

## Marty Hylton leaving PI:N for job with Park Service

By Brian Bushard

[bbushard@inkym.com](mailto:bbushard@inkym.com) For 12 years, Marty Hylton's job has focused on a single question: How does Nantucket preserve its sense of history in the face of devastating sea-level rise?

That question will become even more complex when he joins the National Park Service as its first ever historic architect for climate change adaptation next month. The job requires him to explore how sea-level rise, wildfires, rising temperatures and droughts will impact cultural landmarks at the 423 national parks and heritage sites around the country for years to come.

Hylton has headed the University of Florida's Preservation Institute: Nantucket since 2009. Tomorrow is his last day.

The Inquirer and Mirror

caught up with him this week for an exit interview.

Inquirer and Mirror:

How severe of an issue for the island is sea-level rise, and how urgent is the need to take action?

Marty Hylton: "It's critical. People talk about us reaching a tipping point and I think we've already met the tipping point. Over the next 10 years unfortunately I think we're going to see really devastating natural events that are being caused by and accelerated by climate change. Look at what happened in Australia last year. The second worst wildfire in California history is happening right now.

Hylton: "I don't hear that anymore. I'm very public about how I feel about the science and I'm hearing that less and less. In Florida, the former governor (Rick Scott) didn't allow public officials to use the words 'climate change,' and I was technically a public official. I prefaced my talks then and I preface my talks now by saying, 'I don't care what your politics are, I have witnessed climate change first-hand. I don't care what you believe, it's happening.' You can either develop strategies or not. But at this point even if we cut emissions to zero, it's still happening. There are so much emissions already built up."

I& M: In terms of a timeframe, what is short-term and what is long-term, and what do you think those approaches are going to look like?

Hylton: "It has to be a multi-faceted, multi-pronged approach. We need to be doing a better job across the country and here on Nantucket of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

What is short-term and what is long-term? Every community has to decide that for themselves and it has to be based on facts. We have a NOAA tidal gauge in the harbor that's been here since the 1960s. We have an immense amount of data to see the changes over the last six decades and seeing how much the harbor is rising. Right now we're using 10 years for a short-term, 2050 as mid-term and 2100 as a long-term.

Arcadis, the consultant for the (town's) coastal-resilience plan, is using the highflood- risk scenario, and that predicts that by 2050, Washington Street is under water

local, national, federal, are going to have to change because they're not equipped to address the timeframe in which this is going to occur. Massachusetts has been a leader in environmental protection. I'm coming from Florida and that's all I'm going to say about that.

It's the protection of wetlands, which are so important to absorb storm surge. Current policy addresses how to protect existing wetlands, but it doesn't talk about how to expand a wetland. That policy is a real challenge.

Then the big question is bringing together a community and getting some form of consensus on the approach. In the end once you've done that and you identify these projects, how do you get them funded?

How you attract federal funds is going to be a challenge for communities of this size. It's different for New York, Boston or Miami, or even the coast of Virginia for our Naval defense. It's not the case here. But Nantucket does have a lot of wealth. It could be a public-private partnership."

I& M: In the past 12 years what do you see as your biggest achievements?

Hylton: "It's been such an honor and a privilege to be part of such a significant program not only for this community, but for the country when it comes to historic preservation.

We did a lot of work to document the Boston-Higginbotham house. That story of diversity and social equity, the story of this community integrating the schools 100 years

The majority of my work with climate change has been related to the coasts, both here and in Florida. But everything from hurricanes to fires to extreme temperatures and droughts is only going to accelerate.

I& M: What do you think the most significant risks are for Nantucket over the next 10, 20, 50, 100 years?

Hylton: “Unfortunately it’s only a matter of time before a major hurricane impacts the island. Think about if Hurricane Sandy had taken a slightly different path. It would have devastated the island and Cape Cod.

There was a hurricane in the 1930s and a couple in the 1950s that did quite a bit of damage. I know I talk about sea-level rise, but it’s really going to be storm surge and wind damage as the northern Atlantic warms and storms get larger and more severe. I think it’s going to be the severity of the storms first that’s going to cause the most damage.”

I& M: One statistic you often mention is that seven of the largest flooding events in Nantucket’s history have come in the past 10 years.

Hylton: “That’s not only here. I do a lot of work in St. Augustine, Fla. Seven or eight of their worst flooding events all happened in the last 10 years. All three of those communities (that make up St. Augustine) were historic communities.”

I& M: Are you still hearing people say this is something that happens naturally, or that it’s not accelerating and we don’t have to worry about it?

with just a regular high tide twice a day.”

I& M: We have living- shoreline-type projects and we have coastal-engineered structures like the Sconset Beach Preservation Fund’s geotube project. Do you think protection and adaptation are going to take a combination of short-term living-shoreline type approaches that could lead to something bigger down the road?

Hylton: “Globally there’s been a shift away from large sea walls and flood gates. The Netherlands is saying they have to learn to live with water rather than these hard-armored protections. It’s going to be a combination of things.

We took a nature-based approach, including living shorelines and oyster farms. Could they become sponge parks with vegetation? These are straightforward, low-cost projects. But we’re going to have to do a lot of things and some of the larger challenges like transportation and supply chain, that’s going to take time to figure out, so what small steps can we take in the meantime while we’re waiting on these bigger decisions?

The elephant in the room is what’s going to happen with the Steamship? How are we going to get off the island if we need to and the wharf is flooded?”

I& M: What do you think are the biggest challenges to implementing any of those things? Is it financial, or building consensus at Town Meeting?

Hylton: “One of the things I’m most excited about in this new job is working in policy, and all policies,

ahead of Brown v. Board of Education. We had a major impact on that site, and we helped raise awareness of that site on the island.

The last four years and the work with resilience, I think that’s my legacy. Holding History Above Water in 2019 was a pretty transformative moment and that workshop was my idea. I wrote the first grant that got the seed going for the town.

To get to follow it with a study on Washington Street, that’s the reason I’m joining the National Park Service. The federal government is paying attention to the work that’s being done here. They see the work here as a model for other places.

“I would like to thank the Walter Beinecke Jr. family’s Osceola Foundation, especially Barb Spitler, ReMain Nantucket and all island partners who have supported the program and me personally.”



Marty Hylton

Copyright © 2021 The Inquirer and Mirror 8/12/2021

[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)

---