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Sparks Fly Over a National Park

Boston Considers Natural Gas and Wind Turbine Projects on its Harbor Islands.

Story by Jennifer Weeks / Jan. 20, 2006

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The 34 islands in Boston's harbor have been a national park for only 10 years, but they have been in use since pre-Colonial times. When Europeans settled Massachusetts Bay in the 1600s, Native Americans used many islands as fishing bases and trading posts. Over the next centuries Bostonians built military outposts, prisons, summer cottages, commercial wharves, schools, social service institutions, and dumps, leaving room for hunting, fishing, boating, and swimming.

Soon the islands may serve yet another purpose: meeting Boston's growing energy needs.

Last September, the Boston Harbor Islands Partnership (an alliance of federal, state, and nonprofit organizations that jointly manages the park) agreed to consider putting four or five wind turbines with a total capacity of about 3.5 megawatts on Long, Moon, Spectacle, and Peddocks Islands, which lie between four and eight miles offshore.

This step followed a two-year feasibility study led by the Urban Harbors Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and the Island Alliance, a nonprofit that works to raise private-sector support for the national recreation area. The proposal has a long way to go, however, because the Harbor Islands, unlike other national parks, are privately owned, and each owner must consent to the turbines.

"From my point of view, it would be great," says Tom Powers, president of the Island Alliance. "Of course, you'd have to look at each site individually to make sure that [the turbines] wouldn't affect the visitors' experience."



Fort Andrews (NPS photo)

The designated islands are a microcosm of the harbor's history. One, Long Island, is home to city social service facilities, two abandoned Nike missile batteries, the circa-1900 ruins of Fort Strong, and Long Island Head Light, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Moon Island, once the terminus of Boston's sewage treatment system, is a training site for police and firefighters. Peddocks Island is open for hiking and camping but also houses private cottages and the remains of Fort Andrews, which guarded the harbor from 1904 through World War II. Spectacle Island was used as a garbage dump until recently, but a public park has been built on top of landfill from Boston's Central

Artery construction project and is slated to open later this year.

Erecting four or five wind turbines up to 200 feet tall could pose tradeoffs for the more than 100,000 people who visit the islands each year. Turbines may alter views to and from the islands. As in many regions, the aesthetics of wind energy are controversial in New England: Some observers think windmills are attractive, while others call them blights on natural landscapes. A 150-foot, 660-kilowatt wind turbine already stands on the southern shore of Boston Harbor, generating electricity for the suburb of Hull.

Wind power also would have to be integrated with historic preservation on the islands. The Harbor Islands are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an archaeological district for their prehistoric remains, and many individual sites and structures on the islands are eligible for listing. The park contains three National Historic Landmarks: Boston Light, Fort Warren, and Boston's Long Wharf. "



A proposal for a natural gas terminal on Massachusetts' Outer Brewster Island is generating less interest than a wind turbines on four other harbor islands. (Sherman Morss, Jr.)

Only two national park areas currently have wind turbines within their borders. Channel Islands National Park, off the coast of southern California, installed a hybrid renewable energy system in the late 1990s that combines two 10-kilowatt wind turbines and a solar photovoltaic array. By replacing a generator that ran on diesel fuel and motor oil, the system saves money, eliminates sulfate, nitrogen oxide and particulate emissions, and reduces the risk of oil spills in a sensitive ecosystem. In August 2005, a grid-connected 2.5-kilowatt turbine was installed at the Coquina Beach Bathhouse in South Nags Head, N.C., part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore.



Island views (Brent Erb/NPS photo)

Proposals for much larger wind farms with dozens of turbines have caused controversy near other national parks, including Maine's Appalachian Trail and Massachusetts' Cape Cod National Seashore. However, wind advocates think that a few small turbines can be compatible with the Harbor Islands park's existing missions.

"The story of the Boston Harbor Islands, which is embraced in the national park designation, is one of evolving uses and environmental restoration," says Jack Wiggin, director of the Urban Harbors Institute. "Wind power, appropriately sized and sited, advances the park's sustainability and environmental education goals while providing a needed source of revenue to support park activities."

Finances matter because the Harbor Islands park was established as a public/private partnership: the islands are owned or managed by the city of Boston, state and federal agencies, and private conservation groups, and every dollar of federal funds must be matched with three dollars from other sources. The installation proposed in the wind feasibility study was estimated to yield net annual revenues of about \$730,000 (more than 10 percent of recent park operating budgets) from sales of electricity into the local power grid, and this figure is probably low in view of rising electricity prices.

The wind initiative was dwarfed by a September proposal from energy company AES Battery Rock to build a liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal on Outer Brewster Island, located 10 miles offshore at the mouth of Boston Harbor. In return, the company has offered up to \$10 million annually for conservation activities. New England's economy is heavily dependent on natural gas, and regional demand threatens to exceed supply this winter, so the offer is attractive to local officials who are worried about energy prices. "



Urban island getaway (NPS photo)

Local conservation groups argue that security zones around a terminal on Outer Brewster would curtail access to prime fishing and boating waters in Boston Harbor, and that the facility would displace nesting harbor seals and rare birds. Environmental advocates, along with the Island Alliance, oppose converting an island that was acquired with state and federal conservation funds to private use.

"The National Park Service has a clear mandate to protect the natural and cultural resources of the park system, and to provide for their enjoyment," says Park Superintendent Bruce Jacobson.

"Removing land from park use for an industrial facility is inconsistent with this fundamental purpose."

Under state law, converting park land to non-park uses requires a two-thirds vote from the state legislature. A pending bill that directs the state to lease Outer Brewster for the LNG terminal could come to a vote as early as this month, but harbor advocates are urging legislators to hold hearings first.

"We think this is a pretty bold play by AES," says Bruce Berman, spokesman for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, noting that up to a dozen other proposals are pending for LNG terminals in the Northeast but only two or three are expected to be built. "This proposal to take Outer Brewster Island is all about market share—it's not about meeting New England's energy needs."

Because Massachusetts acquired Outer Brewster Island in 1973 with Land and Water Conservation Funds, both the National Park Service and the state would have to approve converting it to private use, and Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs Stephen Pritchard has called the LNG leasing bill inconsistent with state laws and policies.

Meanwhile, the wind initiative is slowly moving forward with analyses of technical issues such as upgrading the islands' electric transmission cables and ensuring that wind turbines would not obstruct flight paths into Logan Airport. If no roadblocks are found, further studies will consider how windmills would affect park views and conform with historic preservation goals.

Wind power on the Harbor Islands, which may produce more light, has generated less political heat than the natural gas project because the proposal is on a much smaller scale, and wind advocates are addressing potential impacts. Turbines won't affect the visitor's experience, says Tom Powers of the Island Alliance: "They could coexist."

Jennifer Weeks is a freelance writer living in Massachusetts.

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