

ISLAND MONITORING

Catherine Schmitt

Garbage on the beach, sodden toilet paper, and beer-can littered campfires are not what one wants to see in the wilderness. This holds true on the thousands of uninhabited islands that dot the Maine coast. Some islands are just a tuft of trees clinging to rocks, others are acres in size, but they all have a wild and rugged character that calls us to their shores. To land on a Maine island is to feel like a 15th century explorer, scrambling over rocks, climbing cliffs, and wandering through fields and woods. But islands are more fragile than they seem. Exploring takes its toll on unique island ecosystems.

Recreational activity on state-owned islands increased by 50 percent between 1996 and 2003, prompting the Maine Island Trail Association and the Bureau of Public Lands, which oversee activity on the Maine Island Trail, to recommend science-based monitoring of recreational impacts. The National Park Service owns about 15 outer islands around Acadia and has a growing interest in monitoring island use. In response to this need, the Island Monitoring Task Force was created in 2004.

Last summer the task force, coordinated by Natalie Springuel of Maine Sea Grant, began a pilot monitoring project on three islands, including Long Island in Blue Hill Bay. Acadia has held an easement on 4,460 acres of Long Island since 1995. "The park's islands don't experience the heavy use of islands to the south," says Charlie Jacobi, recreation specialist with the park, "mostly because they are further away from population centers and have less camping." Backcountry camping traditionally hasn't been managed by the Park Service because they focused on the heavily used areas on the mainland, but that's changing. "I know we are going to manage island recreational use more intensively," says Jacobi, "and having baseline data before we begin to manage is ideal."

With more visitors, the park's natural areas are vulnerable to human impacts beyond just litter. There are other, more subtle impacts that Springuel's group is attempting to monitor, effects like campsite expansion, erosion and soil compaction, tree damage, and footpaths. The project is developing monitoring

methods that are science-based, island-specific, and standardized so they can be used by managers and volunteers.

Studying recreation-related impacts on natural areas is still a fairly new science, and even less is known about impacts on coastal islands. "Much of the literature that exists is for large wilderness areas where the use area is concentrated," says Springuel, "but impacts on islands are dispersed because people tend to roam across the whole island." Islands are also



Charlie Jacobi, Acadia recreation specialist, dismantles a new campfire scar on a Long Island field.

unique because habitats with different sensitivities overlap, including intertidal areas and sandy banks. "The intertidal zone represents a particularly complicated environment because it is difficult to distinguish between human and natural impacts," says Springuel.

Last summer Springuel, Jacobi, and a volunteer took measurements on Long Island to experiment with different monitoring methods and to establish a baseline of information on impacts, so managers can make informed decisions about resource use.

At almost five miles long and two miles wide, Long Island is the largest island in Blue Hill Bay and one of the largest undeveloped islands on the Maine coast. It has a long history of human habitation and recreational use, beginning in the late 1700s. Today, there are a few private homes on the western side of the island and campsites on the eastern side.

The easement prohibits commercial use, so kayak guides and other tours are not allowed to land there. Visitors to Long are more likely to be local residents, people who have been visiting for generations. Most aren't aware that the Park Service is the responsible land owner, or that they might meet up with an enforcement officer. Stuart West, assisted by the Town of Blue Hill, enforces easement restrictions and park regulations on the outer islands, but education about Leave No Trace principles

and camping rules comes first.

The park is charged with preserving and protecting ecological, scenic, and cultural resources on Long Island, while at the same time providing public access. "It's a balancing act," says Jacobi, "and monitoring will help managers ensure that the island remains 'forever wild.' I think 50 years from now people will be pretty glad Long Island was preserved and is still available for use."

Volunteers are needed this summer. Contact Natalie Springuel, Marine Extension Associate, Maine Sea Grant, College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor 207-288-5015 x298, nspringuel@coa.edu.

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