

Cape ecologist to retire after pivotal tidal restoration role

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Cape Cod National Seashore ecologist John Portnoy is retiring Tuesday after 30 years of work in aquatic biology and biogeochemistry, including a pivotal role in the planning of a proposed restoration project for the Herring River basin. *Cape Cod Times*

NORTH TRURO — It's not every man who has the kind of influence that could last 100 years. But it's fair to make that claim about Cape Cod National Seashore ecologist John Portnoy.

On Tuesday, Portnoy will retire after 30 years with the federal agency. He is stepping down just as his baby of sorts, the massive Herring River tidal restoration project in Wellfleet and Truro is taking flight. The project is the largest restoration attempted along the Northeast coast.

For more than 20 years, Portnoy has studied, planned and raised money to reverse damage to the once-vital tidal river basin. Largely because of a 1909 dike at the river's mouth, poor water quality in the basin has left fish dead, shellfish populations depleted, marshes dehydrated and atrophied, native plants locked out, and upstream waters spoiled.

In the late 1990s, Portnoy published research findings that described how human alterations had created the ecological problems and how the restoration could reduce or reverse them. He later coordinated development of a hydrological model used to explain the ecological and economic benefits of returning salt water flow to the marshland.

In 2005, a critical step forward occurred when the Seashore and the town of Wellfleet cut a deal on how a restoration project would proceed.

"When I arrived here 29 years ago, the adverse impacts of tide restrictions were clear," Portnoy said in an interview at his office yesterday. "I live in Wellfleet, and I think it's a resource that Wellfleetians are really missing out on and have for a very long time."

Portnoy hopes the restoration effort will return the river basin to its glory days, when boats were tied up in the salt marshes and oysters were harvested.

A second project, and perhaps the most surprising one for Portnoy, continues at East Harbor in Provincetown and North Truro, a 350-acre tidal lagoon and a 400-acre salt marsh known at times for its dead fish. Portnoy recalls standing on a newly opened culvert at the site watching the return of sand eels from Cape Cod Bay and learning that sea and bay ducks had returned to East Harbor in an annual bird count.

"Once you turn on the tide, you can't keep these animals out," he said.

Portnoy's colleagues on the Outer Cape struggled to find words yesterday to express their obvious high regard for the 60-year-old ecologist.

Graham Giese, a senior scientist at the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies, called Portnoy both a leader and a person who never acted like one. "He's always worked at such a clear level of asking questions of nature and then proceeding to find answers, and never taking an answer that someone else pre-cut," Giese said. "He's just been remarkable that way, a sustaining example for us."

Portnoy is a New Bedford native and obtained a doctorate in marine ecology from Boston University.

In 2006, he received a prestigious Environmental Achievement Award from the U.S. Department of Interior for his work on the Herring River project. The Association to Preserve Cape Cod has honored Portnoy for his work on the planned restoration and he will receive another award next week, association executive director Maggie Geist said.

Seashore Advisory Commission member Brenda Boleyn, a retired marine biologist, said she has always been impressed with Portnoy's ability to take on complex scientific issues, explain them to local people and get residents to support his efforts.

"John's work is going to leave improvement in the Seashore that will be very long-lasting," Boleyn said. "There's more work to be done. He has set it in motion and provided a strong foundation for the work to continue."

HERRING RIVER RESTORATION The proposed project to restore tidal flow to the Herring River basin is designed to reverse the effects of a dike built in 1909 at the mouth of the 1,100-acre river and floodplain, which feeds into Wellfleet Harbor on Cape Cod Bay. The restoration project would be the largest ever attempted from Cape Cod to Nova Scotia. The cost of the project has yet to be determined.

- The Chequessett Neck Road dike was built in 1909 to limit tidal flow in the river, provide more developable land and cut down on mosquitoes. But over the years, the loss of tidal flow has decimated upstream plant and animal life.
- The negative effects of the loss of tidal flow include fish kills, introduction of non-native plant species, encroachment of woods in the marsh, water quality degradation, and loss of shellfish habitat.
- The privately owned Chequessett Yacht & Country Club was partially built on land that dried out because of the dike, and the course would have to relocate several holes if the restoration

project moves forward. During a public hearing on the project earlier this week, a club spokesman said it would cost about \$5 million to relocate five golf holes if full restoration of tides occurs. The spokesman added the club would lose at least \$650,000 during the relocation of the holes.

- There is an Oct. 31 deadline for public comment on draft versions of federal and state reviews of the proposed project.

Sources: Herring River Restoration Committee, U.S. Department of Interior, Cape Cod National Seashore