



# *Conservation Commissions in Action on the Coast*

*By Betsy Rickards, CZM and member of Marblehead Conservation Commission from 2000–2008*

**The Conservation Commission.** For those coastal residents who face them with development proposals, the name evokes fear or maybe frustration; for those who live next to the proposed development, the name conjures up hope for protecting the land, their view, or the seashore critters; for those who don't live near a resource area, the name suggests...wait, who?...and what's a resource area? Let me take the opportunity to clear up the role of a Conservation Commission within a coastal community—for those who know them, those who think they know them, and those who don't know they exist.

A CONSERVATION COMMISSION IS AN APPOINTED VOLUNTEER BOARD consisting of everyday residents who dedicate many hours each month to promote stewardship of local conservation lands and to implement the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act and Regulations, as well as any local wetland bylaws. (For state laws and regulations, go to Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's website at [www.mass.gov/dep/water/laws/regulati.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dep/water/laws/regulati.htm); see your municipality's website for local bylaws.) These wetland requirements cover many different resource areas, including coastal beaches, dunes, banks, barrier beaches, coastal land subject to flooding, and port areas, as well as inland resources, such as bordering vegetated wetlands, rivers, and vernal pools.

While they're at it, Conservation Commissions also implement stormwater management standards to stop unpleasant pollutants from entering coastal waters, and oversee compliance and coordination with other state and federal permitting agencies that deal with such issues as fisheries, water quality, and public tidelands. For coastal communities, where the entire shoreline is a resource area, the Commission must manage a profusion of project reviews that require an entirely different, and usually very complex, set of rules for protecting these moving, shifting, and changing coastal landforms.

To do all this, your average coastal Conservation Commissioner must attend training seminars to learn coastal processes and delineations, hydrology, fisheries and shellfish biology, plant and soil science, and engineering and construction methodologies. They must become skilled at interpreting plans and legal documents—i.e., laws, regulations, and policies. They must adhere to administrative procedures and open meeting and conflict of interest laws, and they are obligated to deliberate and reach a fair decision for every project. They must take a hard line against those who disregard the regulations, and often engage in contentious battles with applicants, abutters, and sometimes each other.

It is not always an easy job and volunteers are rarely praised for their efforts. But, for those unsung heroes who persevere, the reward is that every hearing, every deliberation, every permit is one small step toward protecting the coastal (or inland) ecosystem from further human disruption. With all the buzz about global climate change and sea level rise, coastal Conservation Commissions can be satisfied that they have been working long and hard at the local level to protect the resources that reduce erosion and storm damage, prevent pollution of the waterbodies, and preserve habitats. The combined efforts of these Conservation Commissions help maintain those natural sedimentary

*To avoid adverse impacts to the shoreline from the construction of this house, a local Conservation Commission maintained a no-build setback from the coastal bank, encouraged the planting of native coastal species, and implemented standards to control stormwater from draining into the ocean and onto adjacent properties.*

processes to stave off storm damage and protect development; protect stabilizing vegetation along banks and dunes to control erosion, filter pollution, and offer habitat for fish and wildlife; and reduce (or set back from the shoreline) the footprint of a house and driveway to minimize the risk of flooding and reduce the amount of polluted runoff that enters the stormdrains and the harbors, bays, and ocean.

These benefits are shared by all coastal townspeople, as well as tourists and visitors. Unbeknownst to a coastal homeowner now, a setback requirement may spare a house the fate of falling into the ocean when sea levels rise! Call them martyrs or call them rosa-rugosa-huggers, the Conservation Commission is the first line of defense for our local resources, and in sum, for the entire Commonwealth and its coastal waters. So, if you're thinking about what you can do to support the environment, you may want to consider a stint on the board. Joining your Conservation Commission is one of the best avenues to reach out at the local level to influence smart development along the coast, and bear positive effects on the natural resources around you. Looking for a piece of action (environmental action!) need not take you on a trek to witness the melting of the ice caps—you may accomplish just as much from a trip out your back door to a local Conservation Commission meeting.

Photo: Betsy Rickards

