



A farm overlooking boats in Nantucket harbor is one of the many idyllic scenes found the island. Photo: Elena Smith

On Nantucket Island, fond memories collide with today's climate change realities

By Elena Smith



Elena Smith, one of six winners of Connecticut Sea Grant's diverse youth scholarship.
Photo: Judy Benson

Elena Smith is a student at the University of Connecticut working on her master's degree in English and minor in Art History. She enjoys watching Marvel movies, reading books, and creating art. In her free time, she loves to play with her three dogs, as well as connecting with friends. Elena looks forward to her annual summer trips to Nantucket, as well as one day traveling around Europe to study art in person.

Every year my family travels to Nantucket for a week during the summer. Once we arrive, we are greeted by my great aunt and uncle who have been living there for as long as I've known them. For me, this iconic home of the fictional sailors who encountered Moby Dick is a place synonymous with sunsets, swimming and reading in grass fields.

Nantucket is the embodiment of a New England summer. It's a place mixed with historical relevance, from the cobblestone streets of the town built in the 1830s thanks to the success of the island's whaling business, to the museums with exhibits telling the stories of old shipwrecks with boat wreckage displayed alongside.

As you walk the streets, you'll notice they are filled with flowers and mom-and-pop shops. There are ice cream parlors on every corner with book and clothing stores in between. Cars with surfboards strapped to their roofs are a common sight, and kids walk around with sand-filled shoes and sunscreen swiped across their noses.

As I reflect on these idyllic memories from my youth, I compare what stands out for me on the island today—the impacts of climate change growing increasingly obvious. The experiences I had then grow more precious every time I return.

One of my most vivid recollections is of visiting Sesachacha Pond with my family almost every day. It's more subdued than the bustling beaches on the ocean. The brackish water there felt as warm as a bath, with calm ripples that we would float in. We used paddle boards to maneuver around the pond, and near the shore, we would try and catch fish with nets. Sometimes we would walk around the entire pond to a canal connecting it to the North Atlantic. Once at the beach, we would scream to the sea god Poseidon to conjure up his biggest waves to knock us over.

On the days when we ventured out to the ocean at Jetties or Surfside beaches, we carried foldable chairs and towels until my arms were sore. We would look for giant shells to take back home to paint or turn into necklaces. These beaches were great because they had accompanying restaurants and bars that were always playing songs by Jimmy Buffett or The Beach Boys. I would search in vain for sand dollars. When I grew tired of playing, I would spend my time wrapped up in a towel reading, looking like a hermit crab the way I would cover myself to block out the light so I could see the words on my page. I ended up finishing so many books that we often had to return to the local bookstores to buy more.



Quaint cottages line the waterfront in Nantucket. Photo: Elena Smith

Even now when I vacation on Nantucket, we go to these same places we've been going to for upwards of 20 years. I still search for sand dollars and bask in the warm water at Sesachacha Pond. I still fly through books and paddleboard through the open waters. Yet even though we mimic our past visits, things have changed.

What was once a fun adventure to the other side of Sesachacha became a path filled with fish bones and half-decomposed seagulls. At other beaches, I have seen similar things. In 2022, we were overcome with the lingering smell of sulfur and something rotten when we walked onto Jetties Beach. As it turns out, there was a mass of decomposing nuisance seaweed near that area of the island, the smell infiltrating the surrounding town as well. It is thought that this seaweed blows in from the North due to wind, and slowly begins to decompose in part due to the warm temperatures. There has been an abundance of this seaweed, or wrack, carried in the waters around Nantucket, according to the island's chief environmental health officer, John Hedden. This decomposition has also brought excesses of enterococci bacteria in the waters, often a precursor of water too contaminated for swimming.

These are some of the problems undoubtedly being caused by rising global temperatures. According to *USA Today* and *National Geographic*, beaches across the United States have been seeing an increase in dead birds and fish as well as rotting seaweed, often an invasive species proliferating in warming waters. Making matters worse, the rising sea levels and increasing number of significant storms are worsening erosion in many coastal towns including Nantucket. I have noticed more frequent harsh winds and rainstorms, which prevent us from leaving the island or going outside. These storms can cause flooding and make roads dangerous to travel. They also cause significant problems for traveling by ferry to and from the island. Trip cancellations and departure delays force people to stay on the island longer than they planned. My family has been faced with this, and to try and avoid it we sometimes leave earlier than expected—never a fun thing to happen on vacation.

These flooding and erosion problems have been an ever-pressing issue for Nantucket. The shores have been slowly shrinking and disappearing for years. Houses are falling into the sea due to the rising tides, seriously affecting the economic status of the island. It's an island with a reputation for high



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incomes, with many historic homes with an average value of almost \$4 million, according to Fisher Real Estate. Due to the increase in tourism to Nantucket in recent years, many new houses are being built there, which is worrisome on the coast where the risk of damage from erosion and storms is high. Increasing development and population are especially troubling on an island as vulnerable to the effects of climate change as Nantucket. Though erosion has been shaping the island and its beaches for a millennium, it has intensified in recent years. If no major efforts are made to try and stop these dangers, the island will lose more land mass, threatening residents' homes and other assets.

Having grown up with the experience of what Nantucket

used to be like, I am disheartened to witness all the drastic problems it's facing. For my great aunt and uncle who live there half the year, climate change affects them regularly. Even for me, though I only experience one week a year on the island, seeing the effects of climate change in real time is frightening. Finding dead fish and birds on your way to the beach is disturbing. Smelling decomposing seaweed with pop songs playing about how fun the beach is feels dystopian. But this is also a wake-up call about what's to come if changes aren't made soon. This is a problem affecting all generations of life. As my great aunt and uncle face erosion and environmental problems, so do I. Climate change is a worldwide phenomenon that needs worldwide help. We must come together to face these problems before it's too late.

Street flooding such as this in October 2022 is becoming more common on Nantucket.
Photo courtesy of The Inquirer and Mirror

