

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ISLAND BEACH AS A COASTAL GATEWAY COMMUNITY AND WHY THE PEOPLE OF NEW JERSEY SHOULD CARE

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## **ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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Why should the people of New Jersey care about the environmental stability and quality of the gateway community of Island Beach State Park? The paper begins by defining and exploring the region of focus and then will categorize the community in question as meeting the criteria of a *gateway community*. The thesis will then be revisited and addressed by discussing the historical and environmental significance of the area and what is at stake should no action be taken. The next step will take a look at what efforts have been made in the interest of the region while also addressing what is lacking in action. This will be done by researching previous conservation projects in and around the New Jersey coastal region and analyzing presented bills and legislation that could benefit both the inhabitants and the environment of the region. The final point of strategy in this paper will be the presentation of a policy recommendation. This policy recommendation will seek to establish a sustainable community that operates harmoniously between the developed municipalities and the historical state park, whilst serving the New Jersey Coastline as an environmentally sound hub for coastal living. Such a policy will work towards mitigating pollution, bolstering coastal resiliency, investing in green and sustainable infrastructure, and more. This paper will utilize a wide array of resources, from local press to peer-reviewed analysis of coastal resiliency and environmental health of the region. The most important resources, however, will be the testimony of key officials and leaders within the New Jersey environmental community.

## **THE REGION OF ISLAND BEACH, NEW JERSEY**

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The Garden State is home to a vast 130 miles of coastline. Along that stretch of coastline, one would find multiple collections of long, skinny beaches that are detached from the mainland. These land masses are known as barrier islands. These pieces of coastal geography are essential to the protection of shore communities and ecosystems, as the beach dune system acts as a shield by absorbing waves and storm surges.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, a focus will be placed on the barrier island region known as Island Beach. This region splits the Barnegat Bay from the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Many locals and tourists may be familiar with this region, as Island Beach is home to the popular communities and attractions within Seaside Heights, Seaside Park, and Island Beach State Park. This is a hotspot for nature lovers and vacationers alike, between the beaches, boardwalks, amusement rides, and open parks. To give readers a better understanding of this region, the following portion will delve into the environmental significance of the area.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE**

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Island Beach State Park takes up the majority of this region, as it stretches approximately 10 miles parallel to the main coastline of New Jersey. As previously mentioned, this landmass acts as a shield for the

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "What Is a Barrier Island?" NOAA's National Ocean Service, March 5, 2021. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/barrier-islands.html#:~:text=These%20islands%20are%20critical%20to,less%20flooding%20on%20the%20coast.>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Gordon, "Section 21" in *A Gazetteer of the State of New Jersey: Comprehending a General View of Its Physical and Moral Condition, Together with a Topographical and Statistical Account of Its Counties, Towns, Villages, Canals, Rail Roads, &c., Accompanied by a Map*, ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Daniel Fenton, 1834), 163.

mainland by absorbing the brunt of energy from storm surges, hurricanes, and nor'easters. But this island is more than just a shield, as within it one would find a vast system of dunes and beaches which are home to a diverse array of maritime plants and wildlife, many of which have called this place home for thousands of years.<sup>3</sup> Within this undeveloped region, you will find vegetation such as dune grass, sea marsh, and a maritime forest. It is also the preferred habitat for ospreys, piping plovers, and foxes, to name a few species.

Other notable points of Island Beach State Park are the Sedge Islands Marine Conservation Zone (SIMCZ) and the Emily DeCamp Herbarium. SIMCZ is a conservation area approximately 1,900 acres in size and contains highly productive marshes and other water systems such as creeks, ponds, and open water. This zone's purpose is to manage and maintain the health and quality of the residing ecosystem. Within the Island Beach State Park visitor guide from 2021, a section is dedicated to SIMCZ and states:

This is one of New Jersey's most productive wildlife habitats because it contains a combination of maritime forest, thicket, and an extensive tidal marsh. The NJ Department of Environmental Protection manages the area to protect it while making it accessible to the public for a variety of recreational uses.<sup>4</sup>

The Emily DeCamp Herbarium is a center for educating the public about the importance of coastal vegetation. This herbarium can be found at the Forked River Interpretive Center, where a collection of roughly 400 plants have been classified and preserved. Public visitors have the opportunity to visit this sight and shadow scientists as they examine plants.<sup>5</sup> As shown, this region is fully embraced by mother nature.

#### **THE GATEWAY COMMUNITY DEFINED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

In 1998, the National Park Service (NPS) published the guidebook titled "Gateway Opportunities: A Guide to Federal Programs for Rural Gateway Communities." Within the introduction of this guide, the following explanation is given for 'gateway community':

The term gateway community refers to a community adjacent to a National Park System protected area. The local economy and social fabric of gateway communities are strongly influenced by NPS land management policies, as well as by a large number of visitors to the protected areas. Gateway communities are often located in spectacular and remote landscapes with a natural character and local tradition unique to the region.<sup>6</sup>

The non-profit organization Scenic America, which is dedicated to preserving the scenic beauty of the United States, champions gateway communities in its program work. A great example of how Scenic America advocates for the importance of gateway communities and corridors in this statement:

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<sup>3</sup> New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection. "Official Site of the State of New Jersey." NJDEP | Island Beach State Park | New Jersey State Park Service. OPRA. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/parks/islandbeachstatepark.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Friends of Island Beach State Park. "Island Beach State Park Visitor Guide." Ocean County Board of Freeholders, 2021. [https://friendsofisp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/IBSP\\_VisitorsGuide2013.pdf](https://friendsofisp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/IBSP_VisitorsGuide2013.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection. "Official Site of the State of New Jersey." NJDEP | Island Beach State Park | New Jersey State Park Service. OPRA. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/parks/islandbeachstatepark.html>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. National Park Service, *Gateway Opportunities: A Guide to Federal Programs for Rural Gateway Communities*, by Karen Steer and Nina Chambers, Washington, D.C., GPO, 1998. <http://npshistory.com/publications/social-science/gateway-1998.pdf>

Gateway communities and corridors are important because they support the domestic travel and tourism industry. NPS estimates that 329,000 jobs are directly created by national parks, and visitor spending amounts to \$20.2 billion annually. Many of these communities also have historical significance so preserving them safeguards the country's heritage and culture.<sup>7</sup>

In the aforementioned guide, the NPS goes further to designate some of these communities as 'rural gateway communities.' The specialization asks communities to meet certain criteria, from matters such as a population size to be under 50,000 and for the community to be far from any metropolitan area. The purpose of the rural designation is to qualify for federal funds that are allocated to areas defined as rural. This rural designation rests within the shared goals of the NPS and their gateway communities, as explained in the guide:

- *economic prosperity and diversification* that does not compromise the quality of life or environmental protection;
- *sustainable community development*, such as appropriate infrastructure, land use planning, and open space management, that maintains a sense of place; and
- *cultural and social development* that allows for the preservation and promotion of traditional local values.<sup>8</sup>

### **THE PROPOSED COASTAL GATEWAY COMMUNITY**

The Island Beach region is a hotspot for tourism and visitors. This, coupled with the Seaside Park and Heights communities' proximity to Island Beach State Park and low population, would be fair and adequate criteria for this space to be called a gateway community in the spirit of the National Park Service's definition. While there is a subdivision known as the rural gateway community, the NPS does not have the specialized designation of coastal gateway community. Due to this lack of specification, I present a recommendation for the creation of the new subdivision to specialize in the coastal region along with its specific matters of marine and coastal habitats and geography, while maintaining the original shared goals of rural gateway communities.

The Island Beach region has the opportunity to be the pilot community within this new designation. Qualifications would align with many of the original criteria for gateway communities, such as proximity to protected land and away from a metropolitan area and a population between 2,500 and 50,000. This specification would call for the criteria of marine and coastal proximity and the hosting of parks along bays and oceans that act as habitats for coastal wildlife, as met by the Island Beach and Seaside region. This designation could also address plenty of other regions along the Jersey Shore, such as Cape May or portions of the Pinelands, as the Pinelands National Reserve consists of over one million acres of forest that spans several counties and dozens of municipalities.<sup>9</sup> Areas like this could surely benefit from a program such as the NPS's gateway community designation.

### **PROBLEMS FACING GATEWAY COMMUNITIES**

<sup>7</sup> "Gateway Communities." Scenic America. EarthShare, June 29, 2021. <https://www.scenic.org/visual-pollution-issues/gateway-communities/>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. National Park Service, *Gateway Opportunities: A Guide to Federal Programs for Rural Gateway Communities*, by Karen Steer and Nina Chambers, Washington, D.C., GPO, 1998. <http://nps.history.com/publications/social-science/gateway-1998.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> "New Jersey Pinelands Commission: The Pinelands National Reserve." New Jersey Pinelands Commission | The Pinelands National Reserve. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://www.nj.gov/pinelands/reserve/>.

Island Beach's coastal gateway community has its own problems in addition to the national issues at hand. In an effort to be a primary source of information on the status of the region, I had the chance to speak with Paul Lang, a Trustee with the Friends of Island Beach State Park and Volunteer Master Naturalist for Ocean County. For context, the Friends of Island Beach State Park is a non-profit organization that's main mission is "to enhance interpretive, educational, recreational & research programs, and events at Island Beach State Park ... [and] to further public appreciation and stewardship of the park."<sup>10</sup> The organization places an emphasis on fundraising to maintain the natural habitat of the region, educates and propagates the protection of the barrier island ecosystem, and organizes programs to promote stewardship of the land and waters. Lang further explains:

The park environment is very important as a barrier island to protect against storm surges and to protect the Barnegat Bay, which is a nursery for fish and wildlife. While the area is a safe place for breeding wildlife and migratory wildlife, it also serves as a recreational place for the public.

When asked to elaborate on the problems that face Island Beach State Park, Lang had the following to say:

Two major problems the park continues to deal with are the pollutants from plastic and foreign substances along with the new regularity of powerful summer and winter storms which erodes the beach line. Additionally, the park is underfunded by the state, which is exactly why the Friends group is so important to the maintenance and stability of the park.<sup>11</sup>

Coastal gateway communities also face increased problems due to climate change. Madeline Urbish, Head of Government Affairs (New Jersey) at Ørsted, cited that coastal communities that lack adequate infrastructure are at risk of daytime flooding, in which roads and basements will flood in the absence of a storm. "Climate change is no longer a fear of the future. We are already feeling the effects."<sup>12</sup> Joshua Tennant, a longtime educator of biology and the environment from Monmouth County, seconds this point. Tennant projects that coastal communities must adapt to change and accept that measures such as establishing high dunes and raising homes are necessary to maintain a state of resiliency against more frequent and violent storms.<sup>13</sup>

## **WHAT IS AT STAKE**

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In the case of Island Beach as a gateway community, several key services and environmental factors are at stake of being damaged or destroyed if the region continues to receive insufficient attention. As Dr. Brian Potter of The College of New Jersey put it, "there is a duality of purpose within Island Beach."<sup>14</sup> He explains how the region provides a service of recreation and leisure to the residents and tourists of the region in addition to the service to the environment as a geographic defense system and home to wildlife.

Island Beach State Park is one of the few remaining undeveloped barrier beaches along the Atlantic Coast. Thanks to this preservation of land, the ecosystem, and its inhabitants have maintained their presence within 3,000 acres of coastal dunes.<sup>15</sup> The largest osprey colony in the state can be found here,

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<sup>10</sup> "Everything You Should Know about the Friends of IBSP!" Friends of Island Beach State Park. FundRazr. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://www.friendsofisp.org/about/>.

<sup>11</sup> Lang, Paul. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. April 20, 2022

<sup>12</sup> Urbish, Madeline. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. March 24, 2022

<sup>13</sup> Tennant, Josh. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. March 29, 2022

<sup>14</sup> Potter, Brian. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. April 5, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Division of Travel and Tourism, Department of State. "Island Beach State Park." Island Beach State Park | VisitNJ.org. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://visitnj.org/nj-all-beaches/island-beach-state-park>.

along with peregrine falcons, wading birds, shorebirds, waterfowl, and migratory songbirds.<sup>16</sup> Marine mammals, such as dolphins and seals, frequent the park each year. If funding does not adequately reflect the need for defensive and resilient investments against the ever-growing powerful storms and sea level, all of these inhabitants face the destruction of their ecosystem, and park visitors face the destruction. In addition to habitat destruction... If the dune systems are not of adequate quality, the barrier island's main purpose of defending the mainland may fail in the event of another superstorm or strong storm surge. Hurricane Sandy-level damages cannot become commonplace.

### **IMPORTANCE OF COASTAL RESILIENCY**

For those along the Jersey Shore, the thought of Hurricane Sandy may be a haunting memory, especially those close to the barrier islands. According to New Jersey Commissioner Shawn LaTourette of the Department of Environmental Protection, investing in coastal resiliency is of "utmost importance" in the context of environmental protection.<sup>17</sup> With the fear of more frequent and devastating effects of climate change knocking on the doorstep of the precious coastal communities along the Atlantic Coast. A true investment in the region cannot fail to address the elephant in the room of climate change.

Thankfully, some public officials do recognize the importance of coastal resiliency. After Hurricane Sandy, Seaside Park was left with a great deal less damage than Seaside Heights. This lack of damage can be attributed to the dunes, as they absorbed the brutal winds and waves that Hurricane Sandy tossed toward the town. "Those dunes saved our town," Seaside Park Mayor Matthies said. "Since Sandy, they've become even more of a focal point." As mentioned in an Asbury Park Press article from 2015:

The Coastal Research Center at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey studied the state's shoreline before and after Sandy struck. In Seaside Park, 25-foot-high dunes that were 150 feet wide, along with a 150-foot-wide beach "provided adequate protection from tidal surge and wave action," according to the Stockton report.<sup>18</sup>

One can only hope that other members of the public office can take coastal resiliency as seriously as Mayor Matthies. Necessary investments like this are integral to the preservation of homes and habitats alike.

### **INVESTING IN THE OUTDOORS**

One of the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the uptick in outdoor recreation. In wake of the pandemic, U.S. residents have been connecting more with the American outdoors. For example, approximately 57 million households partook in at least one camping trip in 2021– this is a 15 million household increase in comparison to 2019, which is now considered the pre-pandemic-era.<sup>19</sup> In the context of New Jerseyans, there was also a massive increase in park visitation.<sup>20</sup> Paul Lang from Friends of Island Beach State Park can attest to this, as the park sees an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 visitors a year. On some days the park is so busy that the gates have to be closed for new visitors as early as 11:00 am.<sup>21</sup> The park offers a plethora of recreational activities from swimming, fishing, clamming, hiking, cycling, and more.

<sup>16</sup> New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection. "Official Site of the State of New Jersey." NJDEP | Island Beach State Park | New Jersey State Park Service. OPRA. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/parks/islandbeachstatepark.html>.

<sup>17</sup> LaTourette, Shawn. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. April 18, 2022

<sup>18</sup> Mikle, Jean. "Seaside Park: Dunes 'Saved Our Town' from Sandy." Asbury Park Press. Asbury Park Press, November 9, 2015. <https://www.app.com/story/news/local/toms-river-area/seaside-park/2015/11/08/people-respect-dunes/74414228/>.

<sup>19</sup> "2022 KOA NA Camping Report." Kampgrounds of America Inc, 2022.

<http://koa.uberflip.com/i/1465395-2022-koa-na-camping-report/7>.

<sup>20</sup> "Seaside Heights, NJ." Data USA. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/seaside-heights-nj>.

<sup>21</sup> Lang, Paul. Interview by David Roberts. Online Informational Interview. April 20, 2022

Now is clearly the time to invest in parks and outdoor recreation. Increased visitors and recreationists can inject more money into the local economy of coastal gateway communities, but the proper funding and investment in infrastructure and management are necessary to adequately serve this boom in outdoor adventurers and tourists.

### **POSSIBILITY OF ACTION**

There is now a greater possibility of funding new conservation and environmental projects thanks to the signing of the Great American Outdoors Act in August 2020. This act was created in a response to the massive maintenance backlog at NPS facilities. The historical conservation legislation operates as follows:

This legislation will use revenues from energy development to provide up to \$1.9 billion a year for five years to provide needed maintenance for critical facilities and infrastructure in our national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, recreation areas, and American Indian schools. It will also use royalties from offshore oil and natural gas to permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund to the tune of \$900 million a year to invest in conservation and recreation opportunities across the country.

National parks host more than 325 million visitors every year, and the infrastructure cannot keep up without significant repairs. The network of roads, trails, restrooms, water treatment systems, and visitor facilities is aging, and many are exceeding the capacity they were designed to support. The National Parks and Public Lands Restoration Fund will provide funding for priority projects that address the maintenance backlog at NPS facilities, including campgrounds, picnic areas, roads, trails, and other critical infrastructure. Specific projects to be funded will be announced in the future.<sup>22</sup>

### **COASTAL RESILIENCY PROJECTS IN NEW JERSEY**

Thanks to the newly signed GAOA, the Land and Water Conservation has finally had a consistent budget to work on conservation projects across the nation's national parks and recreational sites. Recently, the LWCF has worked on a noteworthy collaborative conservation project in southern New Jersey. The LWCF worked alongside the Army Corps of Engineers and The Nature Conservancy to work toward the restoration of wetlands, marshes, and dunes in Cape May. This project was funded by \$23.95 million from the LWCF and reestablished nature-based infrastructure projects in the area in order to slow down flood and storm waters. The preservation of these wetlands is integral to the safety of mainland communities, as the marsh system saved an estimated \$635 million in property damages during Hurricane Sandy.

Currently, there are a few notable conservation projects currently underway within the Island Beach region. One of these projects has been covered already, that of the Sedge Islands Marine Conservation Zone. Other projects and efforts focus on the preservation and revitalization of the seabeach amaranth, piping plover, and fox. The seabeach amaranth is a species of plant that grows along the upper portions of beaches and saw dangerously low numbers in 2018, however, this number has grown by more than a multiple of five in less than a years time thanks to the combined efforts of New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.<sup>23</sup> As often is, the conservation of the seabeach amaranth had a supplementary benefit on the piping plovers, which are federally threatened beach-nesting birds. The NJDEP called for the

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<sup>22</sup> "Great American Outdoors Act." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/legal/great-american-outdoors-act.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Friends of Island Beach State Park. "Island Beach State Park Visitor Guide." Ocean County Board of Freeholders, 2021.

prohibition of vehicles traffic near nesting sites, which has also led to a positive impact on the piping plovers of the region.<sup>24</sup>

With these projects underway, it is sobering to know that environmental projects are still reaching the consideration of government funding. Thanks to the Great American Outdoors Act, valiant Land and Water Conservation, and its numerous coalition partners, I do not see why a coastal gateway community project could not happen.

### **COASTAL GATEWAY OPPORTUNITIES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

This proposition for coastal gateway opportunities is shamelessly inspired by the works of the NPS on their gateway opportunities guide from 1998. The difference, however, will be on the specifications of the region in question whilst also providing a heavy emphasis on coastal resiliency, scenic conservation, and sustainability. My recommendations are as follows:

- Proper investment in coastal resiliency and infrastructure.
- Establish 22-foot dunes from the Manasquan to Barnegat Bay Inlets.
- Designate Island Beach State Park as a National Park to garner both national attention and funding.
- Adequately fund park services and maintenance projects to alleviate stress from volunteer groups.
- Invest in the scenic quality of the region, which includes:
  - Undergrounding utilities.
  - Declutter visible spaces.
  - Establish tree and plant ordinances.
- Pledge to use renewable energy.
- Expand bike-ability by connecting existing bike trails from Seaside Park to Seaside Heights.
- Increase transportation options such as a bike-share system or water taxi.
- Establish electric vehicle charging stations along with the Seaside communities and within Island Beach State Park.

### **ADOPTION ACROSS THE STATE**

Theoretically, if this pilot program of coastal gateway community designation were to take off, plenty of other communities across New Jersey could benefit from the program. The remaining portion of the Island Beach peninsula could benefit from this program and would include the municipalities such as Lavalette, Ortley Beach, and Bayhead. Other more high-traffic regions, such as Wildwood, Avalone, Stone Harbor, and Cape May could greatly benefit from this program. Even if these regions do not meet the full qualifications and standards of coastal gateway communities, they can still bear witness to and adopt similar sustainable policies and practices. New Jersey's coastal communities have the opportunity here to really spearhead a new, sustainable way and means of coastal living.

### **CONCLUSION**

Even if the adoption of the coastal gateway community designation does not reach every coastal municipality, at least there will be exposure to new sustainable practices and policies along the coastline. This exposure will garner the attention of voters and residents alike, which will help usher in a new cultural appreciation for defending the beaches on a fully government-funded scale. Hopefully, there will come to a point where the government can fully sustain the maintenance and funding of coastal wild refuges, and those ecosystems will not be subject to running off of the manpower of volunteers.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

New Jersey should care about the prospect of coastal gateway communities. The shore is an integral part of so many lives and businesses and habitats across the state. This program will not only properly fund the regions in question; it will preserve the land and wildlife for generations to come, so our kids and our kids' kids can enjoy the same beach days and nature adventures as we did in our youth.



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