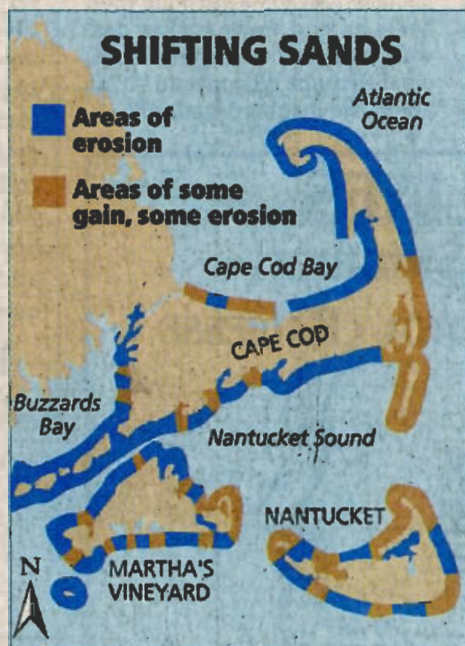


EROSION

Cape and Islands beaches disappearing with each passing storm



JAMES WARREN/Cape Cod Times

By **DOUG FRASER**
STAFF WRITER

The Cape's beaches are disappearing faster than ever. And as ocean waves carry away more and more sand, Cape towns have been forced to spend ever-increasing amounts of money to protect and restore their greatest asset.

"The way we all remember Cape Cod is disappearing. Soon, it will look like Nahant, all pebbles and no sand," Harwich harbor master Tom Leach said of the beaches lining Nantucket Sound.

Beaches are the foundation of the seasonal economy. According to the Massachusetts Office of Tourism and Travel, 48 percent of the 4.7 million people who annually visit the Cape go to the beach, the highest of the categories surveyed.

In Orleans alone, fees collected for parking and off-road travel permits top \$900,000 annually. To protect that revenue stream, the town has earmarked \$2 million on its capital plan to purchase an inland parking lot, as their current lot and beach access is threatened by erosion.

Leach said towns are "sand 'starved." To find sand to save their beaches, towns are taking dredge spoils once dumped at sea and rebuilding eroded shorelines. They are dredging channels deeper to get more sand out of each project, and they are even looking for areas offshore where they might mine large quantities of sand for large-scale projects that promise to temporarily restore beaches.

The expense runs into the millions, but

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the payback in tourist dollars is huge. In the Delaware area, for instance, beach experts claim that rebuilding beaches was paid for two or three times over in tourist revenues.

"Beaches are truly a part of a community's infrastructure, like roads. ... In many cases, they define the community," said Ted Keon, Chatham coastal resources director. "If they are allowed to decay, there will be a loss."

Keon compared rebuilding beaches to maintaining roads.

"You have to fix the pothole and nourish the beach."

Dredging sand-clogged boating channels is the most cost-effective way to rebuild beaches - at \$6.50 a cubic yard.

Trucking in sand can cost as much

as \$250 a cubic yard. But dredging at the town, county, state and federal level doesn't come close to the need.

Mark Forest, an aide to U.S. Rep. William Delahunt, D-Mass, said President George Bush's latest proposed budget allowed for full dredging of just one of 171 small New England ports. Additional restrictions on how federal dredging resources are used essentially cut out smaller ports, like those on the Cape and Islands, Forest said. Delahunt-sponsored legislation that would ease those restrictions is making progress in the House and Senate, according to Forest.

Harwich budgets \$50,000 a year toward channel dredging, enough to gather 7,500 cubic yards of sand. Leach said he has to make that amount stretch to cover four or five projects a year.

"We are way underfunded. We should be moving twice or three times that volume every year," he said.

Beach areas are subject to a complex set of regulations from local, state and federal agencies - provisions protecting plants, marshes, wetlands, coastal banks and dunes, rare and endangered species and fish habitat.

Dredging projects are also squeezed into narrow blocks of time by closures to protect fish.

To address the challenges posed by beach nourishment projects, the state has put together a dredge team that includes representatives of the federal Army Corps of Engineers, state Coastal Zone Management, state Division of Marine Fisheries and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Steve McKenna, Coastal Zone Management's Cape and Islands regional coordinator, said beaches are caught in a classic case of competing interests - fisheries and rare species protection vs. property protection.

Defining fish habitat and the requirements for dredging and renourishing beaches would go a long way to untangling the process, McKenna said.

He believes those answers should be coming from someone at the state level such as Ian Bowles, director of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs.

"At a higher level, someone has to define what this balance should be," McKenna said.

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Without beaches,
what is the Cape
and Islands?

The owner of this Nantucket home
has received permission to move it.



Without convenient
public access,
who will come?

ROB BENCHLEY photo



STEVE HEASLIP/Cape Cod Times

A bulldozer levels sand that has been deposited in front of the Chatham Bars Inn to "renourish" the resort's beach.