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People and Places on the Outer Cape: A Landscape Character Study

Jack Ahern, Ethan Carr, Elisabeth Hamin, and David Glassberg

What is it about a landscape that allows it to become a repository for memories and cultural values? How do you protect this for future generations? Indeed, how do you even know what it is before it is gone?

These are the types of questions that dominate "People and Places on the Outer Cape," a study of the six easternmost townships of Cape Cod, produced by a interdisciplinary research team from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The premise of this 2005 EDRA/*Places* Research Award winner is that the character of even the most well-loved American places may decline severely, or be lost altogether, without active public stewardship.

Since the establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1961 major changes have occurred in the landscape there as a result of the continuing decline in traditional maritime activities, a rise of tourism, population growth, and associated commercial development. Sponsored by the National Park Service and its Boston-based Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, the report tried to document and assess these changes in a way that would be useful to NPS staff, town officials, residents, and property owners. Among its goals were to help citizens recognize the full scope of their landscape heritage and understand current threats to it; empower local communities in their planning, zoning and site reviews; and encourage the establishment of new partnerships and ideas to preserve its character.

The jury found the approach to a complex topic in "People and Places" both practical and poetic. They praised its ability to articulate the foundations of cultural landscapes, the link between place character and the dynamics of memory, and the need to preserve ways of life as well as physical environments.

Managing a Cultural Landscape

Since Europeans arrived in Massachusetts, Cape Cod's landscape has been transformed many times over. After displacing local Native Americans, Europeans cleared most of the forest cover and began systematically to exploit the agricultural potential of Cape lands and the fisheries of nearby tidal flats, bays, and ocean.

Until the twentieth century, however, the large areas of windswept bluff and beach that faced out to the open Atlantic on the Outer Cape were considered a forbidding wilderness. Development there—in the townships of Provincetown, Truro, Wellfleet, Eastham, Orleans, and Chatham—mostly occurred along the shores of more sheltered bays and in the pamets (hollows) between the dunes. In the mid-nineteenth century, the report notes, Henry David Thoreau even called the Outer Cape's Great Beach "rough and desolate." A place of storm and wreck, it was "where things came to die."

Tourism first arrived on Cape Cod with the railroad in the nineteenth century, and in the decades that followed generations of summer visitors came to view the Outer Cape's landscape differently. Many fell in love with its dunes and pamets, oak-pine forests and fresh-water kettleponds, salt marshes and cranberry bogs, historic whitewashed town centers and small but sturdy working waterfronts. The report notes how "a large and diverse literature" developed "describing the perhaps indescribable aspects" of life there. An entire school of landscape painting and photography also emerged out of the summer workshops and galleries of Provincetown.

It was amid this conflict of old and new that the National Seashore was designated in the 1960s. By then, the mass automobile tourism that had developed after World War II was coming to be seen as a threat to the restorative qualities of a summer sojourn on the Outer Cape. Signed into being by a native son, John Kennedy, its mission was to preserve the "authentic" quality of the area. In cooperation with local townships, it sought to preserve the landscape from crass commercialism, as well as manage the delicate balance between man and nature for generations to come.

According to Jack Ahern, the principal investigator for "People and Places," the National Seashore has done a

People and Places on the Outer Cape—Jury Comments

Brager: The question is whether we consider this in the planning category, even though it has a really strong research component, or as research, even though it has really strong implications for planning. I agree we should probably keep it in research, commending it for a really strong component about implications.

Vale: Although the interesting thing is it's clearly the case of a federal agency commissioning a university to make a product for them that is in much more of a planning mode.

Hardy: If it stays in research, you could somehow encourage a planning stage. They can be encouraged to make a great plan.

Vale: What's unusual is that a lot of the research that seems to have won awards has not been research for a client. So here you have a client and a constituency that is presumably funding the work, as opposed to an agenda that's emerging entirely from people doing the research.

remarkably good job taking care of the physical and biological resources in the forty years since. "Where they were not as good was in managing the cultural landscape."

The result in some cases has been simmering conflict between longtime residents and the authorities. Cultural landscapes embody both an underlying ecology and the way it has been shaped by human activities into a series of perceptible places. When different groups view the landscape differently, conflicts may play themselves out as management disputes—on the Outer Cape, for example, pitting traditional lifeways such as off-road vehicle use and sport surfcasting against the habitat needs of nesting shorebirds.

What the report seeks to accomplish is to bring such a dialogue into the open so a public appraisal of risks and effects may be made. What ultimately sustains a sense of landscape authenticity, the report concludes, is its ability to serve as a continually evolving repository for personal and cultural memory. A "sense of place" emerges when a location "has a role in the creation of [people's] memories, and therefore of their identity as individuals, and as a group."

"Headings"

The research involved the work of landscape architects, public historians, and cultural geographers. It included archival and published literature reviews, GIS analysis, interviews with residents and local officials, field observations and analysis, and a series of public workshops. Much of the work was done in two parallel graduate-student studios in the Landscape Architecture Department at U. Mass., Amherst. One was taught by Ahern, Head of the Department, and the other by Assistant Professor Ethan Carr, who had formerly worked with the Park Service in cultural-landscape issues.

Its initial section is devoted to "Character, Current Trends, and History." After that, its second section collects

Left: The long sweep of Cape Cod's Great Beach stretches out toward Provincetown. Aerial photo by PANDION.
Right: Traditional activities have long included clam digging. Photo courtesy of CCNS/NPS.

Brager: It's a really good model for that kind of funding for research. You are more likely to produce something that is going to be useful, because the clients have a vested interest in its usefulness—as opposed to a research report that sits on the shelf and you hope somebody finds it.

Harris: I'm not sure how we started on whether it is in one category or the other. It is so sensitive to place and subtle in its understandings of place I wouldn't care which category it is in.

Brager: One of my questions was about fit. I always liked the project. What I wondered was, is this just about preservation of the natural environment, or is it something about the design landscape? Is it something about development? Is it something about policy? When I looked at it with a specific eye for that, I was delighted to find that the fit was perhaps more narrow than some of the other projects, but absolutely there. It's very much about how land is managed, zoned, protected. There are other aspects about coastal management and even housing development.

Vale: It was remarkably centered on questions of place and

the bulk of the research under a number of "headings." In an innovative way, these refer both to topical sections of the document as well as to directions, "in the nautical sense," for inquiry and concern. The headings, in order of appearance, are "The Great Beach," "Waterways," "Town Centers and Harbors," "Farms and Forests," "Getting Around," and "Homes on the Outer Cape."

The third section of the report emerged following a series of "Cape Cod Conversations," held at multiple locations on the Outer Cape. At these public events attendees were shown slides of typical Cape Cod activities or places and asked to discuss what they saw. They were largely organized by David Glassberg, Chairman of the U. Mass, Amherst Department of History, who had previously collaborated with Carr on studies to help the Park Service better understand, integrate and manage cultural-landscape issues.

Comments received at these events appear as pull-quotes throughout the document, and cover a range of issues. For example, when shown traditional fishing boats, many respondents reflected on how these activities are fast diminishing, but retain great meaning for tourists and residents alike. The image that sparked the greatest response was of a big new house in Wellfleet, which touched a nerve relating to the social and environmental impacts of present forces of change.

According to one resident: "It's a pity. When people come here, and they want to stay and they build the big houses and they put in these fancy lawns and they water them daily, you can no longer conserve what was here. And

place-making, and in some very subtle ways. There were some very well-written pieces to it. Take the observation about the Cape Cod Conversations method—that deeply held landscape values and perceptions are often articulated only in groups, through local residents conversations with one another. And this process, while certainly not unique, of using photography to elicit commentary in a group setting, seemed to have worked very well.

Harris: When I first picked it up I saw some notion about trying to define the fundamental character of the landscape—because if you are going to try to hang onto it then you ought to know what it was. They came to the notion that it had to do with how people remembered it and experienced it, rather than an object-minded definition. Immediately, it was the engagement of people that mattered. They got off to a good start, and they kept it up.

Vale: There was one sentence that jumped out at me: that "Cape Cod National Seashore can help keep the piping plovers from becoming extinct but not the resource-based industries responsible for the look and feel of the traditional Cape landscape." They were interested in a different kind of cultural extinction, and really asking about the socioeconomics and the intricacies of daily life

the people who were here can no longer afford to live here because it doesn't make any sense to keep your property when you're making fifteen thousand dollars a year and then you can sell the property for a million."

New Pressures

If there is a villain that emerges from this piece it is what Ahern calls "incremental development." The growth of the Boston metro area, new technologies, and the increased affluence of baby-boomer retirees now means that the Outer Cape is no longer seen just as a place for hardscrabble locals and fair-weather tourists. Increasingly it is becoming a place of year-round residence. And as the limited land area for development shrinks and it approaches "buildout," new pressures mount that are resulting in a lack of affordable housing, year-round traffic congestion, and pollution of its sole-source aquifer.

Pressures on the perceivable landscape mount as well. According to Ahern, there are some 600 or so "inholdings" within the existing National Seashore. "It complicates life considerably to realize that these could be redeveloped extensively. A cute little cottage that once fit into the landscape could all of a sudden rise up to triple its size."

The problem extends into the centers of existing towns as well. One-by-one redevelopment of residential lots and the conversion of small-scale commercial uses into giant retail outlets might someday mean the Outer Cape will lose its distinct place identity and come to resemble every other landscape on the outskirts of a major city.

When the National Seashore was first being proposed, local communities feared the federal agency would assume a dominant role in their affairs. To assuage these concerns, agreement was reached on a "Cape Cod model" according to which the Seashore would suspend purchase and selective condemnation of lands if the towns would agree to zoning restrictions that "supported the preservation of the Cape landscape."

"If we were to honor that model it should mean you could go to the towns and say that these new monster homes are out of character, and that they should write and enforce zoning regulations to prohibit them," Ahern says. But legal, political and economic issues make this difficult. And, Ahern notes, the relationship between the federal agency and the towns has been, euphemistically speaking, "up and down."

Research to Action

A certain frustration will always attend the writing of reports like "People and Places of the Outer Cape." No matter how skilled the researchers in documenting issues and identifying threats, others must become sufficiently motivated by their work for it to have practical effect.

To begin this process of turning research into action, the report's last section lays out three alternate scenarios for the future of the Outer Cape. These were based on prioritizing conservation, containing new growth within existing town centers, and creating "new villages. A follow-up three-day conference was also held in October 2004 in Provincetown to promote discussion of the report's findings. Called "Endless Summer: Preserving Landscape Character in Coastal Communities," it focused on four themes: community character, affordable housing, working waterfronts, and smart growth and redevelopment.

As "People and Places" points out, "authenticity does not exist by happenstance; paradoxically or not, it is often cultivated and nurtured by local businesses and residents alike. The delicate balance between promoting character and preserving it is hard to achieve." There are lessons here for sensitive cultural landscapes nationwide.

Opposite: Restored dune shacks are a remnant of older housing patterns on the Outer Cape. Photo courtesy of U. Mass.

in a complex tension of longtime local residents and the summer tourist crowd. What can planning do, what can the National Park Service do, what can anybody do about the long-term sustainability of certain ways of life? What can you do to help support local fishing industries? Or what can you do to support affordable housing for the people who live and work here and can't afford to remain in the next generation? And it managed to be evocative about the qualities of the place through its prose and images without wholly romanticizing something that it isn't. It acknowledged the very serious challenges that are there that will ultimately work against anyone's enjoyment of the place—the sense of the cumulative effect of incremental changes. We don't see it with each little transaction, as when somebody doubles the size of a house on a particularly prominent dune or slope. What would it mean to have a system that didn't allow you to do large things that are visible from certain kinds of places? If you multiply that times a few hundred, you may well save a much broader set of vistas without being wholly retrograde in your approach. So I thought it was really quite an exemplary piece of work that managed to be both practical and poetic at the same time.

Cranz: Well said—practical and poetic—it was moving.