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NEWS

Paradise lost or island overcoming? Sanibel's recovery hits month five



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Without any planning, the write on/wipe off board at the entrance of J.N. "Ding" Darling's Wildlife Drive became a frozen-in-time artifact, still marked with Monday Sept. 26's details: high and low tides and a 7:20 p.m. sunset.

Four months and a Daylight Saving shift later, sunset comes an hour earlier, the tides still roll in and out, but everything else is vastly changed. Two days after that entry, Hurricane Ian savaged the region.

Now, the island is starting to hit its recovery mode stride, settling into a post-Ian rhythm as life goes on amid sometimes dizzying contrasts.

"We continue to make progress every day," said the city's Mayor Holly Smith, "and that is the important thing."

Wednesday, the Sanibel school welcomed back students, which Smith said "felt really big. It's the heartbeat of our community."

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More: Sanibel reality check: Displaced businesses, orphaned trombones and debris fields

Two beaches are open again – to everyone; not just residents – but red tide warning signs are up as the harmful algal bloom intensifies.

A mail van remains marooned in mud next to the damaged post office, but temporary trailers opened Monday, so residents don't have to make a 90-plus minute commute to the mainland.

Some businesses are coming back; others have shuttered for good or, like Macintosh Books and Congress Jewelers, moved to off-island quarters.

City council lifted the curfew Tuesday at its 10-plus hour meeting, but electricity remains out in pockets.

Most of the island's gopher tortoises were wiped out, says "Ding" Darling Manager Kevin Godsea, and Ian may even have caused an extinction: Far as he knows, no one has seen a Sanibel rice rat since the storm. The creatures were what scientists call endemic and live – or lived – nowhere but Sanibel.

The island's debris contractor, Crowder Gulf, has hauled off 1.7 million cubic yards so far, Smith says, and most heaps are gone from the shared-use path. Joggers, dog-walkers and cyclists are back, and soon, the once-ubiquitous Billy's rental bikes will be as well. After the storm, owner Billy Kirkland became an island hero, giving carte blanche to anyone who needed wheels to use one of his bikes, then leave it wherever. Now, he's getting ready to open again.

The parking lot of Jerry's, the island's lone supermarket (after the storm forced the historic Bailey's into rebuild mode), is full on a recent morning and the weekly Sanibel Farmer's Market has returned.

As the current Bailey's will eventually, other ruined buildings are starting to come down. The city has issued 76 demolition permits so far, the mayor says, with more on the way. According to a preliminary Federal Emergency Management Agency report, 168 of 5126 buildings counted were destroyed, while 2,194 – almost 43% – had major damage. The numbers came from October, when FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue team swept the island looking for people and categorizing structural damage. The report said 2,525 had minor damage, 51 were affected and 188 were unaffected.

"Ding" Darling is still closed; BIG Arts is open, as is the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum is open, though with limited hours and exhibits, and no admission charge. The list of reopened restaurants has expanded from one – the Sanibel Deli – to a two-screen iPhone scroll.

Looking back on the recent whirlwind, Smith said, "This was really a game-changing week, between getting the beaches open, the post office and the school – this was a big deal and a big next chapter for our community's sense of resilience."

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

The famed preserve will likely re-open in March. But it won't look the same.

Expect dry, brown vistas, more limited walking options and troubled water for a while, says Kevin Godsea, who leads the refuge as well as six others in Southwest Florida.

"The Indigo Trail is more like a skate park," he said. A sturdy birding platform turned up in a nearby creek. "In Tarpon Bay, we removed almost 300 cubic yards of trash out of the mangroves," Godsea said. Of a boardwalk wrenched from its pilings and tilting toward the sky, he deadpans, "It's no longer ADA-accessible."

So far, 12 10-yard truckloads of fill have been dumped and smoothed into the washed out and scoured roadway.

Water quality in the refuge, already a pre-storm concern, "is a significant issue," Godsea said, with the measured diplomacy of one long-schooled in sound bite caution.

The seagrasses behind what he describes as "the levee that is Wildlife Drive," are now all gone, a process that started before the storm, but was definitively finished by it. There may be a silver lining. Godsea welcomes the chance to rethink refuge hydrology and restore more natural flow "to try to mimic the natural system more ... to remove some of these barriers, but still allow for access to wildlife for birding and fishing (that) are second to none, We have a great opportunity to restore some of these habitats."

And though many have been heartened at the mangroves' flush of new growth, Godsea cautions that it may not last. "You see the green edge on the mangroves, but that's a quick leaf-out response," he said. "Then they'll start to die back again and it'll take another few years of recovery before it looks like that lush green wall you used to have before."

Refuge staff, colleagues imported from other sites and volunteers have worked hard to get things back in shape, buoyed by an early visit from the big boss: Martha Williams, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

How much time and money are needed to make the refuge whole? "Congress passed the emergency supplemental act and the omnibus bill just before Christmas. We're waiting to see the preliminary number," Godsea said, "but probably over \$26 million" for structures alone. "Stay tuned on that number – it's in flux. So we're spending cautiously now." How long will all it take? "We'll be dealing with this for years," he said.

The Sanibel lighthouse

The prosthetic leg is smooth and cool to the touch, compressed layers of wood bolted to the iron frame of the 1884 landmark light.

The storm took out one of the originals, as well as the two cottages at the foot of the structure topped by the huge beacon at the eastern tip of the island. The two substantial Cracker buildings where caretakers lived until 1949, when the Coast Guard automated the light, were just swept out to sea and off the face of the map.

The missing leg was later found in three pieces, so damaged it will have to be recast then reattached, Celina Kersh, president of the Sanibel Historical Museum and Village, told The News-Press.

The beach and surrounding are remain closed, but crews are busy scooping and sifting the surrounding sand. On a recent morning, dead fish dotted the shoreline, the same day the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation's online newsletter headlined "Red tide intensifies."

Tower Gallery

Hammer tapping and the smell of fresh paint fill the air at the historic Tower Gallery as a crew of volunteer artists work to spiff the place up and ready it for next month.

"We are hoping to have a soft opening March 15," said JoAnne Bedient, one of the gallery's longtime mainstays.

Founded in 1982, the cooperative's two dozen artists work in fiber, paint, photography, glass, metal and ceramic, like Bedient.

Air conditioning and the internet remain to be fixed, but the 1915 home, jacked up and moved to its current Tarpon Bay Road location by then-owners, the late Ikki and Polly Matsumoto, survived remarkably well. The artist couple had lucked into the two-story house for free, because it was going to be demolished.

All they had to do was come up with the \$35,000 needed to move the whitewashed Florida vernacular cottage from its original Gulf-front site next to the Island Inn. It was the biggest job building movers Flint & Doyle had ever undertaken, Polly Matsumoto told the News-Press in 2005. "The move was wild. Mailboxes were smashed and trees were leveled."

But the old girl, now radiant in trademark turquoise, came through the hurricane like a champ.

"It was like a miracle," said artist Shah Hadjebi, though he wasn't so lucky himself. His Rabbit Road home took a beating, but Hadjebi was able to salvage some of his watercolors.

Evicted, homeless, but hoping to return

For Alison Ward, surviving the storm was the easy part.

The 74-year-old retiree and island volunteer had lived in Casa Mariposa, one of Sanibel's affordable housing complexes, for more than eight years. She rode out the storm on the island, evacuating by boat in the storm's aftermath.

Then she became homeless.

Jan. 12, Community Housing and Resources, the nonprofit that runs the complex on land owned by the city, sent Ward an email terminating her lease and telling her she had until Jan. 31 to remove her belongings from her apartment.

The catch? No residents would be "permitted to set foot on the property" until after a series of inspections, she said. "Unless I hire a hovercraft, it's impossible for me to pack up and move."

The stress has taken its toll, and the worry has compounded several illnesses. Ward's been staying with her associate minister, though she fears wearing out her welcome, but "I don't really have a plan B," she said. "Well, I can sleep in my car."

Ward's was one of 21 leases terminated of 88 total, and so far the charity hasn't offered former tenants space in unoccupied units or help finding new homes, Ward says. Community Housing and Resources didn't immediately answer calls or respond to emailed questions.

For her part, Mayor Holly Smith says the city's trying to resolve this. "It is all of our goal to get those CHR residents that we have committed to back in their homes," she said. "Anything short of that is a disservice to the most vulnerable that we have a responsibility to."

Thursday, Ward got an email from CHR saying "We are happy to report that the fire panels and monitoring system have been repaired and the Fire Marshall has given us his certification that we can re occupy the properties."

She hopes that means the matter is settled for good. "The worst thing in the world would be for me to have more stress."

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum

A blue strip of painter's tape slices the wall next to the entrance to the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum showing Ian's high-water line. It will probably become a permanent feature, though perhaps in a different form, says Executive Director Sam Ankerson.

Repairs are ongoing and will likely continue for at least the better part of a year, he says.

The good news: The research collection, stored in rows of metal cabinets and representing some 30,000 different species, is fine – a huge relief to Science Director and Curator Jose Leal. "It's irreplaceable," he said. "Priceless."

Here, it was rain that caused all the trouble, blasting in horizontally through blown-out soffit under the roof. Then, without power to run pumps or heaters, some 80% of the creatures in the museum's tanks died, Ankerson said. Now, gutted to studs and plywood, he jokes that the grand interior space called the Great Hall of Shells has become the Great Barn of Shells. Yet somehow, the wood panels illuminated by sun streaming through the corona of cobalt glass created by island artist Luc Century – all intact – heighten the cathedral effect.

Meanwhile, the museum is coordinating an exhibit that's part documentary, part visual group therapy session: "In the Wake of the Flood: Community Photographs of Hurricane Ian and its Aftermath" is what Ankerson is calling an evolving, participatory exhibit. Open to islanders and mainlanders alike, it invites "anyone who lived through this," to contribute up to three photos each to a collage that will be displayed as it grows.

Though the museum has only been collecting for a few weeks, two hallway walls are already covered with people's tacked up images that are by turns, funny, tragic, and hard to reckon with. One of the first contributors was physician and City Councilman Scott Crater, who sent in shots of an upended boat in mangroves, the piled remains of the Shalimar Resort on the island's West Gulf Drive blocking the road and a metal roof impaled on a tree.

The project may stray a bit from the museum's expected lane, yet it also makes perfect sense, Ankerson says. "The Shell Museum is a natural history museum and we believe all museums can be places for community building and interaction, in challenging as well as good times."

Even though the eyes of the world may have turned from Southwest Florida, these images will persist as a multifaceted monument to "different personal experiences of the storm's

impact."