

# VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

The U.S. Corps of Engineers has, after completing a seven-year study of erosion on Cape Cod at a cost of \$275,000, concluded it's not economically feasible to attempt saving us from being washed into the Atlantic Ocean.

You can, therefore, kiss goodbye at least forty-seven miles of our Cape's eastern coast. Nature's ravaging storms are to be allowed to take their toll undeterred. The eventual toll will be the entire outer Cape from Chatham and Orleans to Provincetown.

If the infamous (at least in some circles) Corps has admitted defeat, we may as well accept the inevitable. (Most of us would have acknowledged that before spending \$275,000, but what would the Corps do to justify its existence were it not to make expensive studies?) Along with our beautiful and beloved lower Cape, studded with picturesque little villages, handsome estates and lovely homes, will go the entire Cape Cod National Seashore.

A chief naturalist at the Seashore, Glen Kaye, says, "It would take the entire federal budget to halt the erosion." In fact, the cost to protect the outer Cape would be horrendous, the Corps has declined to consider seriously the environmental impact of any of the plans proposed for erosion control.

The most expensive of these was a 20-mile-long breakwater to be constructed about 1200 feet off the eastern shore — the backside of the Cape's "bare and bended arm," as Thoreau described it.

Cape Cod and the Islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard were formed when glaciers, creeping down over New England during the various ice ages, melted as a result of our planet's climatic changes. As the ice sheets melted they dumped billions of tons of rock, gravel, sand and clay in ridges extending from Bourne to Falmouth and from Sandwich to Truro. Geologists call the mounds of debris left when glaciers retreat terminal moraine. One of these, the Buzzards Bay moraine, begins in Bourne, north of the Cape Cod Canal, and runs south toward Falmouth.

The Sandwich moraine runs east and west and forms a ridge that is the Cape's backbone. The Mid-Cape highway (Route 6) runs along the ridge to Orleans.

From northern Orleans to North Truro another wind-swept moraine formed when two glaciers merged, then melted, to form an interlobate moraine. It is, of all New England's coastline, the most vulnerable to erosion by winds and waters.

Ever since the melting ice piled sand, clay, gravel and boulders on what is now Cape Cod, the sea has nibbled it away. Bluffs edging the eastern shore are losing an average of three feet a year. While approximately half the material removed is redeposited as sand spits — all of Provincetown is but a sandspit — these too will ultimately be consumed.

It may take 10,000 or more years before the six outer Cape towns entirely sink beneath the waves, but evidence it will happen is visible to all who visit the lower Cape. In the February '78 blizzard Eastham's Coast Guard Beach was leveled, the parking lot disappeared, and the bathhouse was destroyed. All that remains of the parking lot are isolated patches of macadam still bearing painted arrows that once directed traffic; the beach access road is narrowed to one lane.

Like the Corps of Engineers, officials at the Seashore Park . . . the lower Cape's largest landowner . . . have abandoned all thought of halting the natural forces that will one day reduce it to a mere dotted line on ocean charts.

Ten thousand years is a long time; you don't have to rush down Cape for a last look. No one living today worries about what may happen in the year 12,000 A.D. And if it were to happen all at once in some distant year, no one would imagine such catastrophe might befall our narrow land. The important figure to consider is not how long it will take until the Cape ends at Harwich and Brewster, but how long it will be before some bit of real estate, now poised above the surf, simply disappears between nightfall and dawn.

If you don't happen to own such a piece of real estate, maybe you won't care; but someone's going to suffer a big loss, and it's going to hurt, emotionally as well as financially.

And don't think only the outer Cape is in jeopardy. We who live on the Cape's south shore, somewhat protected by the islands, see our own beaches slipping into the sea. Seashore erosion in New England averages a little more than two feet per year.

Take particular note of the word "averages." That means some years only an imperceptible inch or two slides down the bank; in other years as much as twenty or thirty feet can wash away; in years that hurricanes have lashed our southern shores, that much land has disappeared overnight.

Back in August, 1944, a severe hurricane roared up from the Caribbean and tore across the Cape. South shore beaches and shorefront properties from Falmouth to Chatham were devastated. The beach at Oregon in Cotuit washed out and the sea poured into Rushy Marsh. The breach healed itself the following winter, but the beach remains smaller and narrower to this day.

The same storm swept away lawns, pine groves and bluffs twenty feet deep from the beach front at Wianno. Where, the day before, the ladies sipped their tea, waters of the Sound now rippled. The bluff's new leading edge dropped to the beach within five feet of the doorstep of the Wianno Club.

Of a summer residence which had graced the sandy point at the western entrance to East Bay, nothing stood but a chimney. Scattered in the sand were a few dishes and other small relics of the home that, only the previous evening, had appeared to be a permanent part of the land and seascape. gone.

At Craigville Beach not a bathhouse stood on the water side of the road. Scattered in the marshes and along the banks of Centerville River were cottages, tilting rakishly, some half-on-half off their foundations, some entirely removed from their former sites. Directly in the center of the road, in front of the place the bathhouses had been, only yesterday, sat a scale. It was the kind with a big round dial, the kind you used to feed a penny and get back a small card telling your weight and Fortune for Today. It must have weighed a quarter of a ton.

When you drove to Centerville from Osterville across Bumps River Bridge, the sandy barrier beach on the right was, like the beach at Cotuit, open to the outer seas. That breach, too, mended itself.

Losing six of our Cape Cod towns will take a long time; the loss will be gradual but not so gradual each bite won't bring anguish. Losing our mid-Cape coastal properties won't be painless either, and even though the footage may disappear more slowly, it's going, all the time, tiny grain of sand by tiny grain of sand. During storms, yard by yard, it slips under the waves.

Next time you drive along Wianno Beach at low tide, note the sand bars forming beyond the beach. The water is lighter where the water shallows. Where do you suppose the sand comes from to build those bars?

Not from the ocean floor, let me assure you.

As the Seashore's Mr. Kaye said, "If you build close to the coast, you can pretty well predict the lifespan of your structure, and don't kid yourself that Uncle Sam or anybody else is going to come in and halt the process."

If the United State Corps of Engineers confesses it can't tackle the job, it's a sure bet there's no one who can.