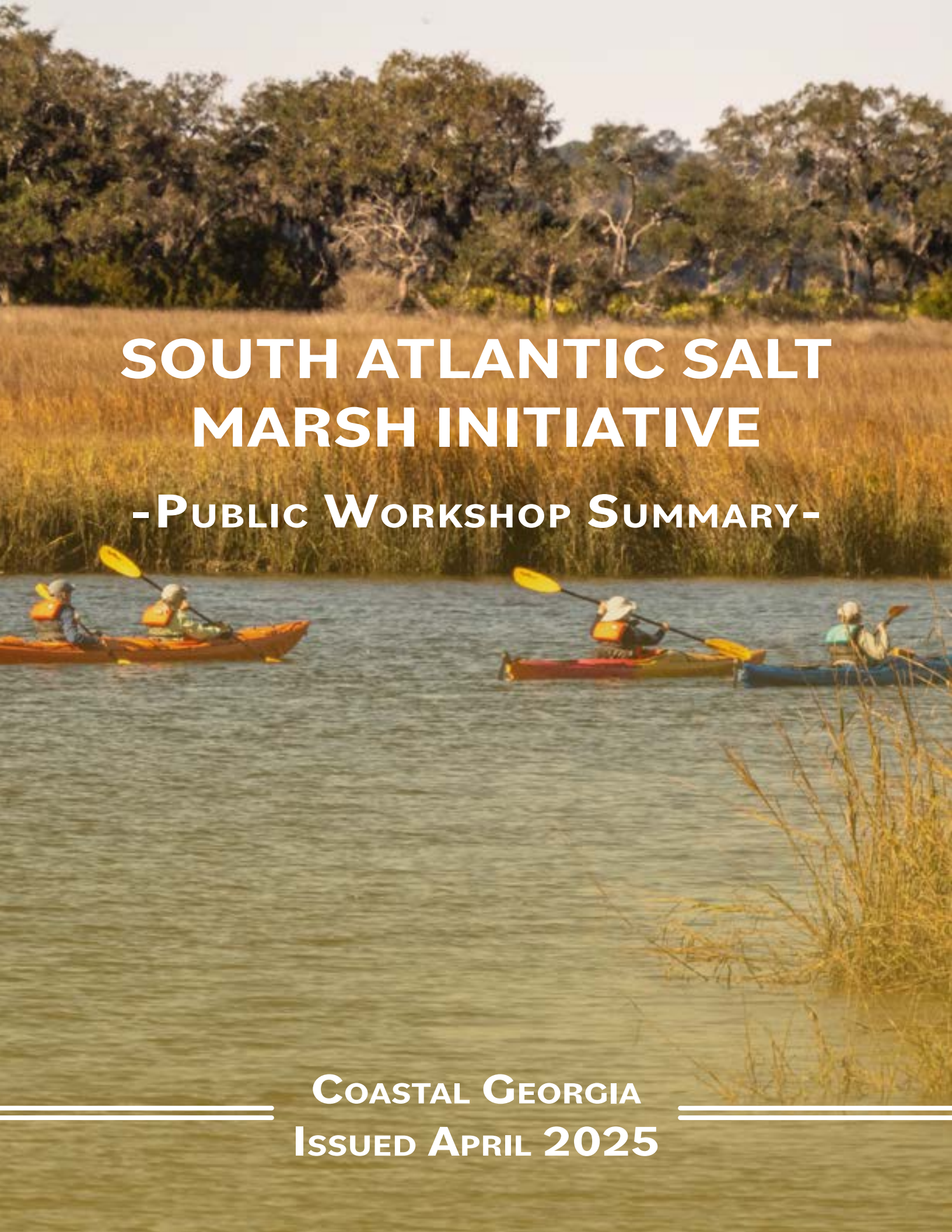


SOUTH ATLANTIC SALT MARSH INITIATIVE

-Public Workshop Summary-

Coastal Georgia

Issued April 2025

Thank You

All of us spearheading the SASMI effort in Georgia send our heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated in the public workshops this fall. The goal of the workshops was to hear from you! Every idea, concern, and piece of information you shared with us makes this initiative stronger, ensuring a brighter future for Georgia's precious salt marsh habitat. Georgia has over 350,000 acres of salt marsh, more than a third of all salt marshes on the eastern coast. Thank you for helping us keep it that way.

SASMI Coastal Georgia Community Engagement Team

Workshop location and dates

Glynn County	September 10th, 2024
Camden County	September 12th, 2024
Chatham & Bryan Counties	September 24th, 2024
Liberty County	January 21st, 2025
McIntosh County	February 13th, 2025

Overview of Previous Workshops

Georgia Conservancy, with assistance from Seabrook Village Foundation, held three public workshops as a part of the Salt Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI). The Glynn County and Camden County workshops were held in early September, followed by the McIntosh and Liberty County workshops in January and February 2025.

The Chatham County and Bryan County workshops, originally planned as separate events in August, were rescheduled as a single workshop after postponement due to the impacts of Hurricane Debby. In all, the workshops engaged over 130 attendees: these included local staff of NGOs, local government representatives, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, members and leaders of the Gullah Geechee Nation, and the general public.

Glynn County - 36 attendees
Camden County - 25 attendees
Liberty County - 17 attendees
McIntosh County - 27 attendees
Chatham/Bryan Counties - 27 attendees

Glynn County Workshop

The public workshops provided opportunities for participants to learn about the Salt Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI) in Georgia and provide ideas and information on potential projects to preserve and restore the salt marsh. These ideas will form the backbone of the SASMI implementation plan, an action-oriented strategy to protect Georgia's marshland habitat. To learn more about salt marsh and SASMI, you can access this video prepared by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Keep reading to review the outcomes and takeaways of the SASMI workshops.

Workshop Structure

Each workshop featured multiple stations for participants to contribute thoughts, ideas, and information to the South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI) in Georgia. These stations included a prioritization exercise where participants engaged in a goal-setting exercise based on the SASMI priorities identified in the broader, four-state plan (link); a mapping station, an existing projects station, a guest speaker station that presented on a special topic, and a storytelling station.

Each workshop began with an introduction to SASMI, followed by a viewing of Marsh Forward: The South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Participants were then invited to roam between the five stations at will, visiting them in any order to provide input.

McIntosh County Workshop

Input Station Goals

- **Goal-Setting:** Evaluate the level of priority (high, medium, or low) of SASMI strategies identified in the broader, four-state SASMI plan. Share how these strategies and goals relate to salt marsh issues at home.
- **Mapping Exercise:** Share thoughts and ideas about salt marsh areas on a series of maps displaying flood areas, projected marsh migration (gain, loss, and retainment), and conserved lands.
- **Existing Projects:** View information on existing salt marsh restoration and conservation projects through blurbs and an online interface.
- **Storytelling:** Share personal narratives that highlight your relationship and experiences with coastal marshlands.
- **Special Topics:** Learn about a special topic at every SASMI workshop.

Goal-Setting: Themes & Takeaways

One of the most important outcomes of the workshops to-date has been the evaluation of broader SASMI strategies in the context of Georgia, as well as the in-depth ideas that participants provided related to specific strategies in the following strategic focus areas: Marsh Protection & Restoration, Marsh Migration Corridors, and Cross-Cutting Approaches.

Marsh Protection and Restoration

- **Priority Items:** Under this strategic category, the highest priority objective was to minimize impacts to marsh habitat from adjacent development and sustain ecosystem and community health.
- **Buffer Zoning:** Create zoning policies that mandate sustainable practices like maintaining and protecting buffer zones between marsh and development
- **Comprehensive Plan Integration:** Ensure that goals in comprehensive plans are translated into enforceable policies that minimize workarounds and loopholes
- **More Robust Living Shoreline Implementation:** Living shoreline projects can be implemented more frequently and effectively. Data tools should be leveraged to identify land acquisition opportunities for new living shorelines and to find more cost-effective construction alternatives.

Conservation of Marsh Migration Corridors

- **Priority Items:** Of the two objectives in this theme, removing and avoiding creating new barriers to marsh migration as a priority in planning and federal and state investments in public infrastructure, wetland restoration and working lands elicited a stronger response from participants.
- **Adaptation Strategies:** Raise causeways as an adaptation strategy to rising sea levels and simultaneously incorporate wildlife underpasses and corridors.
- **Plan Implementation and Enforcement:** Oversight and enforcement measures must be in effect to ensure plans are carried out.

Cross-Cutting Approaches

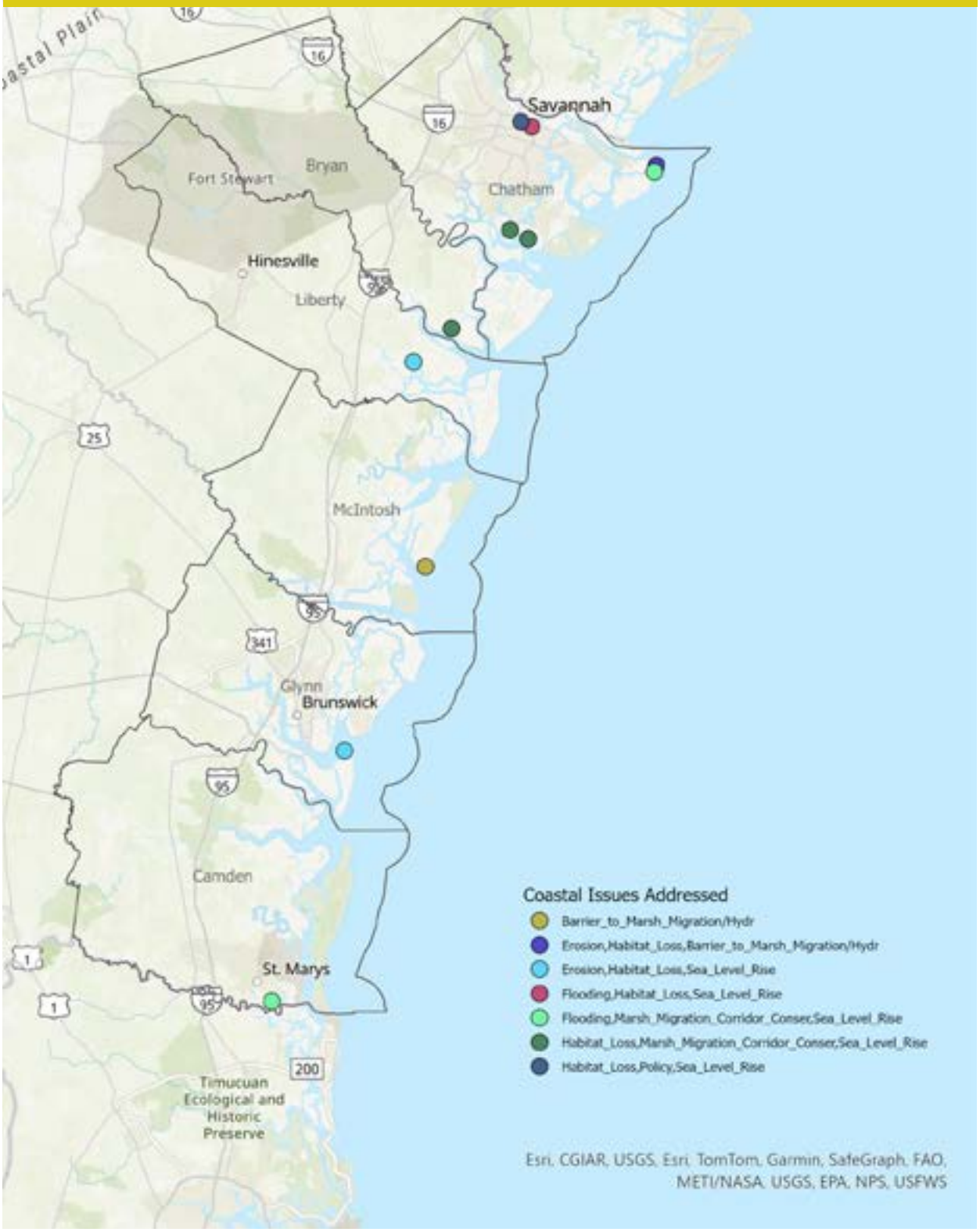
Cont. from previous page

- **Priority Items:** Participants believed that "Expand, develop or leverage existing federal, state, and local policies, programs and incentives to protect and restore salt marshes and conserve marsh migration corridors" was a top-priority objective.
- **Education:** Participants highlighted the need for culturally-informed education and outreach to local communities. They also stated that education efforts should be directed towards local government stakeholders who may not be aware of the significance of protecting salt marsh habitats. Lastly, participants emphasized that distinct engagement approaches and messaging may be needed for different groups of people, e.g. of different socioeconomic backgrounds, but that reaching out to all groups is important.
- **Collaboration and Consistency among Partners:** Participants suggested that the SASMI effort should ensure a consistent approach and understanding of actions needed by technical partners.
- **Messaging:** Creating memorable messaging to ensure that information is retained by a general audience is important to making a lasting change to local attitudes and appreciation for the salt marsh habitat.

Existing Projects: What's Going On Now?

There is work already being done to help protect and restore Georgia's salt marsh. Georgia Conservancy is tracking various salt marsh-related efforts using a web tool that stores the relevant project information that partner agencies report. Additional projects will be added to the tracker as we receive information about them and as partner agencies working in coastal conservation and restoration self-report ongoing initiatives. The map below displays the location of several efforts reported and the coastal issue(s) that each seeks to address. You can visit the Project Tracker at this link.

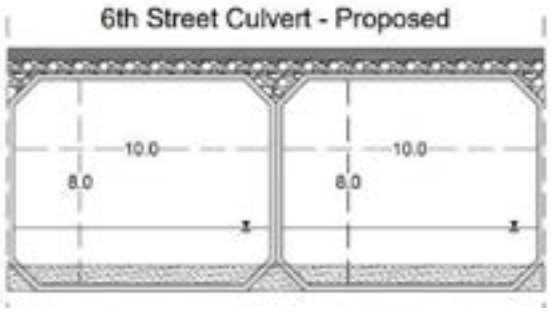
Ongoing Salt Marsh Projects by Coastal Issue



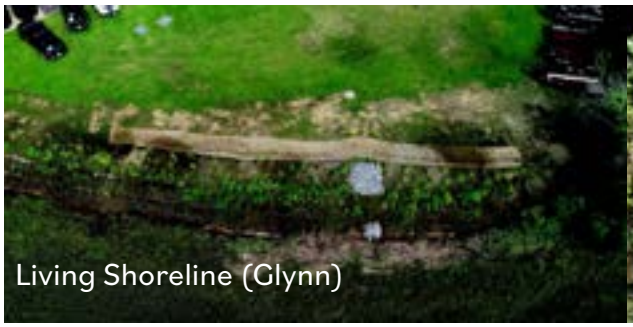
Existing Projects (Cont.)

The existing projects stations at each workshop also showcased visual examples of completed protection and restoration projects, and, in some cases, proposed locations for new projects. This was a chance to celebrate past successes, communicate what projects benefiting salt marsh and other coastal wetlands look like, and bring attention to other locations that could benefit from similar interventions. The projects on display were specific to each county. Below are examples of some projects featured at the Existing Projects station.

An example of heavy erosion at Crooked River State Park where a living shoreline could be implemented.



A culvert under 6th Street leading to Tybee Island is undersized, causing scour and erosion. A proposal to replace the existing culvert with a new box culvert system or bridge is being actively pursued.



A living shoreline installation at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Coastal Regional Headquarters. (Left) One month post-construction.

Storytelling Station: What We Heard

Oral histories serve as a bridge; a shimmering thread that connects the empirical rigor of scientific study with the rich, textured experiences of coastal communities. The oral histories collected from the 2024 SASMI workshops form a mosaic of memories, each piece a glimpse into the evolving relationship between people and the marsh. In these stories, science meets soul, history embraces hope, and the marshlands stand as both a sanctuary and a battleground. These narratives are a portal into time, bridging the past and present to guide the future.

Local storytellers Ami Traore and Krystal Hart of Seabrook Village thoughtfully engaged with attendees, carefully identifying individuals whose unique experiences and perspectives would enrich the storytelling process. Their efforts laid the foundation for Monét Murphy to capture meaningful and diverse narratives. This meticulous approach involved not only recording the interviews but also carefully analyzing and dissecting these accounts to uncover deeper insights and themes. Below are high-level highlights from the individuals who contributed to their oral histories, collected and thoughtfully curated during the workshops, reflecting the dedication and scholarly effort invested in preserving these stories.

We Heard From...

- A longtime marshland advocate, who has seen with her own eyes how the tides are different, the storms more frequent, and the ***brackish waters rising dangerously to her doorstep***. Though she has mended to the marshlands for a lifetime, she does not know how to prepare for a rapidly changing coastal future.
- A Marine Science undergraduate at Savannah State University, introduced to Georgia's marshes with fresh eyes, captivated by the ***universal draw of this teeming world of fiddler crabs and spartina grass***. Her enthusiasm and belief in the power of change reflect both the curiosity of a newcomer and the deep connection these fragile ecosystems inspire across generations.

We Heard From... (Continued)

- A frontline coastal community and Gullah Geechee resident, who has witnessed the draining and paving over of marshland over a lifetime. However, the marsh's essence - as that of the Gullah Geechee people - is rooted in a ***legacy of resilience***.
- A scientist observing the quantitative changes of the marsh - dwindling fish populations, salinity shifts - who is grappling with the ***immeasurable changes, the spiritual and cultural connections, that must also be recorded and protected***.
- A leader with Keep Golden Isles Beautiful, inspires a new generation of conservationists by transforming trash into treasure and teaching the value of recycling to third-graders. ***Her passion drives community initiatives that protect vital ecosystems, showing how small acts of care can create lasting ripples of sustainability.***
- A leader in Brunswick who passionately advocates for her community through her neighborhood planning association, ***highlighting the neglect that has allowed history to fade: dilapidated buildings, forgotten parks, and polluted neighborhoods. Despite the environmental and cultural destruction, she finds hope in the younger generation***, inspiring them to rise up, restore what has been lost, and fight for justice in marginalized communities regardless of their own cultural background.
- A grandfather-granddaughter duo, who share a bond deeply rooted in the persistent, yet ever-changing, lands and waters that they call home. Ever evolving, too, is work and education opportunities, which ebb and flow much like the tides. ***They dream of the wealth of the land and water sustaining and providing for all in who call it home.***
- A member of a local historic preservation board, who has seen the friction between newer and legacy residents of coastal communities – and thus, the friction between preservation and development - rise at a rapid pace. Advocating for the needs of existing residents, while planning for informed growth for new, is more challenging than ever. ***Shaping future growth of the community in harmony with environmental, cultural, and historic assets*** is not a luxury, but a necessity for her community.
- A researcher, dedicated to participatory science and uplifting frontline community voices. He has seen how an extractive mindset for scientific research, as well as tourism, wear communities down over time. ***The land and the people are not separate entities; they are one and the same, and they must both be treated with respect. One cannot be valued without the other.*** Otherwise, a slow but relentless erosion of both the cultural and environmental fabric of the community is bound to occur.

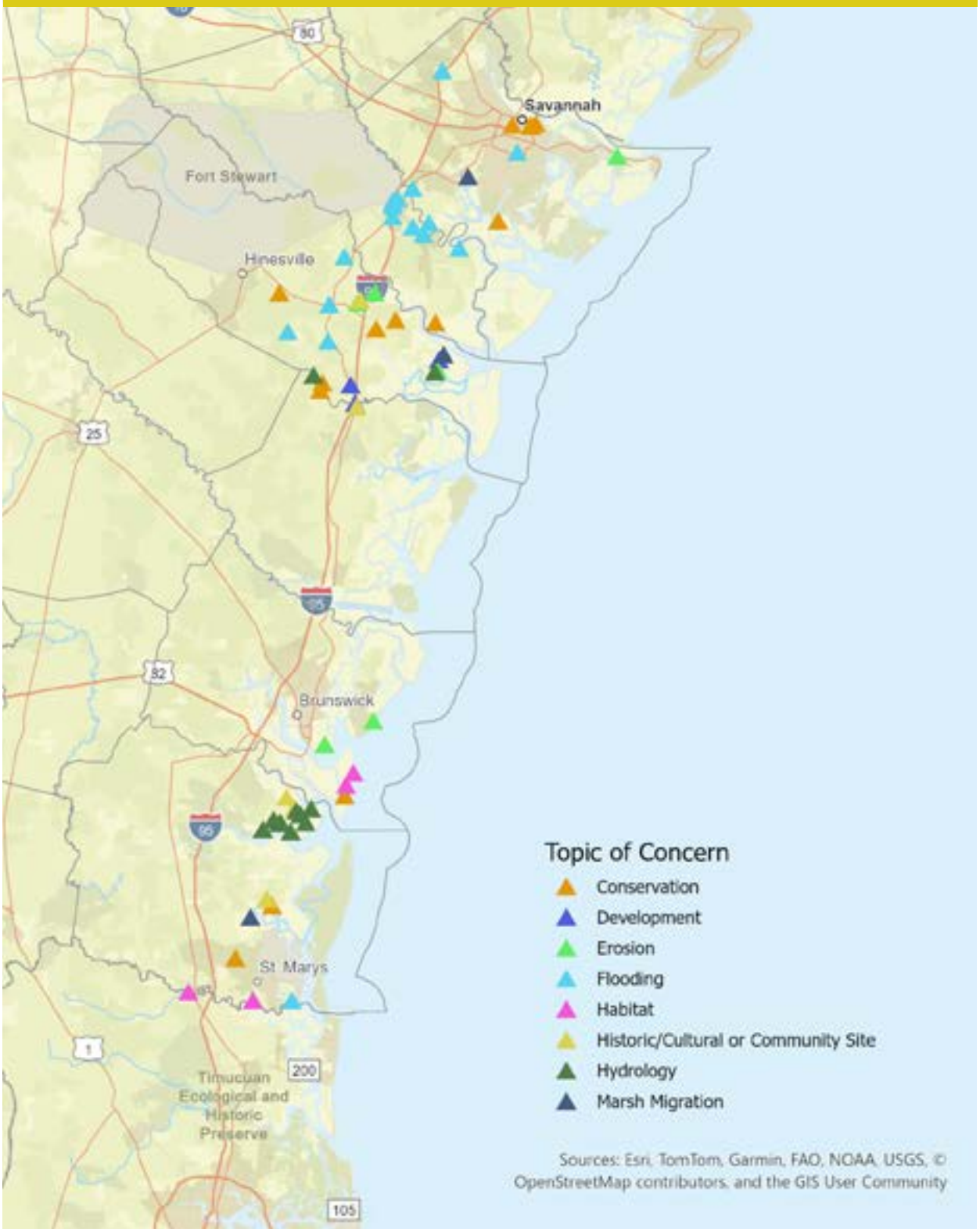
Mapping Exercise: Where to Look

During the mapping exercise, participants had the opportunity to associate their comments and observations with a location on a map. The exercise assisted the project team in identifying areas of interest for SASMI projects, but participants also used the exercise to express general concerns and raise questions. Additionally, the maps allowed coastal residents to document flooding impacts from storms Debby and Helene.

Inputs from the mapping exercise were cataloged in a digital geospatial file and sorted into categories. The categories express the general topic of each comment. The results of the mapping exercise and categorization can be seen on the map on the following page. Read below for a quick synopsis of the mapping exercise.

- Marsh migration in Camden County is projected to occur along the St. Marys river. Participants expressed that the extent of the migration will spell significant habitat changes along the river and that the change in salinity gradient due to sea level rise may negatively impact endemic sturgeon.
- Marsh migration has been observed on the edge of some properties in more than one coastal county. Further migration approach and intersect with developed areas.
- Man-made alternations to the hydrologic network along marshes of the intercoastal waterway have impacted marsh habitats. Restoring natural hydrologic flows may help preserve marsh habitats and reduce coastal erosion.
- Flooding from this year's coastal storms occurred on residential and commercial properties in Bryan and Chatham counties, near the Ogeechee River. Some of these properties are in high risk (1% annual change of flooding) areas and will likely continue to experience worsening or more frequent flood events in the future.
- There are some opportunities in Chatham County to conserve low-lying, undeveloped areas (and areas anticipated to receive marsh migration). These potential conservation areas may also afford opportunities for public access as parks.
- Along the coast, there are several historic sites in marsh hammocks or islands that could be indicated with historical markers. Cemeteries near the marshes edge may be under threat of inundation and/or erosion due to sea level rise.

Mapping Exercise Input by Topic Category



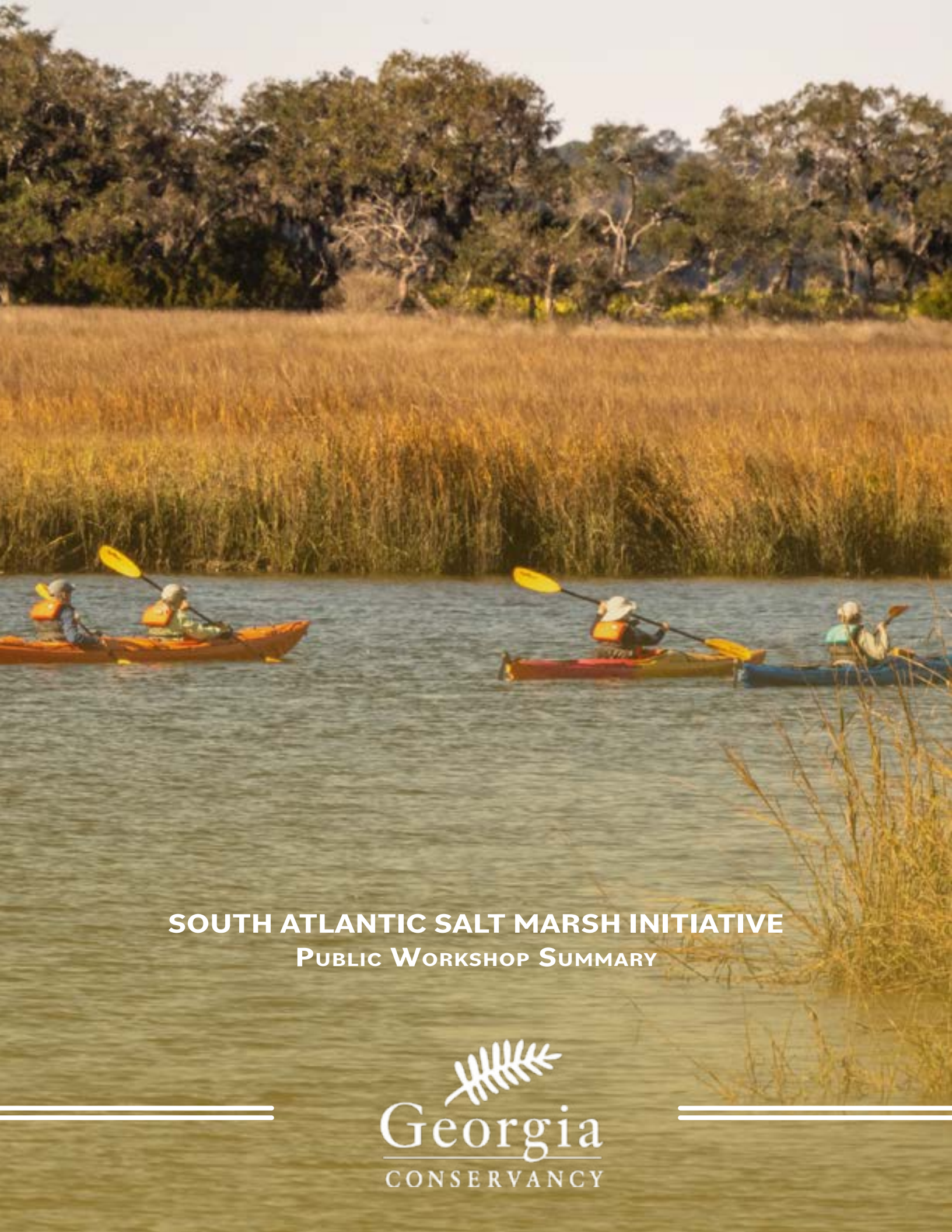
Acknowledgments

Identifying the needs and opportunities to preserve, protect, and restore our precious coastal marshlands across six coastal counties is no small feat. We relied on your local expertise and experiences to help us assess a broad regional landscape of diverse communities and circumstances. We acknowledge and thank you for your contribution.

Georgia Conservancy would like to give special thanks to Krystal Hart and Ami Traore of Seabrook Village Foundation for the substantial support they provided in organizing and running the SASMI workshops. We would also like to thank staff of Georgia DNR's Coastal Resources Division for lending their time and knowledge to hosting a living shorelines booth at the workshops and for the resources they allowed us to share. Thank you to our other special guests and hosts. Without you, the workshops would not have been possible or nearly as enriching.

Lastly, Georgia Conservancy extends our thanks to the members of the public and to the professional agencies and organizations listed below who attended the workshops and provided invaluable feedback.

Bryan County Community Development Department
Camden County Emergency Management Agency
Chatham County Cooperative Extension
Chatham County Resilience Office
Georgia Department of Natural Resource Coastal Resources Division
Georgia Institute of Technology
Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor
Savannah State University
Seabrook Village Foundation
The Nature Conservancy
University of Georgia Sea Grant and Marine Extension



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