


Environmental Reflections on the Best Job in the World

By Michael Dukakis, Former Governor of Massachusetts (1975-1979 and 1983-1991)

I guess I was always an environmentalist, even back in the days when the term didn't exist. As a boy in the 1930s, I was fascinated by the stamps in my stamp collection that celebrated the national park system. The highlight of my young summers was a week at the beach at Scituate—yes, Scituate was where you went for a quick beach vacation in those days.



Sarah Island and Longlee Island (left) are two of the 34 Boston Harbor Islands. In the 1970s, then governor Michael Dukakis orchestrated the purchase of 13 of the Harbor Islands for \$3 million. The islands, now part of a National Recreation Area, welcome more than 350,000 visitors annually.

In addition to our Scituate beach trips, each summer my mother took my brother and me to Nantasket for the day. We would take the boat, and I probably developed my longtime interest in Boston Harbor and its islands while looking out over the ocean during those trips. The Commonwealth's rich history interested me as well. As a teen in the 1940s, I would walk the streets of Boston's historic neighborhoods—from the North End to Beacon Hill—with a copy of Johnny Tremain under my arm, imagining what it must have been like to live in this area when Paul Revere, Sam Adams, and others started the American Revolution.

Don't ask me why these things held such a fascination for me. They just did. And that early appreciation for the special beauty of Massachusetts—its coasts, its harbors, its streets full of history—has been a part of me ever since.

As an adult, I had the opportunity to learn even more about the Commonwealth's unique resources from a lot of very good people. One who stands out was Congressman Joe Moakley. (Elected to the Massachusetts state Senate in 1964, Moakley went on to serve as U.S. Representative for the Massachusetts 4th Congressional District for almost 30 years.) Alone among all of the legislators with whom I served, he was the guy that helped us understand how important Boston Harbor and its islands were to the Commonwealth and its people. And in those days, 13 of those islands were privately owned, the harbor was a cesspool, and even the islands that were publicly owned left

a lot to be desired. In the late 1960s, Joe was the leader in the effort to clean up the harbor and acquire the islands, and with a little help from the rest of us, in 1970 legislation was passed authorizing the state to acquire all of the harbor islands. Despite that legislation, it was not until I became governor in 1975 that the islands became part of the Commonwealth's holdings.

I remember telling Evelyn Murphy, my environmental affairs secretary at the time, to buy them even though we were dead broke and in frightful economic shape. She did—at a total cost of \$3 million for 13 islands! I can't even begin to imagine what their price would be in today's market. And so we began the process of creating a new Harbor Islands State Park system, setting the stage for a joint federal-state partnership and ultimately the highly successful cleanup of the harbor and its sewage treatment facilities.

In short, if you felt as strongly as I did about our environment and our historic heritage, it wouldn't take much to convince you that preserving our coastal and ocean environment was an absolute priority. And it is hard to describe to those of you who are a lot younger than I am (I was born in 1933—you do the math!) just how dramatically public consciousness and public opinion have shifted in the last 30 years to support such initiatives.

To give you an idea of how different the political climate was in the 1970s when I took office: one of the first decisions I had to make as governor was whether or not to order our utility companies to reduce the use of sulphur oil from two percent to one percent, a reduction that would result in less pollution from high-sulphur fuel. The business community was in an uproar at the prospect, arguing that we already had some of the highest utility rates in the country and that any state effort to pull us out of what was one of our deepest recessions since the Great Depression would be hurt by this pro-environment decision.

And nothing beats the day we celebrated the acquisition of Halibut Point in Rockport. I'll never forget it. Despite pouring rain, we signed the bill outdoors—I'll never forget how hard it was raining!—and it remains one of the state's great treasures. Kitty and I still love driving up to the North Shore, buying fried clams along the way, and then going to Halibut Point to eat our clams and gaze out at the ocean and the coastline of three different states all at the same time. If you haven't had that opportunity, then do it, and you will understand why being the governor of this state is the best job in the world.

These days, of course, we face new challenges. Global warming, and what it could potentially do to our remarkable coast if we don't do something about it, is an issue that cannot be ignored. Former Vice President Al Gore is one of my heroes for his leadership on the issue, and if there is any place in the country that ought to consider how seriously global warming could affect our beaches, coasts, and life as we know it, it's New England.

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It was not a politically popular move, but I made the decision to reduce the use of sulphur oil to one percent. Today, we can't even understand why such a thing would be up for debate. We permit only a tiny fraction of the sulphur that was allowed even under the one percent standard, and nobody would have it any other way.

Given how strongly I felt about the environmental health of the Bay State's air and water, signing the Massachusetts Coastal Zone Act in 1983, after beginning the coastal management program in 1978 during my first administration, was a no-brainer. Following up on it with major bond issues that permitted the Commonwealth to acquire South Beach on Martha's Vineyard and South Cape Beach in Mashpee were very special moments in my public life.

In the meantime, all of us can lead by example by being active environmentalists. These days, thanks to the recycling programs set up within many towns and cities in Massachusetts, we recycle much of our waste without giving it a second thought. But chances are good that there are even more things all of us can do in our daily lives—be it something as simple as carrying a cloth bag to the grocery store, to picking out a car based on its fuel efficiency.

For my part, I am still riding the T every chance I get, armed with my senior card and paying 65 cents a ride—the best value, as I like to say, in America. People see me on a subway or streetcar and will say to me, “You're still riding the T?” And I say to them, “I rode it when I was governor. Why wouldn't I ride it now that I am just a civilian?”