

Betsy Brabson – Coordinator,
South Carolina Beach Vitex Task Force

A Vital Link in Making the Difference on the Carolina Coast

By Carla Vitez - a member of the North Carolina Exotic Pest Plant Council and the Stewardship Advisory Council for Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation

When Beach vitex started messing with the turtles, Betsy Brabson drew a line in the sand. As a volunteer with the South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts (SCUTE), Betsy participates in the conservation and monitoring of sea turtle nests in her beach community. An incident involving a newly hatched group of sea turtles added to her suspicions about a particular plant. Sea turtle volunteers had been called in to rescue hatchlings that were confused by the bright lights of nearby condominiums. Betsy was distressed to learn that the tiny turtles had become tangled in a thick stand of woody vine and had died from dehydration.

For several years Brabson had been noticing the same plant, beach vitex, around beach communities near her home in Georgetown County, South Carolina. Its pretty purple flowers and tolerance of salt spray made it a popular landscape choice. The North Carolina State Arboretum had introduced beach vitex



Betsy Brabson on right

(*Vitex rotundifolia*) in the early 1990s as an erosion control plant to cover dunes damaged by Hurricane Hugo. But Betsy noticed that it seemed to be spreading out of control.

When she sent a sample to Clemson University for identification, they wrote back stating, “Beach vitex is an invasive plant and should not be planted at the beach.” When nothing further happened, Betsy thought, “I’m just a regular citizen. What can I do about it?” She put the letter in a drawer.



Through Betsy, a vital link was made between researchers and the local community.

In 2003 Betsy found beach vitex seedlings popping up on an undeveloped beach just north of Georgetown. “That’s it,” Brabson thought. She started taking down names and counting plants. Brabson documented 167 new plants in a half mile stretch of the beach, and when she got home she started calling people. Finally, she reached Dr. Randy Westbrooks, an invasive species prevention specialist with the U.S. Geological Survey, and reported her findings. Dr. Westbrooks knew about beach vitex. Others, including Tommy Socha of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, had been concerned about the spread of beach vitex and had reported to federal officials that it was rapidly displacing native dune species such as sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*)



Beach vitex covering sand dunes

and seabeach amaranth (*Amaranthus pumilus*) that are important for dune stabilization. But Betsy's call provided the impetus to take action.

Dr. Westbrooks immediately organized a symposium bringing together people from state and federal agencies and non-profit organizations. Betsy called her network of contacts and rallied the local citizenry. Connections were made and the electricity began to flow. As a result, the South Carolina Beach Vitex Task Force was formed, and an action plan was formulated. Through Betsy, a vital link was made between researchers and the local community.

Betsy's spark quickly spread. In 2005, interested parties in North Carolina joined forces to form the Carolinas Beach Vitex Task Force (CBVTF). The task force has made a big difference in educating the public about beach vitex and lobbying to stop its sale in the Carolinas. Overall, nurseries have responded favorably to the appeal to stop selling it, and a number of beach towns in NC and SC have adopted ordinances to prohibit the planting of

beach vitex. In 2006, the town of Pawley's Island voted to provide \$15,000 for eradication efforts on their island.

In July 2006, CBVTF received another big boost when the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded Clemson University and CBVTF \$133,000 for eradication demonstrations on beach vitex and restoration with native dune plants on 50 sites north of Charleston Harbor. Dr. Chuck Gresham of Clemson's Baruch Institute of Coastal Ecology and Forest Science is leading that effort. As of December 2006, 75 beach properties totaling 4.8 infested acres have been treated under this new initiative.

Betsy Brabson, who once questioned whether just one person could do something significant about invasive plants, is now the South Carolina coordinator for the Carolinas Beach Vitex Task Force and communicates with people all over the country about the issue (see www.beachvitex.org). She spearheads education and identification workshops and provides coordination between task force agency members and the public. Perhaps most important for the

future, Betsy shares the message with her community of how important it is to pull together as a team, for the sea turtles and for the environment.

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NOTE:

Because of its highly invasive qualities, *Vitex rotundifolia* has been proposed as a Federal as well as a State Noxious Weed. A Weed Assessment was conducted in 2004-2005, but the listing process has not moved forward. At least one publication lists beach vitex as native to Hawaii, making its federal regulation there a problem. Discussions continue about the ultimate listing of beach vitex as a federal Noxious Weed and the complexities and politics of regulating and controlling invasive species. Stay tuned. – Dr. Randy Westbrooks, U.S. Geological Survey, rwestbrooks@usgs.gov

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