

A New Neighbor on Cape Cod: Reflections on the National Seashore

For many people, the creation of a national seashore on Cape Cod was a foregone conclusion. The day after President Kennedy signed the founding legislation, a Boston Globe editorial commended the effort to “save one of the country’s most magnificent stretches of shoreline.” The bill’s co-author, Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Dover, Mass., proclaimed that the park would be “dedicated to the spiritual replenishment of American families increasingly locked in urbanization and commercialization who see the refreshing beauty and natural grandeur of the clean, open spaces.”

Yet for families on the Outer Cape, this was not just a stretch of shoreline, or an open space. It was home.

In March 1959, an editorial in the Cape Codder spoke to the conflicting emotions surrounding the proposal for a national seashore: “Cape Cod National Seashore – Blight or Blessing?” When the national seashore became a reality in August 1961, headlines from the Provincetown Advocate (now the Banner) reflected the continuing concerns: “Reactions Differ on Park Taking” and “Questions Arise About Park Lands.”

While Cape Codders are still weighing the pros and cons of the national park in their midst, reflections from the three largest newspapers on the Outer Cape confirm that without a doubt, the national seashore is now an important member of the community.

- Bridget Macdonald



Carol K. Dumas, Managing Editor, January 28, 2011

When the idea for a national seashore park for Cape Cod was first put forward, The Cape Codder newspaper was solidly behind it even though there was initial public opposition to the plan. The idea of the Outer Cape communities giving up ownership of their land was anathema to many, and in fact, The Cape Codder’s backing of the national seashore caused it to lose many advertisers.

As our editor Malcolm Hobbs wrote in a March 12, 1959 editorial: “We are well aware that there is legitimate objection to the incursion of the Federal behemoth. We have felt the same aversion ourselves. But over the years, we have become convinced that only radical treatment will save the day for prosperity on Cape Cod. And a desecrated Cape Cod will not be a prosperous Cape Cod. Let’s cut the know and save the Cape we love.”

How telling those lines are today as many Cape Codders look today at the vast lands within Cape Cod National Seashore as representative of the “real” Cape Cod.

For what happened in the 50 years since the Seashore’s inception came true: Cape Cod has become built up with businesses and homes, from Bourne to Provincetown.

If not for Cape Cod National Seashore, surely developers would certainly have scooped up the oceanfront vistas we enjoy today up, as they are elsewhere across the peninsula and across other coastal areas across the U.S. Can you imagine motels on Nauset Light Beach?

Cape Cod National Seashore has contributed to the quality of life we enjoy on the Outer Cape. Those of us blessed to live in the towns within the Seashore enjoy the trails and beaches year round. The preserved vistas have inspired artists, the Seashore itself is a laboratory for scientific research and its natural resources have spawned curricula in our schools.

The advent of the Seashore has not been without controversy, but we challenge anyone to disagree that its establishment was not in the best interest of Cape Cod, the nation, and future visitors and residents.

CAPE COD TIMES

William Mills, Editorial Page Editor, October 5, 2008

“The seashore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world.”

- Henry David Thoreau

Writing more than 150 years about the wide-open spaces of the Outer Cape, Thoreau said: “A man may stand there and put all America behind him.”

Imagine Cape Cod, indeed imagine America, if there were no National Seashore. The 43,000 acres that comprise the Cape Cod National Seashore from Eastham to Provincetown represent nothing less than an ornate bridal veil that gently protects golden strands of beach, curling surf, and bejeweled ponds and hills.

Creating the park, however, was no easy feat. After all, in 1955 the National Park Service proposed a park that would encompass, among other parcels, 70 percent of Truro and more than half of Wellfleet. Unlike Yellowstone or other national parks, this “national seashore” on Cape Cod would include a large number of commercial and residential properties. It was a first in Park Service history.

Months of hearings and meetings were required to produce a bill that balanced private and public interests – a balance that is still being sought by park managers to this day.

As expected, Outer Cape residents of the late 1950s voiced concerns about the widespread use of eminent domain to pry

national park lands from private hands. Although the government offered a fair-market price for much of the land, some property had been in the same families for generations.

Despite opposition, a Truro resident summed up the emerging consensus: “I think the time has passed when we old-timers can hope that Cape Cod will stay the way it is. ... We have absolute proof it is going to change, and then the issue is, should it be done by bulldozers? By money-mad people? By builders wanting quick jobs? Or is it to be done by the U.S. government in another manner?”

As a result, legislation providing for the establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore was introduced in the Senate on Sept. 3, 1959. Sens. John F. Kennedy and Leverett Saltonstall and U.S. Rep. Hastings Keith, who represented the Cape in the House, supported the plan. The legislators represented both political parties.

On June 27, 1961, the Senate passed the bill unanimously. A few weeks later, the House passed a similar bill. On Aug. 7, seven months after moving into the White House, President Kennedy signed the Cape Cod National Seashore bill.

Today, 50 years later, because of the untiring efforts of citizens and community leaders, a special place, a vast park has been permanently protected so future generations can stand there and put all America behind them.

PROVINCETOWN BANNER

Alix Ritchie, Founder February 3, 2011

The Cape Cod National Seashore’s 50th anniversary offers a fitting opportunity to look at what the Cape Cod National Seashore has meant to the Outer Cape, and to Provincetown in particular.

In many ways Provincetown was the town most affected by the creation of the national park, situated as it is within the Province Lands, which were transferred from the commonwealth to the federal government, a more distant entity.

On the one hand it has meant that the lands on the Outer Cape and along the Atlantic beach will be protected – an invaluable legacy. And, looking at shoreline development in areas without such protection, we have a lot to be thankful for.

On the other hand, the National Park Service, built on a military model, values consistency. Yet, the Seashore doesn’t fit the standard NPS model: it has not only development within the park but whole towns, and thereby inherits an odd responsibility

for the survival and success of those towns. It’s more than just being a good neighbor: there is a community as well as an environmental caretaking that is needed.

Many of the resulting concerns were addressed in the park’s last master plan – not solved necessarily, but not brushed under the rug either. Collaboration was the concept called for in the plan, and as we look to the next 50 years it certainly will be needed.

We hope that the Seashore hews to its plan and embraces the need for collaboration in helping the towns survive and thrive, and we hope that the towns hew to the concept as well in preserving the Outer Cape for future generations.

Together, we owe it to those who will follow after us to ensure that both the grandeur of the seashore and the historic and vibrant communities of the Outer Cape continue to be protected.



There’s a new “green standard” here at Cape Cod National Seashore. After several years of planning and progress, this spring the seashore was officially accepted into the National Park Service’s Climate Friendly Parks program. To date, fewer than 65 parks have fully completed the process, and Cape Cod National Seashore’s official designation as a Climate Friendly Park is truly a milestone.

A 2007 baseline inventory found that the seashore’s total greenhouse gas emissions (including park operations, concessionaires, and visitor activities) were equivalent to 3,303 metric tons of carbon dioxide (roughly comparable to the amount emitted by 281 house-

Cape Cod National Seashore Has Gone Green!

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holds annually.) After a workshop with park staff, stakeholders, and Washington Office representatives, the seashore developed an Action Plan to help us set and achieve emissions reduction goals. By 2020, the park will have reduced its total emissions by 20%.

What this means is that change is required – on all our parts. Park staff is doing its part from little things like turning off computer monitors, to big things like driving fewer miles in more fuel-efficient vehicles. We’re also striving to make it easier for our visitors to enjoy a green park experience. As we move forward, look for more car-free visitation opportunities: from increased public transportation options to improved bicycling infrastructure. But nature’s not waiting for us: Cape Cod is seeing the effects of climate change in terms of sea level rise, changes in kettle pond water quality, and impacts on local flora and fauna. Let’s all start today by driving less, reducing waste, and using less energy. We’ll all breathe easier tomorrow!