

## More From the Coastal Debris Files

An update on the collapsing houses at Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

**On May 10, 2022**, during a multiday nor'easter, two unoccupied oceanfront houses in Rodanthe, North Carolina, collapsed, resulting in miles of debris scattered along the beach at Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The following year, I visited the Outer Banks to learn what happens when erosion, rising seas, a national park site and a beach community collide. The resulting story, "On the Brink," appeared in the Fall 2023 issue of National Parks. After that, I packed up my notebooks.

But houses kept toppling in Rodanthe — six in 2024 alone. Each time I read about a new collapse, I thought about walking on the national seashore with the park's superintendent, David Hallac, see-

ing exposed septic systems, stepping over nail-studded boards and hearing how the widespread debris affected wildlife. Hallac had also talked about solutions, including the possibility of the Park Service buying and removing threatened oceanfront properties.

When I called Hallac recently, he said money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (funded by earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing) had paid for a pilot program to do just that with a pair of homes, which were purchased for \$731,000 and removed in late 2023. (One house belonged to Daniel Kerlakian, who told me before the sale that he'd spent most of the two years he owned it making repairs from storms.) Hallac said he considers this program "a tool in the toolbox ... but when and how it's used is still to be determined."

In February, Hallac said four homes were in "precarious" situations, some in the water even at low tide. The numbers keep changing, but about 50 total are considered threatened, including 16 in the town of Buxton. Yet Hallac

feels optimistic.

In August, the park and the state's Division of Coastal Management, which had been collaborating with other agencies for a couple of years, released a report setting forth ideas about how to improve management of threatened structures. Hallac described it as "a big step forward."

One tactic the county and the Park Service have started using, he said, is to work with neighbors to anticipate collapses. When owners have contractors lined up who can spring into action after their houses give way, it significantly helps mitigate the damage.

Despite progress, "there's still not a silver bullet on how to manage the situation," Hallac said. When a house falls into the sea, it's "catastrophic."

I asked him about a house I had visited, known as the Black Pearl, at the northernmost part of Rodanthe. When I was there, the tide rushed clear under its pilings.

"All I can say," Hallac said, "is that it was standing yesterday."

—MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

DEBRIS from collapsed houses spreads for miles along Cape Hatteras National Seashore.