

It's not restoration if the result is death

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As we sit in our grounded sailboat, surrounded by inches of water rather than feet, we reflect on the “restoration” project for Sesuit Creek. The operation was a success, but the patient died.

In 2008 the town of Dennis, along with a host of state and federal agencies, succeeded in flooding the marsh upstream of the Bridge Street culvert with salt water, through a sixtyfold increase in the opening under the bridge. Yes, the freshwater vegetation was largely killed off. Success. However, the salt marsh has not been able to restore itself. After nine years, the area is the picture of *death*. Dead trees, denuded soil, eroded banks. The restoration has failed.

The inner harbor was created by dredging in 1958. Various studies have shown that the dredged depths of 6 feet remained nearly unchanged for 50 years. However, within a few years of the “restoration” we started to notice clogging mats of dead vegetation, accompanied by shallower depths and eroded banks. What happened? The rushing water eroded the marsh upstream of the bridge and carried the silt and debris into the boat basin, where it was dropped when it encountered incoming tidal flow, much as a river delta is formed. In addition, it caused erosion and collapse of the banks in the inner harbor. The harbor is being destroyed. Every year is worse.

On Dec. 14, 2016, the Cape Cod Times published an editorial calling for stepped-up restoration projects. It acknowledges there will be some downside to such projects but claims “the benefit of restoration far outweigh the risks.” Really? Risk losing one of the only deepwater boat harbors on Cape Cod Bay, critical to not only hundreds of recreational boaters but also commercial fishing and other waterfront enterprises? Sure, the town may have not suffered economic loss yet. We all still dutifully pay our slip fees and mooring fees. With a 20- to 30-year waiting list, we couldn't take the chance of losing our spot.

But the boaters have suffered damage in the form of loss of services, worth tens of thousands of dollars, not to mention damage to hulls, engines and props. For many of us access to the slips is limited to a fraction of the boating day. Even if Dennis is not currently experiencing a loss of revenue from the harbor, it will feel the pain when town meeting is asked to vote on a \$20 million dredge project. Plus, it is hard to put a price on the loss of the scenic vista looking West from Bridge Street.

Boaters, unite! We need to demand some action on this. Let's reactivate the Sesuit Boat Owners Association. Environmentalists, take off the rose-colored glasses and look at this meddling with nature in a scientific way. Since the marsh was cut off about 70 years ago, a new equilibrium formed upstream. Upsetting that equilibrium won't necessarily restore the saltwater marsh, for many reasons. Some were cited in the 2016 editorial, including the land subsidence that occurs behind a dam and rising sea levels.

You can't just open the floodgates and walk away. The success, or failure, of restoration projects to date needs to be carefully evaluated before rushing into new and larger projects. The damage to Sesuit Harbor needs to be scientifically evaluated and a plan for remediation put into place.

— *Paula Miller is an environmental scientist and David Miller is a certified professional geologist. They are retired in East Dennis and have been slip holders in Sesuit Harbor for more than 25 years.*