

Preserving the Great Beach: Kennedy and the Creation of Cape Cod National Seashore

Topic: Civic Education and Engagement, Geography, Environment

Grade Level: 3 - 6

Subject Area: Civics and US Government, English Language Arts, Science, US History

Time Required: 1 - 2 hours

Goals/Rationale

President Kennedy signed a bill authorizing the establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore in 1961. By learning about the creation of the Seashore, students reflect on the importance of land conservation and the role of the federal government in preserving natural and historical resources.

Essential Question:

Why is land conservation important and how does the federal government support it?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- explain the importance of Cape Cod National Seashore.
- read a map and identify key features.
- pose questions, gather information from a variety of source materials, and analyze the evidence.

Vocabulary:

Land development - making changes to natural land for a purpose such as farming, housing, business, or industry.

Land conservation - the protection and care of natural land resources such as coastal areas, farmland, and forests. Land conservation helps with protecting habitats, historic sites, and creating recreational opportunities.

National Park Service - an agency of the United States government that takes care of all national parks, most national monuments, national seashores, and other natural, historical, and recreational properties.

National seashore - coastal areas managed by the federal government to protect the land and provide recreational opportunities such as swimming, hiking, and biking.

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Materials

- [Photograph of Cape Cod National Seashore 25th Anniversary Medal](#)
- [Photograph of John F. Kennedy and siblings in Hyannis Port \(KFC618N\)](#)
- [Photograph of President Kennedy signing the law establishing Cape Cod National Seashore](#)
- [Remarks on Signing Bill Authorizing Cape Cod National Seashore](#)
- [Cape Cod National Seashore map](#)
- [Standing Bold: Cape Cod National Seashore, National Park Service video \(13:30 min\)](#)
- [Google Earth](#)
- [Teacher Answer Chart](#)
- [New National Seashore or Park Proposal sheet](#)

Prior Knowledge and Skills

If students are not familiar with the National Park Service, share the definition. Have students explore parks in their state and the rest of the country on the National Park Service's [interactive map](#).

Historical Background and Context

"We are tied to the ocean, and when we go back to the sea, whether to sail or to watch, we are going back to whence we came." John F. Kennedy

John F. Kennedy spent some of his most joyous and nourishing time near the ocean: swimming, sailing, and relaxing with friends and family. Starting at age eleven, he spent summers in Hyannis Port on Cape Cod, the arm-shaped strand of Massachusetts land that juts out more than sixty miles into the Atlantic Ocean. The Kennedy family had a compound of three houses on beachfront property where he swam, played, and sailed from his pre-teen years through his presidency. He experienced firsthand the natural beauty of Cape Cod and sought its unique landscape for recreation, comfort, and replenishment.

By the time John F. Kennedy was elected US Senator of Massachusetts in 1952, many Americans had more access to automobiles, highways, and leisure time. These changes led to fast-growing land development on Cape Cod. There was a growing concern among some residents, leaders, and the National Park Service, about what would happen to the unique coastal habitats if hotels, housing developments, and tourist attractions took the place of the beaches, marshes, ponds, and forests. If all of the beachfront property was purchased by individuals, it would limit public access to the "Great Beach," a stretch of over 40 miles of Outer Cape shoreline described in a 1954 National Park Service study, as "the longest unbroken and undeveloped beach in the country."

The National Park Service had first studied the possibility of a national seashore in Massachusetts in 1939 and by the 1950s, made establishing Cape Cod National Seashore a priority. However, the idea faced widespread opposition from private property owners, land developers, and longtime residents. In 1958 Massachusetts Senators John F. Kennedy and Leverett Saltonstall proposed a bill which included provisions to allow property owners to keep homes that existed within the boundaries of the national seashore. It also included a process for

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local input on park decisions. Hastings Keith, a congressman representing Cape Cod, introduced an identical bill in the House of Representatives. The bills failed to pass but a similar bill was reintroduced in 1961 after Kennedy had been elected President of the United States. He signed the Cape Cod National Seashore bill on August 7, 1961. In his remarks after signing the legislation, Kennedy asserted, "This Act makes it possible for the people of the United States through their government to acquire and preserve the natural and historic values of a portion of Cape Cod for the inspiration and enjoyment of people all over the United States."

Cape Cod National Seashore conserves 44,600 acres of dunes, marshes, ponds, forests, and beaches, including forty miles of shoreline. The protected wetland, coastal, and upland ecosystems support over 570 species of amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals and hundreds of invertebrate animals. In addition to the natural world, the seashore protects historic sites and structures such as lighthouses and historic homes. As a national seashore, it allows public access and monitored regulated recreational activities such as swimming, hiking, and biking. With sea levels rising and the constant challenge of other environmental impacts, the land, water, and ecosystems preserved by the Cape Cod National Seashore is more important than ever.

Bibliography for historical background:

Cape Cod National Seashore, *National Park Service*, August 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/caco/index.htm>.

Carr, Ethan. *The Greatest Beach: A History of Cape Cod National Seashore*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2019.

Lombardo, Daniel. *Cape Cod National Seashore: The First 50 Years*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2010.

O'Connell, James C. *Becoming Cape Cod*. Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2003.

Procedure

1. Project the image of the Cape Cod National Seashore 25th Anniversary medal and ask students to make observations about the artifact.
2. Brainstorm a list of questions about the artifact. Include the following questions if it is not suggested:
 - o What is Cape Cod National Seashore and why was it created?
3. Explain that they will watch a [video](#) from Cape Cod National Seashore to find answers to some of their questions.
4. Make a chart with these four categories: 1) Animals; 2) Plants and Trees; 3) Historic Sites and Buildings; and 4) Land Formations and Bodies of Water. Explain that they will fill in the chart after the video.
5. Following the video, refer back to students' questions and record responses they learned. Work in groups or individually to list on the chart everything they saw or heard on the video (Teachers can access suggested answers on the Teacher Chart.)
6. Explain that they are going to create an illustrated map of Cape Cod National Seashore to show the land, wildlife, and history that it preserves, but first they need to learn more about the seashore, where it is located, and how it was created.

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7. Project or have students find Cape Cod on [Google Earth](#): begin with an image of the United States, locate the Northeast, and then enlarge the view of what looks like an “arm and fist” which is Cape Cod. Have them explore the coastline, noticing where there are roads, buildings, and other types of development, and where there is undeveloped land.
 - What do they notice about the land?
 - What parts of the coastline are developed and what parts are not?
 - Why are some developed, and some are not?
 - What would happen if the entire coastline was developed?
8. Look at the Cape Cod National Seashore map and explain that much of the large undeveloped coastline shown on the Google Earth map is part of the Cape Cod National Seashore.
 - Who is allowed to visit a national seashore? *(It is open to the public. Anyone can go although some beaches charge for parking and entry in the summer months.)*
 - Who is allowed to build within a national seashore? *(There are no private homes or businesses in a National Park or National Seashore. The only buildings are ones that were there when the seashore was created, or buildings for the park. The idea is to preserve the land in its natural state.)*
 - How was the Seashore created? Did everyone want it? *(Provide the following information and source material to help students answer these questions.)*
9. Show the photograph of young John F. Kennedy and his siblings swimming on Cape Cod and provide background information about his connection to the sea including the following:
 - John F. Kennedy swam, played, and sailed from his pre-teen years through his presidency.
 - Cape Cod National Seashore had first been considered in 1939.
 - As US Senator of Massachusetts, Kennedy submitted legislation (a law) to establish the Cape Cod National Seashore.
 - At first, there was not enough support for the law
 - Some people did not want the federal government to take their homes or control how the land was used.
 - They also did not want too many people coming to Cape Cod.
10. By the time Kennedy was president, the Congress was able to pass a bill that included compromises to address these concerns. Show the photograph of JFK signing the legislation. Congress voted to pass the bill but who has to sign it to make it official, to make it a law? *(The president.)*
 - What role did JFK play in creating the Seashore? *(As a US Senator of Massachusetts, he submitted legislation. Congress passed the bill to establish the Cape Cod National Seashore after Kennedy was elected president and he signed it into law on August 7, 1961.)*
11. Hand out or project his remarks. Direct students to the second paragraph and ask them to put it in their own words.
 - Why do you think President Kennedy submitted the bill and signed the legislation? *(He thought it was important to preserve the land, wildlife, and historic sites on Cape Cod. He wanted them to be accessible to everyone.)*
12. Explain that students will now have a chance to show the natural and historic resources that have been preserved because of protecting land and other resources in Cape Cod National Seashore. Have students pick one of the items listed on the chart and draw a picture of it. See [Cape Cod National Seashore website](#) for specific information about nature, history and culture in the Park.

13. Print the map and post the images to “frame” the map. You can use colored string or yarn to link the images to specific areas of the Park, when appropriate.

Assessment

Have students summarize what they have learned by responding to the questions, “What might have happened to all the animals, plants, land, and bodies of water that you learned about if the Cape Cod National Seashore had not been created? Who would be able to access this land and coastline?” Students can respond orally, in writing, or by drawing on a copy of the Cape Cod National Seashore map.

Extension

Creating a New National Seashore or Park: Have students work individually or in groups to identify an area in their county, state, or another part of the country that they think should be a national seashore or national park. They can use the “National Seashore or Park Proposal” sheet to compile their information. They will “survey” the area by researching it to find out about:

- Land features
- Bodies of water
- Plants
- Animals
- History and Culture

They will create a design for a medal, similar to the 25th anniversary medal they analyzed at the beginning of the lesson. They should also provide a rationale for why this area should be a national park or seashore.

Additional Resources

Media Gallery: [The Sea](#)

This collection of over 30 photographs, textual materials, and artifacts documents the importance of the ocean throughout John F. Kennedy’s life.

Podcast: [Saving our Shorelines](#)

Created for adults, this 35-minute podcast and transcript looks at the history and legacy of Cape Cod National Seashore.

[Cape Cod National Seashore](#)

The National Park Service’s official website on CCNS that includes maps, detailed information on nature, history, and culture, and listings of events and activities.

Mass Moments: [JFK Signs Bill Creating Cape Cod National Seashore](#)

Part of the Mass Humanities series, this is an excellent summary of the actions and decisions leading up to the creation of the Cape Cod National Seashore.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National History Standards:

3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
4. Historical Research Capabilities

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Common Core State Standards

ELA College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language

NCSS C3 Framework

Discipline 1 - Developing questions and planning inquiries;

Discipline 3 - Evaluating sources and using evidence

Massachusetts History and Social Studies Frameworks

5.T3 Principles of United States Government

National Council of Teachers of English Standards

1. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print- and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
2. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.



Cape Cod National Seashore - 25th Anniversary Medal



Accession number: KFC618N

Description: Rosemary, John, Eunice, Joe Jr., and Kathleen Kennedy swim in Hyannis Port

Date: 1925

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AR6733-B. President John F. Kennedy Signs S. 857, Authorizing Establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore.

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Additional Information : Accession Number AR6733-B

Date(s) of Materials

7 August 1961

Description

President John F. Kennedy signs S. 857, a bill authorizing the establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore Park. The act was legislated to preserve a portion of the shoreline of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Standing behind President Kennedy are (L-R): Representative Hastings Keith of Massachusetts; Representative Silvio O. Conte of Massachusetts; Senator Frank E. Moss of Utah; Senator Benjamin A. Smith of Massachusetts; Representative John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania; Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska; Representative Philip J. Philbin of Massachusetts; Representative J. T. Rutherford of Texas; Representative Harold D. Donahue of Massachusetts; Senator Gordon Allott of Colorado; Representative James A. Burke of Massachusetts; Representative Wayne N. Aspinall of Colorado; and Under Secretary of the Interior, James K. Carr. Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C.

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Map of Cape Cod National Seashore (National Park Service)

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE, AUGUST 7, 1961

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
ON SIGNING S.857, AN ACT TO
PROVIDE FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE
CAPE COD NATIONAL SEASHORE
EXOP

I would like to make a brief statement. Today, in signing S.857, an Act to authorize the establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore Park, I join the Congress and hope that this will be one of a whole series of great seashore parks which will be for the use and benefit of all of our people.

This Act makes it possible for the people of the United States through their government to acquire and preserve the natural and historic values of a portion of Cape Code for the inspiration and enjoyment of people all over the United States.

This is a wise use of our natural resources, and I am sure that future generations will benefit greatly from the wise action taken by the Members of the Congress who are here today.

I commend the Congress for giving very careful judgment in balancing off public needs in the interests of people who live in this section of the Cape, and I think that they have done an admirable job in serving both interests in this piece of legislation.

I co-sponsored, as a Member of the Senate, a similar bill. It is a very old part of the United States, and I must say that from personal knowledge I realize very well how useful this is going to be for the people of the Cape and Massachusetts and New England and the entire United States.

There are Members of Congress here today from Texas and Colorado and Utah who have seen in their own States the tremendous contribution which these national parks can make. If we are going to double the population in another fifty years or so, we can get some idea of how important preserving this section for all the people will be.

I think we are going to need a good deal more effort like this, particularly in the more highly developed urban areas, where so many millions of people now live, and work out the means of securing the advantages of recreation and leisure which these areas can bring. So I know that the government and the Congress will work together in seeing how they can carry on similar projects in other parts of the country.

This is a matter of great interest to me, and I express my appreciation to the Members of the Congress and to the Chairmen of the Committees, and to those Members of Congress particularly as I said from not only Massachusetts who worked hard on it in a bipartisan spirit but from all sections of the country who strongly supported this legislation.

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Teacher Answer Chart

Suggested lists based on [Standing Bold: Cape Cod National Seashore](#) video

Animals	Plants and Trees	Historic Sites and Buildings	Land Features and Bodies of Water
Birds Snakes Deer Fox Piping Plover Clams Oysters Crabs 50 species of fish Right Whale Gray Seals Great White Sharks Herring	Dune grass Oak trees Pine trees Juniper trees Sassafras Mushroom Birch Forests Daisies Beach roses	Wampanoag sites Pilgrim sites Shipwrecks Rescue huts Life-saving stations Lighthouses Dune Shacks	Ocean Beach Dunes Salt Marshes Kettle Ponds

See Cape Cod National Seashore website for specific information about nature, history and culture in the Park: <https://www.nps.gov/caco/learn/index.htm>.

New National Park or Seashore Proposal

Name of Proposed National Park or National Seashore:

Where is the area located? (Provide URL or describe location):

Survey: List the features of your park or seashore based on your research.

Animals	Plants and Trees	Historic Sites and Buildings	Land Features and Bodies of Water

Why should this area become a National Park or National Seashore?

Design a medal for your proposed National Park or National Seashore.

