

## Chapter 2

# The Beginnings of Change

There were many events that led up to the flurry in sweetgrass work that began in the late 1980s before my entrance into the arena (Fig. 2.1). Of course, the first event that contributed to the stress was the explosion of coastal development in the late 1970s and early 1980s which even continues today.

Wild areas along the coast, once plentiful with traditional sweetgrass-harvesting habitats, were gobbled up for the construction of million dollar beach houses behind gated entrances (Fig. 2.2). In many of these cases, this new housing along the ocean was placed in the same location as natural sweetgrass habitats, and these fields were “plowed down” (Fig. 2.3).

### Sweetgrass Conference, 1988

The beginning of real change to initiate some action and understand the issues facing the basketmakers did not commence until the Sweetgrass Basket Conference which was held at the Charleston Museum on March 26, 1988 (Fig. 2.4). The conference was organized by the South Carolina Folk Arts Program at McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, with the cooperation of the Steering Committee of Sweetgrass Basketmakers, Avery Research Center for Afro-American History and Culture, College of Charleston, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Seabrook Natural History Group. The conference was funded in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts Program and the Ruth Mott Foundation. This conference evaluated the impact of public policy and development on Charleston County basketmakers’ access to sweetgrass resources (Fig. 2.5). In addition, the conference addressed many issues facing the basketmakers with the interaction of officials, environmentalists, basketmakers, biologists, and the public.

This unprecedented conference was long in coming. Some of the earliest events that led up to this conference began in the early 1970s when two young anthropologists, Greg Day and Kate Young, spent a significant time in the Basketmaking



**Fig. 2.1** Over the years, many newspaper and magazine articles have been published describing the dwindling sweetgrass supply as a victim of ocean from developers



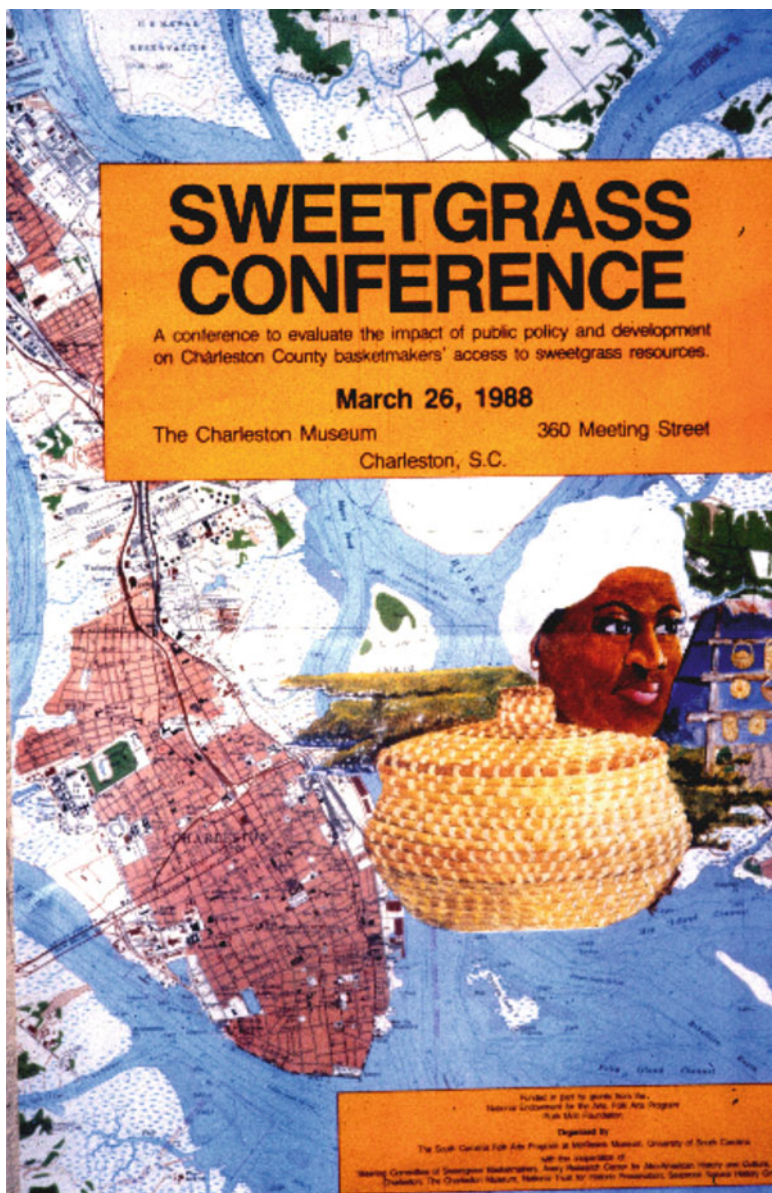
**Fig. 2.2** Sorry, property owners only! Gated communities still contain some sweetgrass habitats that once were accessible and free to harvest



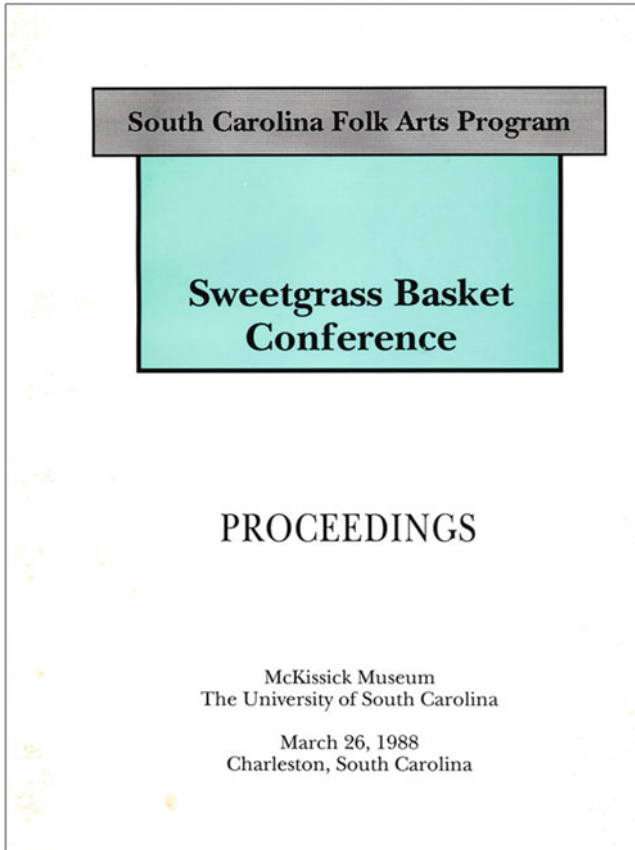
**Fig. 2.3** A native sweetgrass field on Kiawah Island, South Carolina, was bulldozed to make way for beachfront house. See the remnants of the sweetgrass field on the left side of clearing

Community talking with and studying the art of basketmaking. One of their tasks was to assemble a collection of sweetgrass baskets for the Smithsonian Institute. As a result, examples of sweetgrass baskets are now in museums and this act elevated the general public's awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of the basketmaking art. Later, attention and interest in the basketmaking art form continued to grow, and in 1984, McKissick Museum hired Dr. Dale Rosengarten to study the history and practice of Low Country basketry. As a result, this led to the development of "Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry" exhibit organized by the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum in Columbia (Fig. 2.6). Ultimately, this exhibit was transformed into a book by the same name by Dr. Dale Rosengarten. This seminal work excellently described the origin and evolution, folk life, techniques, and the state of the art of Low Country African-coiled basketry.

The idea for the conference came about in October 1986 at a meeting of folklorists, including Dr. John Vlach from George Washington University, Mrs. Bess Lomax Hawes of the National Endowment for the Arts, and Dale Rosengarten<sup>2</sup>. This conference was the first organized effort to find answers to deal with the regional problems affecting this ancient folk art. In many cases, developers, conservationists, and managers of public lands and wildlife preserves did not recognize sweetgrass as a scarce and significant resource that may exist on their lands. Basketmakers were very assertive and verbal, expressing their frustrations with the many pressures threatening the future of this craft.



**Fig. 2.4** The goals of the sweetgrass conference were to draw attention to a culturally and economically vital plant and to encourage land management strategies which favor the grass and make it accessible to basketmakers and their families



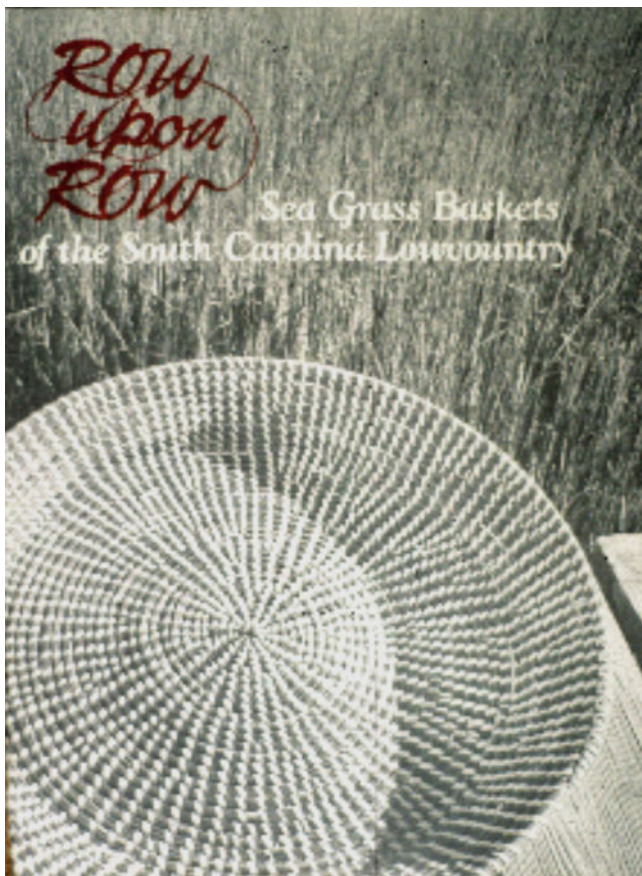
**Fig. 2.5** Proceedings of the historic conference

## **The Findings of the Conference**

The following briefly summarizes some of the findings revealed during the conference:

Sweetgrass is not an endangered species but it does seem to exist in limited quantities along the Southeastern coast. Biologists stated that they could not, at that time, state how the plant propagates, whether it can be transplanted, and under what conditions it thrives. Recommendations from biologists included the following:

- (a) Conduct a biological assessment of the plant.
- (b) Develop a map of sweetgrass populations.
- (c) Determine the threat to the population.
- (d) Identify the ownership of the land on which sweetgrass grows.
- (e) Identify appropriate locations for transplantation.



**Fig. 2.6** Dr. Dale Rosengarten's rich publication is an in-depth study of her 18 month research project on this folk art form which includes both research and history of this flourishing African-American craft and a survey of its current status

Some of the basketmakers indicated that they had tried transplanting but with little success. It was also concluded that there still was quite a bit of sweetgrass growing in areas near Charleston, but the gatherers cannot get to these habitats. The developers have captured the coast. Areas where people have gathered sweetgrass for hundreds of years are now off-limits. Developments have, in effect, made what was once public coastal space a private domain.

Basket stands along Hwy 17, the old Ocean Highway from Florida to New England, are being forced from their traditional highway locations by development. Basketmakers have been selling their baskets on the shoulders of Highway 17 in Mt. Pleasant since the 1930s. The basket stands are part of the visual and cultural landscape of Mt. Pleasant, yet their placement may be hazardous to basketmakers and their continued presence may be growing extinct with development in Mt. Pleasant.

This land is under the jurisdiction of the Highway Department and not the owners of the land behind it and not the town of Mt. Pleasant. The future existence of these stands as development explodes needs to be protected as part of the cultural gift they provide and as a means for basketmakers to sell their products to passing tourists.

The Steering Committee, which was composed of basketmakers, decided to continue their work after the conference and formed the Mt. Pleasant Basketmakers' Association on April 5, 1988. The main purpose of the organization was to promote, protect, and preserve the traditional African art of sweetgrass basketmaking. After the conference, many promises were made to continue the work to protect roadside stands, attempt to cultivate sweetgrass in various locations, and survey existing native stands of sweetgrass. Moreover, this conference was the culmination of making people aware of a problem that they didn't know existed.

Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass

Domestication and Horticulture of the Grass Used in  
African-American Coiled Basketry

Dufault, R.J.

2013, IX, 119 p. 65 illus., 24 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-5902-6