have any special memories of being on the Coharie River?

7. Why is the Coharie River so important to the Coharie Tribe?

8. What does it mean to you to be a member of the Coharie Tribe?

9. Can you tell me a story of what it was like growing up Coharie?

10. What would you like people to know about the Coharie Tribe?

11. In what ways has the culture of the tribe evolved over time?

12. What are some factors that have contributed to this change (or these changes) in tribal culture?

13. How have these changes in tribal culture shaped the Coharie people’s relationship to the Coharie River?

14. What about you personally: have changes in tribal culture affected your relationship with the Coharie River? In what ways?

15. Are there generational differences in how the Coharie people relate to the Coharie River? Prompt: are younger people less likely to form a connection with the river? Why?

16. The Coharie people sometimes refer to the spirit of the river. What is meant by that?

17. What are your hopes for the tribe?

18. What are your hopes for the Coharie River?

19. How would this come about?

20. There is a large piece of state-owned property along the Coharie River. If the tribe could gain access to that property for use by the Coharie people, what would you like to see happen with that land?
Note: if necessary, show the location of the 64-acre parcel.

21. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Thank you for your time.