OPINION

The shifting sands of Crane Beach — and of life

Learning to live with constant change in both the natural and human landscape — to be in harmony with our own seasons — takes practice.

By **Renée Loth** Updated September 3, 2025, 3:00 a.m.

A 50-foot section of the hull from the Ada K. Damon, a historic shipwreck, was visible on Steep Hill Beach on the Crane Estate in Ipswich at low tide on March 21. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

A few summers back, the wreck of the Ada K. Damon emerged on Steep Hill Beach in Ipswich. The 84-foot double-masted schooner had run aground on its maiden voyage in

1909 and spent more than a century well preserved under the cold, wet sand. Periodically the skeletal outlines of the wreck could be visible when the longshore currents at Crane Beach pulled away just enough sand, but this time you could see clear down to the ship's keel. It was a thrilling sight, but exposure to the air made the wood structure vulnerable, and winter storms broke it into long planks that littered the beach the following year. Then the sands shifted again, and it was gone.

Cue the metaphor.

The ancient Greeks said you can't step in the same river twice. But you also can't step on the same beach. In the 20 summers I've spent near the mouth of the Ipswich River, I've seen sandbars big enough to host epic volleyball games flatten out or disappear completely over a single season. Low-tide moonscapes of soft craters one year become nothing but rocks the next, leaving me to wonder if strong currents deposited the stones over the winter or just washed away the sands that had buried them. Fields of sea lavender display their purple froth in the marshes for the briefest moment, then the bright red glasswort takes over, then the long winter begins.

There's a lesson for our lives here if we attend to it.

Barrier beaches like the ones we have in Massachusetts are some of the most dynamic land forms on the planet. They are in constant flux, responding to the implacable forces of wind, waves, and currents. Dunes migrate, cliffs erode, the surf roiled up by hurricanes hundreds of miles out at sea can assail the shore and anything on it, as indeed Hurricane Teddy's waves battered the Ada K. Damon in 2020. Crane Beach has lost 1,500 feet to erosion since 2000, according to the Trustees of Reservations.

Wind as well as water shape the land. If you look closely at the concave dunes that line the beaches you can see lines of reddish-purple, evidence that the sea has deposited heavier grains of garnet while the wind has blown away the lighter feldspar and white quartz. Several years ago, a microburst took out a huge swath of nearly century-old spruce trees on Choate Island, where Cornelius Crane had planted them so he could be reminded of his childhood summers in Maine.

Crane was a great industrialist whose descendants donated more than a thousand acres of this spectacular land to the public, but sowing an entire island with a monoculture of trees to enhance his view? That's a pretty good example of mankind's hubris in attempting to control the land. And it's just one local example. In Salisbury, residents ponied up $600,000 last year to truck in 14,000 tons of sand in hopes of protecting their properties, only to see it washed away within days by a late-winter storm. Coastal communities everywhere are struggling to decide whether to resist nature's relentless march or accept it.

I can relate. Every September I mourn the end of after-dinner sunsets, the last icy dip, the fading of the bright green seagrass, even as the pale yellow and tawny autumn colors bring their own pleasures to the marsh. Learning to live with constant change in both the natural and human landscape — to be in harmony with our own seasons — takes practice. I know if I can stop clinging to the things I love about summer I can learn to be more accepting of the ebbs and flows of life. But oh, it hurts when the tide washes my sand castle away.