

Barrier Island Encyclopedia Article

Barrier Island

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Barrier Island

An elongated island that lies parallel to, but mostly separate from, a coastline. Barrier islands are composed of sediments, mainly sand, deposited by longshore currents, wind, and wave action. Both marine and terrestrial plants and animals find **habitat** on barrier islands or along their sandy beach shorelines. These islands also protect coastal lagoons from ocean currents and waves, providing a warm, quiet **environment** for **species** that cannot tolerate more violent wind and wave conditions. In recent decades these linear, sandy islands, with easy access from the mainland, have proven a popular playground for vacationers. These visitors now pose a significant threat to breeding birds and other coastal species. Building houses, roads, and other disruptive human activities can destabilize **dunes** and expose barrier islands to disastrous storm damage. In some cases, whole islands are swept away, exposing protected lagoons and delicate **wetlands** to further damage. Major barrier island formations in North America include those along the eastern coasts of the mid-Atlantic states, Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico.



Located parallel to coastlines, Barrier islands attract visitors that now pose a significant threat to the birds and other coastal species living there. (JLM Visuals. Reproduced by permission.)