

# Barrier beach breach wins rave reviews

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EDGARTOWN — Unlike Chatham, which agonized over whether a new break in its barrier beach would ultimately damage waterfront homes and hobble its fishing fleet, Edgartown has embraced the changes wrought by the same Patriots Day storm.

"People around here are generally happy about it," says Town Administrator Pam Dolby.

The 300-yard-wide, 20-foot-deep break in the barrier beach at Norton Point that appeared April 18 may even bring improved water quality, shellfishing and fishing in Katama Bay.

The bay is shaped like a partially deflated balloon, with its neck pinched nearly closed on the Nantucket Sound side of the island at the entrance to Edgartown Harbor. The new break sends cold, clean water shooting far up into the bay at three times the speed of water coming through the tiny opening at Chappaquiddick Point. It's a force so strong it exposed the bones of a minke whale buried two years ago at Norton Point, then ripped the carcass apart, scattering the bones and dragging most of it back out to sea.

## Nature's vacuum cleaner

While ecologist Greg Whitmore was intrigued by the idea of the storm, he was far more interested in how it had scoured out decades of muck that had been threatening to turn Katama into a smelly, stagnant backwater.

"Katama was filling in with sediment," said Whitmore, the regional ecologist for the Trustees of Reservations which manages Norton Point Beach for the town.

"It's a completely natural phenomenon. It sucked all the sediment out."

With such a narrow entrance at the northern end of the bay, the southern shore had seen little tidal current to carry dead beach grass, eelgrass and other natural debris out to sea. As it decayed, the organic matter settled on top of the natural white sandy bottom, forming a layer of smelly muck that Whitmore said could support few species.

"Nobody would swim here," Whitmore said Thursday, standing on Norton Point Beach next to the break. The beach is only about 100 feet wide between ocean and the bay behind it. Beachgoers would come for the ocean side and avoid the smelly, mucky bay tidal flats.

In the areas closer to the break, those flats are gone. It's as if a giant shovel scooped out the sediment and left behind white sand and clear green water. Whitmore said he believes the changes will make for better habitat — not only for shellfish and plant life, but also for birds.

Plovers started settling on the sandy point even as the April storm was still raging. Last week, dozens of least terns and common terns huddled along the bay shore against a stiff ocean wind. If fall and winter storms don't destroy the thin strand of beach, this could be a productive tern colony next summer, Whitmore said.

Meanwhile, bigger fish such as striped bass like to sit in strong currents and catch smaller fish that the fast water sends tumbling into their gaping mouths.

## **No down side**

"It's all good," said Edgartown fisherman Tom Smith, casting into the roiling water off the beach. A 30-foot fishing vessel maneuvered between the fingers of a delta of sandbars that fanned out from the mouth on the inlet, looking for bigger fish.

With the 62nd annual striped bass and bluefish fishing derby set to begin yesterday, fishermen scrambled to scout entirely new fishing territory in the bay.

"The learning curve is steep," said Smith. The addition of a new fast current was also a challenge to boaters.

As she pulled away from the Edgartown dock last week, Tara Whiting appeared unfazed as the stern of the small ferry was manhandled by the current until she was crabbing sideways toward the dock on the opposite shore on Chappaquiddick Point.

There's a constant battle for dominance between the two inlets into Katama Bay, and that makes it impossible to predict the tide direction and when it will be running the strongest.

"It takes a couple of runs to figure it out," said Whiting.

"The true yachtsmen picked it up," said Harbor Master Charlie Blair. "The inexperienced had even more trouble."

Blair had to move his mooring fields because the two currents, coming from opposite directions, ran beside one another right through the middle of the buoys, sending moored vessels crashing into one another.

Blair, like many others on this fish-mad island, is a fisherman. He has a pole in the office and 200 more at home.

He's seen Norton Point break through a number of times, but it doesn't last long.

"I've been seeing big clouds of krill (small shrimplike animals). That's whale food," he said. "It's a brand-new game."

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