Sea Grant
Woods Hole

Focal Points

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Shoreline Change and the Importance of Coastal Erosion

The Massachusetts shore is, for the most part, eroding. Results of a statistical analysis of shoreline change spanning 140 years and covering approximately 1,000 miles of ocean-facing shore reveals that, overall, the Massachusetts shore is eroding at approximately 0.56 feet per year. Data from published charts and aerial photographs from the mid-1800s to 1978 show that 72 percent of the communities for which shoreline change data were available exhibit a long-term EROSION trend, while 28 percent exhibit long-term ACCRETION. The highest long-term average annual erosion rates occur along the south shore of Nantucket at approximately 12 feet per year.

The Importance of Coastal Erosion

Erosion of glacial landforms (including MORAINES, DRUMLINS, OUTWASH PLAINS, and KAMES) provides the primary source of sand and cobble for Massachusetts' 1,500 miles of beaches, dunes, and BARRIER BEACHES.

James O'Connell, WHOI Sea Grant

Without erosion, many of the Commonwealth's biologically productive bays, estuaries, saltmarshes, and tidal flats would not exist. Yet coastal erosion is considered a major economic problem in Massachusetts and nationally.

The importance of the coast, economically, is easier to measure, in some cases, than its aesthetic value. Waterfront property, for example, generates much of the residential tax base for coastal communities. According to *Soundings* magazine, proximity to waterfront adds approximately 28 percent to the value of real estate. Mirroring worldwide trends, 75 percent of Massachusetts development, historically, has occurred in the coastal zone. And in many cases, development proceeds without consideration of long- and short-term shoreline change, particularly erosion. Right now, hundreds of millions of dollars of Massachusetts shorefront real estate is at risk due to both chronic, long-term erosion of coastal bluffs and episodic, storm-induced erosion of dunes and barrier beaches *(see photographs)*.

A 1994 Army Corps of Engineers report stated that, at that time, 74 structures could potentially be lost in the next 50 years along Humarock Beach in Scituate as a result of erosion. Today, many homes along the 100-foot-plus coastal banks of southern Plymouth and the east shore of Nantucket are presently at high risk of loss due to long- and short-term erosion and SLUMPING.

Causes of Shoreline Change

The causes of shoreline change are both natural and human-induced. The primary natural causes of erosion in Massachusetts are RELATIVE SEA LEVEL RISE and storms. The results of a study completed several years ago by scientists at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) document that relative sea level in Massachusetts is rising approximately one vertical foot every 100 years. Each year, on average, approximately 65 acres of COASTAL UPLAND are PASSIVELY SUBMERGED as a result of relative sea level rise. In fact, authors found that the contribution to shoreline retreat in Massachusetts from relative sea level rise is far greater in some areas than erosion

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Words in SMALL CAPITALS *are defined in the glossary on page 3.*

Phone: (508) 289-2398 • Fax: (508) 457-2172 • E-mail: seagrant@whoi.edu • Internet: http://www.whoi.edu/seagrant
Sea Grant Program, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, MS#2, Woods Hole, MA 02543


James O'Connell

armoring of sediment sources with seawalls, revetments, and bulkheads, and the interruption of longshore sediment transport by the construction of groins and jetties.

Understanding Shoreline Change

Identifying areas subject to both long- and short-term erosion, and understanding the causes of erosion are important if we wish to avoid building homes, structures, and infrastructure in high hazard coastal areas. Shoreline change maps and data for Massachusetts, as well as maps showing areas subject to storm waves and flooding, are available for viewing or for purchase *(see Resources section)*.

The correct interpretation of shoreline change data can help coastal planners, resource managers, and property owners identify appropriate and inappropriate areas to place structures. The combination of long-term shoreline change data analysis, measurements of short-term shoreline movements, an understanding of coastal

Learning from past mistakes, though unfortunate, can also aid coastal planners. Consider the following lessons learned about shoreline change in Massachusetts:

- Jetty construction at the mouth of Sandwich Harbor on Cape Cod Bay resulted in downdrift erosion for approximately 5,600 linear feet, with a maximum erosion of the downdrift shoreline of approximately 361 feet. However, following readjustment of the shoreline to the new, artificially induced equilibrium profile, the shoreline has eroded only 38 feet.
- The erosion rate along the Humarock Beach shoreline of Scituate has accelerated since the 1950s. The principal sediment sources for this barrier beach, updrift glacial drumlins, have been armored with revetments. This has significantly reduced the major source material for the beach. The apparent cause and effect nature of the

long-term rate of change in future planning and management for this area.

- On Nantucket and in other areas, trend reversals—erosion followed by accretion, and vice versa—complicate matters. In many cases, short-term shoreline fluctuations can be orders of magnitude greater than the long-term rate of shoreline change. Nantucket's southeast shore has a long-term average shoreline change rate of +0.10 feet per year (net accretion of 2.1 feet between 1846-1978), suggesting a relatively stable area. However, between 1846 and 1978 the shoreline accreted 238 feet, then eroded 236 feet. This same phenomenon occurred at Codfish Park on Nantucket. Unfortunately, many homes were constructed during the accretion phase. Since the trend reversed to erosion beginning in mid-1950s, many houses have been lost to ero

determine which is more reflective of the potential future shoreline configuration.

On-going Shoreline Change Research and Information Needs in Massachusetts

The following studies, conducted by WHOI investigators, represent but a few examples of the many studies underway in Massachusetts:

Investigation into the timing, severity, and causes of coastal bluff erosion on the Cape Cod Bay shore of Truro involves the analysis of bluff erosion and the formation and migration of nearshore sandbars.

In collaboration with the U.S. Geological Survey, investigators are trying to understand the complex interplay and feedback mechanisms among the sea cliffs, beaches, and shallow water regions along the Cape Cod National Seashore. They are also attempting to determine the