Community group is backing Assateague park

By Laura D'Alessandro
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — Brandon Warner spent last summer at Assateague Island as a consulting intern, working with all levels of park staff to create a business plan for the park but ended up creating even more.

“When I was there, I was able to learn a lot about Assateague, and one of the things I learned in the first couple of weeks is there is a lot of support for the public and visitors, but I noticed there was no organization to facilitate that support,” he said.

Warner saw this as an opportunity to help.

“I wanted to engage these passionate people to support the park further,” he said. “A lot of people say ‘we’d love to support more,’ but then all they can do is write a check to the National Park Service, and no one likes to write checks to a government agency.”

Warner is currently studying for his Master’s Degree in Environmental Management at Duke University where he has turned the need for a friends group at Assateague Island into his masters project.

“So many people go to Assateague Island as their family trip every year and spend a whole week there which is very rare for a lot of other national parks,” he said. “The average number stayed is usually two days but at Assateague Island it is five to six days.”

He hopes once the group gets its 501(c)3 designation it can begin to work on engaging the help of these passionate visitors through a group called the Assateague Island Alliance.

“Our mission includes programs and publications, stewardship through philanthropy, outreach and education,” he said. “Collecting our solicitation will be a big step, and the second is to develop a membership program.”

Warner, who takes the title of executive director of the AIA, is not working alone in this endeavor. Many local, longtime supporters of Assateague Island have joined the board.

“I have worked with Assateague Island National Seashore before through the Assateague Coastal trust but for one reason or another things did not work out well for a friends group,” said Jeannie Lynch, a member of the Worcester County Planning Commission and AIA. “But the park needs some help because of all the cuts in Congress, and if I can help them, I certainly will.”

Lynch said she was involved at Assateague long before even becoming a member of the Planning Commission and worked with people who had originally worked on making the island a state and national park.

“We’re just so lucky to have that resource here and need to do everything we can to keep it in good shape and work with the rangers,” she said.

Carolyn Cummings, who is currently active in the Maryland Coastal Bays program, was also asked to join the board. She said she hopes the AIA can get Assateague the care it deserves.

“I do a lot of traveling and go to a lot of other coastal communities,” she said. “They all have aquariums, coastal labs, museums and that is what I’d like to see us get with our new visitor center.”

Anyone interested in joining the friends group can call Assateague Island at 410-641-1443 for more information.

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