

Should Nantucket Sound become a marine sanctuary?

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By staff writer Doreen Leggett

In 1980, Nantucket Sound was on the verge of being nominated as a National Marine Sanctuary. However, a change in the rules during the Reagan administration stymied the effort.

Had it happened, the current controversy over locating a 170-turbine wind farm there would be moot.

With this history in mind, U.S. Rep. William Delahunt has asked the Provincetown-based Center for Coastal Studies to exhume the biological studies that originally convinced the Massachusetts Attorney General and the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs that the Sound was worth protecting more than 20 years ago.

In a letter to the center, Delahunt said the state believed Nantucket Sound should be protected because of the "numerous distinctive ecological, recreational, historic, and aesthetic resources of regional and national significance."

Peter Borrelli, the center's executive director, said he is ready to pore through the documents and prepare a report for Delahunt by mid-December.

"We will advise the congressman on the significance of the area. It is not an environmental impact statement or an assessment of the wind farm - that is going on separately," Borrelli noted.

He said one thing has become very apparent: There hasn't been very much research conducted on Horseshoe Shoal, the specific location tabbed for the wind farm. The center doesn't plan to do any research at this stage, but will give advice on what additional studies may be useful.

Today, there are a dozen National Marine Sanctuaries representing a wide variety of environments - deep ocean gardens, near-shore coral reefs, whale migration corridors, deep sea canyons and even underwater archaeological sites. They range in size from one-quarter square mile in Fagatele Bay, American Samoa to more than 5,300 square miles in Monterey Bay, Calif., one of the largest marine protected areas in the world.

While some activities are regulated or prohibited in sanctuaries to protect resources, multiple uses such as recreation, commercial fishing, and shipping, are encouraged. Research, educational, and outreach activities are other major components in each sanctuary's program of resource protection.

The Center for Coastal Studies is no stranger to ocean policy and management issues. It nominated Cape Cod Bay as a critical habitat area and works with the state on the management plan. It also devotes time to the biologically rich Great South Channel. And it nominated what is now the Stellwagen National Marine Sanctuary for protection.

"We have considerable knowledge about the nomination process and the selection process," said Borrelli. "We know what constitutes a national marine sanctuary.

"And I think [Delahunt turned to us] because we generally take this broad ecosystem-based approach to management."

Stellwagen was nominated, he said, at a time when sand and gravel mining operations were proposed in the area. "It's biological productivity is quite significant, which is largely a function of ocean geology," he said. "There is a lot of good stuff going on [there.]"

Could Horseshoe Shoals be so productive?

"It depends," said Borrelli. "Billingsgate [Shoal] is a pile of rocks that you can run aground on," he said with a chuckle.

Delahunt is concerned that Cape Wind's permitting process not get ahead of scientific research on the shoals. He does not believe enough attention has been paid to such studies, and he worries that existing data may be ignored in the permitting process.

Time is of the essence, he said last week during an interview with The Cape Codder. Even those making the decisions don't have enough information, he emphasized, referring to the Army Corps of Engineers, which is the lead agency in the permitting process.

The Army Corps has set September 2003 as its deadline.

Delahunt is focusing his efforts on the dearth of scientific data related to the Sound, as well as lack of federal siting standards for projects like a wind farm.

"Even though this type of use [a wind farm] has not been authorized by federal law, there is now a specific proposal under review by several federal and state environmental agencies," Delahunt wrote to the center.

"Federal and state officials have informed me that during this process they find that they have little information of their own regarding the biological resources of the area and will need to rely on new studies and other organizations to come forward with this information."

"Please give me the data, and I'll utilize it," Delahunt said to the center, suggesting that it could justify renominating the Sound as a National Marine Sanctuary.