

Public Use, Private Meaning: A Case Study of Two New England Summer Communities

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The mission of the National Park Service (NPS) is to preserve “unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations” (NPS 2009). Thus, it is an organization dedicated to preserving and using, two values which constantly require balancing in the operation and development of our national parks.

Inherent in this proclaimed philosophy is the idea that the preservation of a cultural landscape will provide generations of public users with the opportunity to gain knowledge and inspiration from it, while the responsible stewardship of particular physical resources will continue to cultivate certain intangibles, like appreciation and enlightenment. However, the acquisition of meaning and understanding is a strictly individual process. The question therefore arises: How can the management of a public landscape impact its personal meaning? What dangers or opportunities does this process hold for a publically-oriented organization like the NPS?

The following two New England case studies provide useful insight into these questions. More specifically, these sites bring out important lessons about the private meaning of landscapes throughout America, and how they might be most effectively managed for public use, enjoyment, and education.

The dune shacks of the Peaked Hill Bars

The dunes of Provincetown are a stark, isolated expanse of sand stretching up the outer shore of the tip of Cape Cod, in Massachusetts. Stepping into this landscape is like entering another world—a world of sand, sun, sky and sea. Here and there grow patches of beach plum and bayberry, on hillsides cloaked in pale green beach grasses that blow in the salty wind. In a setting almost entirely devoid of trees, only a few scrawny pitch pines cling to the occasional sheltered hollow. Over the crest of the last dune, the Atlantic Ocean lies flat in a bold, blue contrast to the rolling mounds of sand. Close by, the nesting sites of terns and the endangered piping plover can be found.

The wild, wind-swept coastal beauty of this area is the heart of a national treasure whose preservation is the primary goal of the Cape Cod National Seashore (CCNS). Roughly 1,500 acres of dune landscape located east of Provincetown are today known as the Peaked Hill Bars Historic District. Owned, managed, and maintained by the NPS since the creation of CCNS in 1960, the district also includes a total of nineteen rugged, wind-worn structures, or dune shacks.

Trudging heavily through the sloping dunes from Provincetown, it can be a surprise to come upon a wind-battered shack. The actual distance between these outposts and the bustle of Provincetown is only a matter of one or two miles; yet the looming size and emptiness

of the dunes makes the shacks seem like tiny gems hidden in a remote desert. In truth, however, most of these buildings have been here for quite some time.

The original dune dwellers lived in shacks associated with one of the earliest coast guard facilities in the country. Built in 1872, the Life Saving Station of the Peaked Hill Bars was named after a treacherous line of sandbars that faced a stretch of coastline marked by a giant barrier sand dune, or the Peaked Hill. In the decades that followed, the station became a destination for family members and friends of the early life savers. When, in 1918, the Cape Cod Life Savers were replaced by the United States Coast Guard, their stations went out of service and the old structures were either abandoned or sold (Donaldson, Hilyard, and Brown, forthcoming).

From then on, the dune shacks became a regular retreat for a select few. With the social and artistic awakening of Provincetown during World War I and afterwards, many visitors were painters, actors, and writers driven by the spirit of creativity. When the old Life Saving Station and most of its associated buildings were swept into the sea by a severe storm in 1931, a new generation of shacks sprang up to replace them. Most of today's shacks belong to this group, and were built in the 1930s and 1940s.

Dune dwellers came to an agreement with the local land owners and built the shacks themselves, in some cases using salvaged materials from the ruins of other shacks, or wood washed up on the beach. Carefully crafted to sustain the harsh yet fragile dune environment, each simple shack was unique. Over decades of ongoing maintenance and seasonal use, the links forged between the families and the structures they created grew in strength and meaning, and an enduring shack user community was born.

The NPS acquired the Peaked Hill Bars area in 1966. At the time, the dunes were suffering from a high level of both human use and abuse, and becoming dangerously destabilized by swarms of beach buggies that ripped up the fragile beach grass and other sparse vegetation. Following the philosophy of the 1964 American Wilderness Act, the new park launched its pursuit of an untamed, nature-oriented dune environment devoid of any evidence of humanity (16 USC 1131–1136). Public use of the Peaked Hill Bars area was severely curtailed, and a policy of restricted vehicle access and dune preservation was established (Donaldson, Hilyard, and Brown, forthcoming).

As for the shacks, when most of the dune dwellers were unable to prove their legal right to the land in court, the NPS offered term lease and use agreement alternatives to allow families' use of the buildings to continue. Most of the shack users ultimately signed an agreement of this kind, and as a result were able to maintain their seasonal visits or permanent residency in the dunes without interruption.

Still, the meaning of the shacks themselves, and their place in the landscape, became more tenuous under NPS ownership. Over several winters, some of the buildings were vandalized or even burnt down, prompting many dune dwellers to post signs (e.g., "Keep Out") or repeatedly undertake repairs. In 1984, one of the shacks was destroyed as part of the park's effort to return the dunes to a more ideal wilderness landscape.

In an almost immediate response, local support for preservation of the shacks sprang to life. Several local non-profit organizations were soon formed, and together began working toward preserving the dunes' special meaning for shack users. The first was the Peaked Hill

Trust, which was founded in 1986 to protect the remaining dune structures. Most dune dwellers have traditionally been members of this group, whose periodic meetings have helped perpetuate an understanding of the values and concerns shared by regular shack users. Two similar organizations, the Provincetown Community Compact (PCC) and the Outer Cape Artist and Residence Consortium (OCARC), were formed in 1993 and 1995. Today, each of these bodies maintains and manages the use of one or more shacks through lottery, general application, or artist-in-residence programs. Many lottery winner and artist visitors, as well as the more regular dune dwellers and their friends, often paint and compose while staying in the shacks (Figure 1). Others just eat, sleep and enjoy the pure simplicity and peaceful quality of life in the dunes. Thus, the combination of artistic and long-term family use of the shacks today has come to echo their historic use.

In part through the efforts of the Peaked Hill Trust, the Dune Shacks of the Peaked Hill Bars are today recognized as a Historic District, and were determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. This determination helps to protect the shacks that were threatened less than thirty years ago. Although the dune dwellers now lease the structures from the NPS, their ability to voice concerns about the shacks has been further reinforced by the Trust, PCC, and OCARC. Since the early 1990s, shack users have also been able to contribute to district management through the Dune Shack Subcommittee of the Cape Cod National Seashore Advisory Commission. Two individuals are elected to this subcommittee, which then represents dune dweller interests to the park in periodic meetings. In recent years, this subcommittee has not met consistently or regularly. However, its recognition of dune dweller interests and concerns is an important step toward cultivating a stronger partnership with the park.

Figure 1. View of one of the dune shacks, taken by the author in 2007.



Despite the ongoing anxiety on both sides about the management, use, and significance of the dune shacks over the years, the relationships that have emerged out of this process teach some crucial lessons about how to preserve not only the physical elements of cultural landscapes, but their more personal meaning.

Point Lookout

Studying the cultural landscape of the Dune Shacks of the Peaked Hill Bars is particularly powerful for me because I, too, am a summer escapee. For three generations, my extended family has paid seasonal visits to a house bought by my grandfather on Isle au Haut, in the Gulf of Maine, in 1952 (Figure 2). Our house stands on land owned by the Point Lookout Association (PLA), a group established by a collection of Boston families in the early nineteenth century. Today the PLA continues to manage the small, isolated Point Lookout community on the northeastern side of the island, just outside of Acadia National Park.

Relative to the rest of the roughly 7,680-acre island, the landscape of Point Lookout is not particularly distinctive. Roughly ten acres of old coniferous forest blanket a series of rolling hills as they tumble down to the waters' edge, where the cold, salty fingers of the Atlantic Ocean swirl around multicolored boulders. Deer flourish in these woods along with fox, rabbit, and turkey. Down among the clumps of seaweed at low tide, countless sea creatures scurry and hide from the sea gulls circling overhead.

Like the sandy hike out to the dune shacks, the process of reaching Isle au Haut is itself an isolating experience. A thick fog frequently hangs over the half-hour ferry ride on the island mail boat, which threads the needle through lobster buoys and a spread of tiny islands.

Figure 2. View of Point Lookout on Isle au Haut, in the Penobscot Bay, Maine, taken by the author in 2007. More than half of the island forms a part of Acadia National Park.



Visible on the approach are a few of the Point Lookout buildings, which were constructed as summer homes during the 1880s and 1890s. Linked by a network of creaky wooden boardwalks, the thirteen Victorian roofs nestle here and there in the thick Maine evergreens. These homes' impressive size contrasts boldly with the tiny dune shacks, yet their function throughout the decades has in many ways been the same. They are a familiar, seasonal withdrawal from the world; a simple yet comfortable place without phones, television, or computers, and only a few cars.

Most Point families rent out these homes for the summer weeks when they are not able to use them. Like the application program for the dune shacks, this is a way to share this special place with friends and other interested parties. Over the years, island activities have come to form the bedrock of my identity: ocean and lake swimming, hiking, games, clam digging, sailing and adventuring. Still more poignantly, the values fostered by this place have become essential to how I define myself and my goals. These include patience, courage, respect for nature, and education through reading and first-hand experience. Thus, although myriad events, relationships and memories exert a deep influence on the meaning of the places we inhabit, the opportunities offered us by specific physical locations can serve as a strong driver for how we behave and develop (Figure 3).

The possibilities of partnership

The strength of these ties to place are shared by many families throughout America, who similarly retreat to a familiar place each summer season. These escapes are important not only for their contribution to the nation's general quality of life, but for their frequent role in connecting Americans to place and, in many cases, nature. Understanding that connection is crucial for the future of the NPS, as concerns about interest in our national parks continue to escalate.

The recent inactivity of the Dune Shacks Subcommittee demonstrates that the Peaked Hill Bars model is not perfect; it nonetheless offers some useful ways for parks to address private meaning. Through the creation of organizations like the Peaked Hill Trust, communities strongly vested in landscapes can share in their care, and work toward a stronger partnership with governing bodies like the NPS (Figure 4). In turn, this relationship relieves parks from the often laborious task of maintaining and managing aged or deteriorating structures.

Partnerships of this kind acknowledge both the "tangible and intangible" aspects of a landscape in helping to preserve cultural heritage; an important tool according to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS

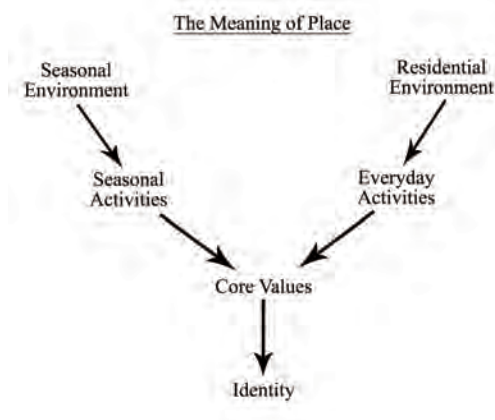


Figure 3. A simplified chart helps to illustrate how familiar landscapes can shape who we are.

Managing Private Meaning in Public Places



Figure 4. Chart illustrating the potential of partnership in the management of meaning in cultural landscapes.

2005). Similarly, in a recent article, Australian National University humanities professor Ken Taylor points out that “it is the places, traditions, and activities of ordinary people that create a rich cultural tapestry of life, particularly through recognition of the values people attach to their everyday places and concomitant sense of place and identity” (Taylor 2009, 12).

By recognizing and integrating the values of the ordinary public into the management of its cultural landscapes, the NPS could reinforce and grow from that personal connection to place. An excellent example is being set by Olympic National Park, whose Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the eight treaty Indian tribes of the Olympic Peninsula has substantially increased the level of mutual trust and understanding. Through this partnership, both parties have gained valuable insight into the management, use, and interpretation of their common landscape. Furthermore, the stability offered by an MOU that requires regular, superintendent-attended meetings, is instrumental for maintaining strong, healthy ties to indigenous communities (Wray 2009).

The management of cultural landscapes can be greatly enhanced through this type of collaboration between parks and local communities. The survival and continuing use of the dune shacks, for example, would not have been possible without partnership. Periodic meetings between local non-profit partners and the park can also bring new perspectives to the interpretation of park sites, guide the maintenance of trails, viewsheds, and other features, and improve treatment recommendations through the use of local knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, the parks’ embrace of private meaning in the public places it manages promises to increase both interest and use among local communities.

In pursuit of this goal, it is important for parks to reach out and inform the general public of how to become involved in the management of their local public lands. Formalizing this

relationship through mechanisms like MOUs, cooperative agreements, and regular meetings and communication, is crucial, as it gives parks the opportunity to address concerns about the meaning of cultural landscapes in local communities. Most importantly, a standardized partnership would provide a more sustainable level of involvement for local community members with long-standing connections to landscapes, and thus transcend turnover in both park and non-profit organization staff and leadership. Like a friendship, this relationship must be cultivated carefully over time to help ensure the survival of these landscapes for future generations.

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