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## A Salute to the National Seashore System at Half-Century

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## EDITORIAL

### A SALUTE TO THE NATIONAL SEASHORE SYSTEM AT HALF-CENTURY

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the 1937 creation of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the initial unit of the National Seashore System. In this time of unprecedented demographic and developmental pressure on America's coastal areas, it is a fitting tribute to this prescient achievement to reflect on the System's first half-century and to plan for its next fifty years.

Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, was established in the midst of the Great Depression, when Lindsay Warren, a visionary member of Congress whose District included a portion of the Outer Banks now in the National Seashore, called for creation of a seashore recreation area modeled on the national parks. The area's unique character warranted special treatment. Comprised essentially of islands no more than a mile wide but more than a hundred miles long, the area designated has broad stretches of pure white beaches on the surf side and expanses of equally magnificent salt marshes on the sound side. The unusual beauty of the region is complemented by legendary characters of its past, notably Blackbeard, and its present, who still speak in Old English accents. Over the centuries, many a ship, including the Monitor, encountered Cape Hatteras' treacherous shoals, and more than a few were lost when Nature's elements conspired in the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

On August 17, 1937, Congress recognized the value of this area and authorized establishment of a National Seashore "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Land was acquired for the Seashore in 1953 when the Mellon family donated \$800,000 for acquisition and the state of North Carolina matched the gift.

Since 1937, Congress has designated nine additional coastal areas for inclusion in the National Seashore System. The second, Cape Cod, was not created until 1961, while five areas were authorized during the ensuing half-decade: Point Reyes, California and Padre Island, Texas (1962); Fire Island, New York (1964); Assateague Island, Maryland-Virginia (1965); and Cape Lookout, North Carolina (1966). The most recently created Seashores are Gulf Islands, Mississippi (1971); Cumberland Island, Georgia (1972); and Canaveral, Florida (1975).

All of the Seashores possess unique natural features, and in each, it was understood from the beginning that the land would be given over to

varying and potentially conflicting uses. In Hatteras, the public lands constituting the Seashore are interrupted by seven small villages in which property has remained privately owned as an integral part of the compromise struck in establishing the Seashore. Similar compromises, most to accommodate private property owners within the Seashores' designated boundaries, underlay the creation of many of the other Seashores.

Today, the National Seashore System is thriving, but that is a mixed blessing. Not surprisingly, the sheer volume of visitors (many of whom use four-wheel drive vehicles to travel the beaches) and the tremendous developmental pressures on private property adjacent to the public areas have increasingly strained certain Seashores. Moreover, conditions at Assateague, a playground for Washingtonians and millions of others, suggest that crisis may be imminent. There are too many people for the resource to bear, and wildlife such as the blue claw crab and the cherrystone clam are badly depleted.

However, some Seashores, like Cape Lookout, are almost pristine; they are wilderness-like or officially designated wilderness. Even in Hatteras, which annually receives two million visitors, it is still possible to have to yourself miles of deserted beaches framed by stately dunes held in place by the humble but efficacious sea oat. Served up tirelessly on the surf side by the action of the sea, wind and rain is fascinating detritus—shells, skate cases, sharks' teeth and blue claw crab bodies. On the sound side, marshes teeming with all sorts of wildlife, from graceful wading birds like the great blue heron and the egret to the inelegant but equally interesting fiddler crab, can be found.

Although planning was instituted on most of the individual Seashores during the latter half of the 1970s, there has been relatively little since, and few restrictions now protect the specific areas. It's not too late, however. The commemoration of fifty years of recreation in the National Seashore System affords an auspicious occasion to plan more systematically for the visitors whose inexorable increase threatens the integrity of these exquisite national treasures during the System's next half-century.

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