

The Cape's Superintendents Have Searched for Common Ground in Shifting Sand

by Bridget Macdonald

For millions of summer visitors who have come to the Cape over the past 50 years, the national seashore represents a peaceful retreat. For the park's top administrators, it sometimes looks more like a battlefield.

Since a proposal to preserve the Outer Cape was first put forward in 1939, the national seashore has been a source of controversy. As one of the first national parks to be established in a pre-populated area, the misgivings of locals simply came with the territory.

From the beginning, superintendents at Cape Cod have had to assume a complicated balancing act in order to address the needs of various stakeholders while protecting cultural and natural resources.

Reflecting on their experiences in office, four superintendents spoke to the challenges and rewards that accompany the top post at the national seashore. Despite their different approaches, there was overwhelming agreement on one thing: the relationships with the local communities are of utmost importance.

Herbert Olsen, 1979 to 1989

Although Olsen came to the Cape with a background in history, he became a champion for natural resources during his time at the national seashore. Olsen helped create the Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Management Plan, held a controversial stance against preserving the dune shacks in Truro and Provincetown, and was the first superintendent charged with protecting the piping plover, which was listed as an endangered species in 1986.

Greatest challenge:

Olsen says the constant battle to restrict ORVs was both his biggest challenge and greatest success. His ORV management plan permanently closed public access to the inner-dune routes in the Province Lands and to the beach between High Head in Truro and the Wellfleet town line. It also limited ORV use to a six-month season. While later negotiations allowed ORV use to continue along 12 miles of beach in Provincetown and Truro, access to these routes is subject to the whims of Mother Nature: namely, erosion and nesting shorebirds. "It's a never-ending issue," says Olsen.

Leadership philosophy:

Upholding the integrity of the environment was Olsen's No. 1 priority, and the primary factor in all of his decisions. "The most important thing was always the preservation of the seashore," says Olsen.

Words of wisdom:

"Above all, you come to the Cape with an open mind. The Cape is unique. It's different. You have to serve six towns, and so you have to learn to adjust to the different views of local politicians."

Favorite place in the national seashore:

The Marconi Station Site and the park headquarters in Wellfleet.

Looking back:

"I think it was a satisfying experience, overall. Challenging, but satisfying."

Andy Ringgold, 1989 to 1995

"There was never a dull moment," says Ringgold of his tenure on the Cape. Coming off a five-year stint in Washington, D.C., where he had helped work on the ORV regulations that Herb Olsen was developing, Ringgold was no stranger to problem-solving. But at the national seashore, there was another dimension: collaborating with the local communities.

Greatest challenge:

Not long after Ringgold came to the Cape, he received a request to renew the special-

use permit for the Provincetown dump. He denied the permit and spent the next five years working to close the landfill and sewage lagoons. "It was a very controversial, divisive issue," he remembers. On top of being an eyesore, the dump was impacting groundwater quality and had attracted an unnaturally large population of gulls. Ultimately, Ringgold said, closing the dump was "a win for Provincetown and the park."

Leadership philosophy:

Ringgold says on the surface, many of the issues he dealt with appeared to be either/or - "either a solution for recreation and access, or for protection of the resources" - but he always looked for middle ground. "Decisions were made closer to the center, with conditions, restrictions, and agreed-upon compromises that would keep the values of the park service intact but also accommodate specific values."

Words of wisdom:

"Come in with your eyes open and don't let your initial reactions be based on past experiences," he says. "Very seldom is there really a need to be at loggerheads over issues. It can be an effective way to get people to the table, but in the end you never really accomplish anything."

Favorite place in the national seashore:

The stretch of shoreline from Coast Guard Beach in Eastham to the opening of the Nauset Inlet. "Depending on what was happening with the inlet, sometimes it was a short walk and sometimes it was long walk, but in all types of weather, it was spectacular. It really gives a flavor of what this part of the country is about."

Looking back:

"Just about everything important about that job was new to my experience. It was a tremendous learning experience, one of the most rewarding of my career."

Maria Burks, 1995 to 2004

Before coming to the Cape, Burks had spent her career working in urban settings, like Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the San Francisco Bay Area, or focusing on cultural resource issues at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields in Virginia. The advantage: she was not intimidated by the prospect of working with local stakeholders. "In Fredericksburg, the communities surrounding the battlefield looked at the park as a federal interloper, so land issues and boundary issues had occupied a huge percentage of my time."

Greatest challenge:

Burks arrived just in time to inherit the national seashore's contentious new General Management Plan. Leaders in Truro and Provincetown had lobbied for changes in



Atlantic coastline, Wellfleet, photo by Amber Jane Barricman

the document regarding policies that affected the local communities. With no previous experience working on a management plan, Burks says, "I had to start swimming hard."

Natural resource management was also unfamiliar territory. With a background in anthropology, Burks likens coming to the Cape with a crash course in environmental science. "I had to learn all about littoral drift, mange, and the difference between plants like Phragmites and Spartina."

Leadership philosophy:

"Listen, listen, listen," she says. When dealing with a multitude of stakeholders, she said there is almost always a place where your interests overlap. "The voice you need to listen to is the one that disagrees with you. That's the one that lets you know what has been overlooked in the dialogue."

Words of wisdom:

"The sense of isolation here is a mindset. It's not combative, but it's the attitude that we go it alone," she explains. "It's very important to get the flavor of the place quickly. Each town has a distinct personality. Get out there and get to know them. Be visible and be transparent in everything you do."

Favorite place in the national seashore:

The hike from Bearberry Hill to the site of the Ball Estate in Truro. "I just like the change in landscape - forest, beach, heathlands - you encounter almost every kind of terrain there is on Cape Cod."

Looking back:

"Over the nine years, I really fell in love with the Cape, and I really didn't expect to. I had always been a mountains kind of girl. But it's amazing how lovely it is there."

George Price, 2005 to present

Price was on track for a career teaching social studies when he began volunteering at Morristown National Historical Park in his native New Jersey. The rest is history: his interest in cultural resources led him to sites like Lowell National Historical Park, Minute Man National Historical Park, and the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, where he served as the first superintendent. But it was science that attracted him to the Cape. "I was particularly interested in the natural history and resources program," he says. "I was excited about what scientists were doing here."

Greatest challenge:

As the current superintendent, everything is still a work in progress for Price. But he said the headway he has made working with the dune shack community has been a major landmark. During monthly meetings last year, Price worked with members of the Cape Cod National Seashore Advisory Commission, dune shack inhabitants, and residents of Provincetown to draft a preservation and use plan for the shacks. "Pulling all that together to help define the future for that historic district is very significant," he says. "It was a real team effort."

Leadership philosophy:

"My predecessor worked very hard at reaching out to the communities and working with them on mutual issues," he says. "That is my philosophy as well."

Words of wisdom:

"Just because the park was established 50 years ago doesn't mean everything here is static," says Price. Before coming to the Cape, he said he assumed the national seashore's management policies would be set in stone. "Not only is the shoreline changing, but the relationship with the communities is changing, the pressure on resources is changing. There is a continual state of discussion around things like zoning, and water, because so many of these issues remain in flux."

Favorite place in the national seashore:

"I've talked a lot in the past about how Fort Hill is one of my favorite places in the world," says Price. "It's just so inspiring."

Looking forward:

"On the Outer Cape in 1959, there was somehow a feeling that you could capture this place," says Price about the days when the legislation to protect the seashore was just taking shape. "But the Cape is subject to the same environmental and social issues as anyplace else. And the national seashore is totally integrated with six towns - living communities. They have the pressures of millions of visitors, and of changing demographics from when the seashore was first conceived," he said.

In just 50 years, the Cape has transitioned from a place characterized by small fishing villages, to one dominated by wealthy second-home owners and retirees. "We have to try to figure out how to make the best decisions possible to keep the essence and spirit of this area alive for future generations." Ultimately, Price says, "The success of the towns will be success for the seashore."