

FALL 2011

SANCTUARY

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Featured:

MARITIME HERITAGE

Understanding Our Past, Navigating the Future

Sanctuary Voices:

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VIEWING THE FUTURE

through the Lens of Maritime Cultural Landscapes

In the scene below, artist J.W. Hill depicted the bustling harbor of Portland, Maine, capturing the commotion and complexity of waterfront life in 1853. From maritime commerce to shipbuilding, each element in Hill's painting is individually significant, but their true importance lies in their relationship to one another and to the natural environment. These relationships are the hallmarks of maritime cultural landscapes.

Cultural landscapes capture the living past that surrounds us and give us a better understanding of the links between the natural history and human history of a place. They illustrate how we have shaped the world, and how the world's natural environments have shaped us. Perhaps most importantly, cultural landscapes can also provide us with valuable insights into the future, such as the relationship between the health of natural resources and human wellbeing and prosperity.

Understanding Maritime Cultural Landscapes

While investigating cultural landscapes involves the combined study of history, archaeology, geography, oral traditions and other social and environmental sciences, understanding the concept is a matter of common sense.

At their most basic, cultural landscapes are specific places where combinations of human activity and natural forces have left a discernable mark on the world. They are found everywhere people have lived,

worked and explored, from the driest parts of the Mojave Desert to the deep submarine canyons of the North Atlantic.

Many human elements make up maritime cultural landscapes. Shipwrecks, lighthouses, abandoned docks, working waterfronts, tribal and indigenous dwellings or sacred places, trawl scours, lost fishing gear, navigation lanes, and shell middens are a few of the hundreds of potential human imprints on the landscape. Equally important are natural features found in the geology, geography and living resources of a place.

Our coasts contain many famous, recognizable maritime landscape features. The magnificent lighthouse on Cape Hatteras, N.C., for example, is a powerful element of the landscape. Within a cultural landscape context, the lighthouse itself is important — not just as an example of engineering, but for the human meanings and environmental connections associated with it. When it was built, the Cape Hatteras lighthouse was a beacon of hope and safety for the mariners



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navigating the treacherous “Graveyard of the Atlantic.” What was important to them was that the light could be seen far out to sea.

Today, we value the same lighthouse for the architectural beauty and tourist dollars it contributes to the seashore. We built this lighthouse to preserve lives in the past, and we have now spent millions of dollars preserving the lighthouse in order to enrich lives today. Across America, our historic lighthouses continue to do both, and will likely do so for centuries to come. Cultural landscapes help us see the many different kinds of meaning we have given to our cultural and natural resources, as well as understand their importance in learning from the past while planning for the future.

Cultural Landscape Lessons

Analyzing cultural landscapes also provides an understanding of how technological, political or economic shifts can alter the health of ecosystems and the future of human communities. For example, we see how the introduction of otter trawling and industrial fish processing to Newfoundland transformed the natural habitats of cod and the livelihoods of cod fisherman, threatening the survival of both.

Another facet of cultural landscapes reveals how indigenous or subsistence-based communities practiced the sustainable use of places and their resources, such as in the Hawaiian Islands and American Samoa. Maritime cultural landscapes make human heritage visible and give a voice to all groups with connections to coastal and ocean places, past and present. Tribal and indigenous cultures, fishing communities, wind power developers, surfers, seaside

restaurant owners and many others share a direct stake in the past, and in the future promise of our coastal areas and oceans.

Cultural landscapes are reservoirs of human experience that preserve undeniable examples of human triumph and loss. Retaining the intangible as well as tangible parts of human culture, cultural landscapes can do something that the natural sciences alone cannot. They convey the human meaning of places — even after all physical remnants and artifacts have been wiped away. For instance, the site of the World Trade Center would retain historical and cultural meaning even if all recognizable traces of the events of 9/11 were removed from Ground Zero. Such human memories and values create the cultural heritage of places.

The lens of maritime cultural landscapes reveals the many human communities that overlap with marine environments such as our national marine sanctuaries. It provides room for different kinds of knowledge and meaning, and gives voice to all people with important connections to our coasts and oceans. By studying maritime cultural landscapes and exploring the links between our natural and cultural heritage, we provide the foundations for building a better future through understanding the wisdom — and learning from the tragedies and triumphs — of the past. 🌊

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