

Old Cape Cod

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ALL-INCLUSIVE FIVE-STAR hotels lined across the shoreline. Expensive seafood restaurants as far as the eye can see. Multi-million dollar homes scattered everywhere that are only used a few weeks out of the year and abandoned the rest. Crowded beaches littered with trash and debris. This is what I'd imagine the Cape Cod National Seashore would look like if President Kennedy hadn't signed the bill authorizing its protection in 1961.

Having a family home in Hyannis, I'm sure the former president felt that

the natural beauty and unspoiled quality of the area was more priceless than development projects ever could be. In order to protect the shores spanning the Cape, the U.S. government, for the first time, created the National Seashore out of land that was predominantly in private hands for the good of the whole. This benefited not only the rich who could afford the beautiful properties but also anyone who came to visit and enjoy the area. Since then, not only has Cape Cod's population grown, but so has the tourist population. And while I will



still complain every summer that the tourists drive too slowly and ask me for directions too often, it's nice knowing that because of the actions of a former president, they too get to appreciate every little thing the Cape has to offer.

When I think of summers growing up, I think of Monomoy Community Services, the day camp where I spent time as a camper and counselor for many years. Day trips—always on Tuesdays from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon—were my favorite. Sometimes we would go to Orleans Beach, where, depending on the tides, it felt like we had to walk miles to get to water up to our knees. It didn't bother us though. We had fun running in the wet sand and jumping into the little pools of water on the way, pretending that lying in them for a few minutes would rejuvenate us on our journey. Inevitably, by the end of

the day, I ended up with a little sunburn, even though I was reminded many times by the counselors to put on sunscreen. However, I didn't mind. In the summer you knew you had a good day when your cheeks were a little too red.

Sometimes, instead of beaches, we went to ponds. My favorite was one known to us as H-Dock. To this day I still don't know the real name of the pond. We called it that because the shore docks were aligned in the shape of an H. While we weren't allowed to go to the top of the H because the water there was too deep, we still enjoyed jumping off in the shallower areas. The lifeguards must have hated seeing our vans pull up, knowing they would be giving us a few warnings each trip.

When we didn't swim, we hiked. The Atlantic White Cedar Swamp trail in Eastham was by far the most scenic.



For the hourlong loop, we'd walk on a boardwalk through woodlands of oak and pine trees. When walking through the marshes where the water covered the tree roots, we'd sometimes pretend to push each other off the path, leading to us being told to keep our hands to ourselves. Another trail, called Doane, led us to the famous Doane Rock, an exposed boulder that stands almost twenty feet high. We found it much more fun to climb the rock than go on the hike. I always had mixed feelings—a fear of falling and the thrill of being up so high. Funny how a big rock can entertain a group of kids for hours.

When we didn't hike we visited tourist sites. While it felt like the longest drive ever, Heritage Gardens in Sandwich was worth the wait. As we walked along the main pathways of the garden, there would be small pathways leading off to areas of blossoming flowers and

towering trees. My favorite place had a waterfall that cascaded into a small pond filled with lily pads and small snapping turtles. We always spent a lot of time in the Hidden Hollow interactive playground with the two-story treehouse, tent-making materials, and a small stage where you could perform with wooden drums. The Pilgrim Monument in Provincetown, which has the best views of the Cape, really makes you work for those views. While it is only 116 steps up, we complained about each one we took after the first twenty. Once we got to the top, we looked around for a couple of minutes and then asked if it was lunchtime.

Field trips during school are something every kid looks forward to, even if it means going to the beach in January when the wind feels colder than the water. While we got the

occasional trip to Plymouth or Boston, it was much easier to go somewhere more local. Mass Audubon offered a lot when it came to learning about wildlife and the impact humans have on the environment. Making the trip up to Wellfleet or Barnstable, we'd explore the area through trails that led us to the water. This was where I first learned about rising sea levels, specifically what Cape Cod would look like in a hundred years. My heart dropped when I realized how much of my hometown would be covered in water by that time.

When we got a little older we were able to visit places where we could engage with wildlife. As we learned about microscopic organisms in ponds, we got to wear knee-high water boots and take little samples out of the water. We saw box turtles in grass fields and small frogs on the banks by a waterfall.

In seventh grade, my school started working on the development of a vernal pool, which is like a miniature pond that forms from melted snow and rain and is by nature only temporary. These pools, despite their small size, contain many amphibian and invertebrate species. Because they are temporary, fish populations cannot make permanent homes, which helps the amphibian species grow. As a result of rising temperatures and development on Cape Cod, the number of vernal pools has decreased.

In 1948, my great-grandfather, John Madden, came to Chatham with some friends of his to buy a piece of property.

At that time, there were very few houses between the beach and Southview Ave. My great-grandfather chose to build his house about half a mile from the nearest beach—unlike his friends who chose land only a couple hundred feet from the water. Even at that time, he was worried about the tides and how they could affect the house in the future.

My great-grandfather and his friends helped each other build their quaint Cape Cod houses. As a joke, they kept the beer cans they drank out of when they worked and decided to tie them to the foundations of the houses. Almost seventy years later, when his daughter, my grandmother, decided to have the home remodeled, as parts of it were falling apart, they found those rusted beer cans still intact.

It turns out that my great-grandfather was right to decide to build his house further from the beach. All over the Cape, especially in Chatham, buildings too close to the water are facing destruction as erosion increases each year. Morris Island, which is at the very tip of the elbow of Chatham, has been experiencing the worst of this devastation. A few years ago, the headquarters of Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge was torn down before it tumbled down and became marine debris. While Monomoy Refuge will adapt to these changes and continue its work in Chatham, it will be harder for residents and tourists to adapt to these changes. Today people can no longer visit some beaches due to the dangers of



erosion causing trees and the bluffs they grew on to fall down. The houses in this area are next. Bulkheads and seawalls can only do so much.



Towering lighthouses whose lights have guided ships to land for centuries; vast, bright-red cranberry bogs that race by as you drive on the highway; fishermen who pull into the harbor, bringing with them seals anxious for the stray fish that fall off the boat; blue box traps scattered in the marshes that lead biting green heads to them; the small drive-in movie theater that still has the original speaker boxes—this is what I and thousands of others think of when Cape Cod comes to mind.

Except now we are worried about the changes happening on the Cape and all across the country: sea levels rising higher each year; erosion taking away several feet of coastline each year;

inaction on climate change, hiring freezes in national parks, and a “drill baby drill” attitude in the White House. Many of the places that make the U.S. as beautiful as it is are in more danger now than they were sixty years ago. Who knows what they’ll look like in another sixty.

It breaks my heart to think about how the town I’ve spent most of my life in will be partially underwater at the end of the century. Henry David Thoreau, an American author and environmentalist, described Cape Cod as a place where “a man may stand there and put all America behind him.” While it’s important for each of us to be mindful of how the America behind Thoreau is changing as the climate crisis worsens, I think it’s also important to enjoy the landscape of an island that has been twelve thousand years in the making. ●