



BEAUFORT NEWS

# Research booms at USC-owned island after \$1M boost. McMaster: Pritchards is 'Garden of Eden'

BY KARL PUCKETT

UPDATED NOVEMBER 14, 2024 1:46 PM | 

Video shows school's lab on SC barrier island in ocean +25 years later



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Pritchard's Island was donated to the University of South Carolina in 1983 by Atlanta businessman Philip Rhodes with conditions the island be used for coastal research and not developed commercially. BY DREW MARTIN



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The University of South Carolina Beaufort has 10 toes in the sand as it forges ahead with developing a world-class marine biology program and it's using revitalized research efforts at a little known 1,600-acre barrier island as the centerpiece in that effort.

The revived research by the local university at the one-of-a-kind Pritchards Island 25 miles east of the city comes two years after it was feared Pritchards would be lost to neighboring state of Georgia. The pristine 3-mile long island, which has gone untouched by beach homes and crowds, is considered one of the best outdoor laboratories on the East Coast.

## TOP VIDEOS



At a gathering at the Beaufort Inn's Tabby Place in Beaufort Wednesday night, the university and its supporters showed up to thank Gov. Henry McMaster, who is credited with taking a personal interest in keeping Pritchards in South Carolina's hands and finding the necessary funding to allow USCB to full take advantage of the research opportunities it affords.



Abby Morris walks Pritchards Island on Friday, April 8, 2022, picking up debris and garbage as she makes her way down the narrow beach that used to be high with dunes. Over time, the high tide water mark has edged closer to the forest of trees at the island's south end. Drew Martin [dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)

USCB researchers and leaders used the event — dubbed Return to Pritchards Island — to explain to the governor and a crowd of 200 how \$1 million in state funding that followed the governor's involvement has led to an explosion of research and interest in the island sandwiched between the larger St. Helena and Fripp islands on the South Carolina coast. The 2023 legislature backed a [recurring expenditure of \\$500,000](#).

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One marine biology professor, Mercer Brugler, gave a particularly passionate performance for the governor and the crowd that had him jumping around and even lying down on the stage as he explained the various research efforts including one that has students inspecting floating trash to look for invasive or new species.



One sandal plucked from Prichards waters, Brugler noted, had choral and barnacles attached to it because it had been floating around for so long. “We want to see who are the ocean travelers on our trash,” Brugler said.

McMaster seemed impressed with the brains and enthusiasm behind the work and says the research at Prichards fits with broader conservation efforts to preserve the state’s remaining wild places.

“It’s like going back to the Garden of Eden,” McMaster said of Prichards Island, “and it’s right here for us to analyze and study.”

With half of the country’s salt marshes located in South Carolina and 50% of those found in Beaufort County, McMaster added, he couldn’t think of a better place in the country to study the coastal environment than Prichards Island and USCB.



Professors within the biology department and involved with research on Prichards Island greet S.C. Gov. Henry McMaster at USCB’s “Return to Prichards Island” presentation held at Tabby Place on Wednesday, Nov. 13, 2024, in Beaufort. McMaster and the state legislature included a

recurring half million dollars in funding for research on the island in the 2024 state's budget.  
Drew Martin [dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)

## FEAR OF LOSING PRITCHARDS

Two years ago, USCB feared it would get kicked out of the garden.

A decades-old deed signed by Philip Rhodes, who donated the island to the state, and the then-Carolina Research and Development Foundation required USC to keep Pritchards Island in a wilderness state and to use it for scientific, educational, charitable and general public purposes. Stipulated within the 1980s deeds was a clause that said USC could lose control of the island to the University of Georgia or The Nature Conservancy if it did not uphold its end of the bargain.



Philanthropist Philip Rhodes speaks at the unveiling of the University of South Carolina Beaufort's Barrier Island Research Facility that he paid to be built on Pritchards Island.

By 2009, funding sources had dried up and the research lab had become weather-worn and unusable because of erosion typical to barrier islands. A sea turtle



program, under the purview of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and in agreement with USC, continued. Otherwise, Pritchards Island went unused by the university.

The story of Pritchard Island's plight, which was [first reported in 2022 by the Beaufort Gazette and Island Packet](#), caught McMaster's eye. He called family representative Martha Rhodes, Philip Rhodes' granddaughter, and left a message promising that whatever the state originally promised ["would be done precisely according to the agreement."](#) McMaster met Martha Rhodes for the first time Wednesday in Beaufort.



Martha Rhodes, granddaughter of philanthropist Philip Rhodes who donated Pritchards Island to USC in the 1980s, speaks with an attendee after USCB's "Return to Pritchards Island" presentation

held at Tabby Place on Wednesday, Nov. 13, 2024 in Beaufort. Drew Martin  
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Since that time, Kimberly Ritchie, an associate professor of genetics and prokaryotic cell biology and director of research at Pritchards Island, said USCB has received \$1 million in state funding, which sparked an anonymous donation of \$100,000.

“It’s been a game changer for us,” Ritchie said of the funding.



USCB professor Kimberly Ritchie, center, speaks with friends and colleagues before the start of USCB’s “Return to Pritchards Island” presentation held at Tabby Place on Wednesday, Nov. 13, 2024 in Beaufort. Ritchie is an associate professor of genetics and prokaryotic cell biology and is the director of Pritchards Island research. Drew Martin *[dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)*

Thanks to the influx of money, [research has blossomed](#) with dozens of students and faculty members now getting hands-on experience at the island studying oyster reefs, shoreline erosion, eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, migratory shore birds,



dune plants, bats, mosquito-born diseases and even a marine worm that could one day be used in cleaning up industrial chemicals.

The university, which needed reliable transportation to get to the island, now has a boat and fleet of kayaks and can reach the island in minutes. Previously, said Bruglar, the marine biologist, he and his students used his pontoon boat to reach the island, which took two hours.

## **'I LOVE THIS STUFF'**

The renewed research at Pritchards has been a big hit with USCB students.

"It's incredible," USCB biology student Matty Holt said of his trips to Pritchards Island to study sea turtles. "There's no other place like it."

Taylor Desilva, another student studying sea turtles, says working in the sun and the sand has opened her eyes to the possibilities of a conservation-related career. "It definitely broadened my horizons and made me realize I love doing this stuff," Desilva said.

Using aerial photographs and GIS mapping data, Loren Quintana, another student, is mapping shoreline erosion rates at Prichards and other nearby islands to see who is gaining and losing.

"It's more important than many people would think," Quintana says. "A lot of these islands have businesses and real estate on there that they want to keep alive."



Taylor Desilva, from left, Matty Holt and Loren Quintana talk about their experiences doing research on Pritchards Island before the start of USCB's "Return to Pritchards Island" presentation held at Tabby Place on Wednesday, Nov. 13, 2024 in Beaufort. Drew Martin [dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)

Funding has allowed researchers to set up camera traps to monitor reptiles like eastern diamondback rattlesnakes. With the high resolution photographs, individual snakes can be identified looking at the diamond-shaped patterns on their backs.

Acoustic recorders are used to study bats and the work already has revealed eight different species with most of them threatened species.

Researchers also are listening to "ocean soundscapes" and the creatures that inhabit them like black drum fish and dolphins.

One day, the university hopes to build a dock and maybe a temporary housing/lab facility, Ritchie said.

## WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL

What makes Pritchards special is that it has never been developed like many of the area islands, researchers said. Its sand, for example, has never been replenished. Relentless waves have resulted in the island “slowly being taken by the ocean,” said Ritchie.

But it's that natural state that makes the island so attractive and important for research, said Warren Parker, the executive director of the Pritchards Island Research and Living Shores Coalition, a group formed 18 months ago to promote USCB and help it develop a world-class marine biology program. For example, Parker said, Pritchards is a perfect location to study the role of barrier islands in coastal resilience.

“It's a natural system,” said Tye Pettay, assistant professor of biological oceanography. “We can study that.”

The island isn't just important for research and educational purposes, Pettay said.

As one of the greatest outdoor labs on the East Coast “that nobody knows about,” Pettay said, “little ‘ol” Pritchards Island has become a huge selling point for USCB to both students and faculty members.

A recent opening for a faculty position, Pettay said, drew 60 applications. Finalists, who visited Pritchards, couldn't believe USCB had this “pristine island” close by that students and faculty can easily access.

The university now has 20 paid internships as a result of the funding, Pettay added.





A photo taken with a drone shows the tide coming in Friday, April 8, 2022, to Pritchards Island where the abandoned USC-owned laboratory formerly that was used for coastal research and the study of loggerhead turtles is being consumed by erosion. Its pilings were once hidden by beach that extended about 300 yards in front of the structure. Drew Martin [dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)

## MORE FUNDING?

Will the funding continue? Nothing is ever guaranteed, McMaster said, but “I would say this is a top priority.” With pressures to build growing in one of the nation’s fastest growing states, McMaster said, people, more and more, are beginning to recognize “that time is now” to protect the environment.

Residents of the state, the governor added, are waking up to the fact they are “living in paradise.”

“If you can’t be happy and find peace here, you’ll probably have to wait ‘til you get to heaven,” McMaster said.



The framework of dead trees and driftwood greets visitors before they get to the abandoned Pritchards Island laboratory formerly used for coastal research and loggerhead turtle research and conservation efforts. In December, the research lab was torn down due to its dilapidated state. Drew Martin [dmartin@islandpacket.com](mailto:dmartin@islandpacket.com)

This story was originally published November 14, 2024, 12:48 PM.

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