

What Makes This A Special Place? A Photovoice Exhibition

Featuring photographs by community members from Drakes Island and Moody Beach

July – August 2022

Coastal Ecology Center Gallery @ the Wells Reserve at Laudholm

Place Attachment

[plās ə'taCHmənt] *theory*

1. *The bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments.*
2. *Feelings of connection with a geographic location that provides security and comfort.*

Place attachment shapes the way we think about the past, present, and future of the places that are special to us. It's a sort of lens that informs how we understand and value a place, how we experience change, how we perceive risk, and how we decide what is important to protect for future generations.

Understanding the dimensions of place attachment is important in the context of coastal management. When people are connected to a place over long periods of time, they gain a vast amount of local knowledge through repeated observation and lived experience. This kind of expertise about a place can (and, in my opinion, should) inform local decision-making processes, including planning and policy initiatives related to coastal resilience.

To explore what place attachment means in coastal areas like those found in southern Maine, I used a research method called Photovoice to engage with community members from two nearby neighborhoods – Drakes Island and Moody Beach. Photovoice is a collaborative approach to learning about community knowledge, experiences, values, and aspirations.

Participants in this project, who are seasonal or full-time residents of these communities, took photos in response to the question, "When it comes to [this place], what do you care about most?" They were asked to submit between 5 and 20 photos, including at least one image of each of the following:

- A physical location or natural feature in [this place] that is special to you
- An activity that you enjoy doing in [this place], either by yourself or with others
- Something that recalls a memory or experience in [this place]
- Anything that you might be concerned about in [this place]

Participants also wrote brief narratives about each photograph to provide further information and context. They then took part in a group discussion, where they reflected on one another's images and identified common themes they saw repeated across the full set of photographs and narrative statements.

Featured in this exhibit are the major themes that emerged during the group discussions and from my analysis of the data. In addition to what makes these places so special to them, participants identified some issues of concern that could have an impact on their connection to place in the future.

12 people graciously accepted my invitation to participate in this project and dedicated their valuable time to the process. I learned so much from them and am eternally grateful for their trust, openness, and support throughout this process. It is an honor to be a steward of your stories and perspectives, friends.

- Jessica Brunacini, PhD

2020-2022 Margaret A. Davidson Graduate Fellow, Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve

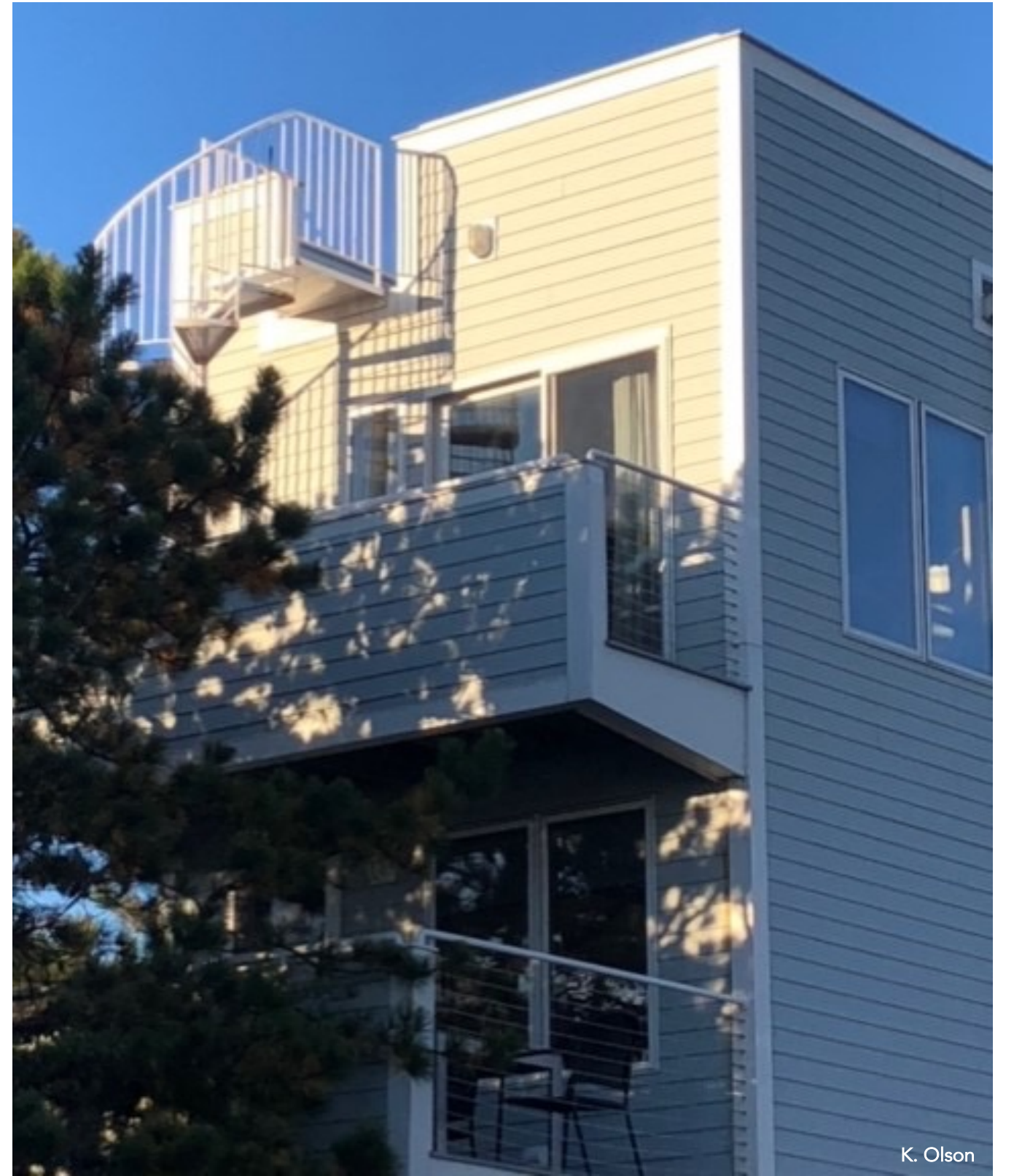
This project was supported by dissertation research fellowships from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Coastal Management and Michigan State University's Department of Community Sustainability. © Jessica Brunacini, 2023. All Rights Reserved. Please do not copy, reproduce, distribute, publish, display, modify, create derivative works, transmit, or in any way exploit any part of this copyrighted material without the prior written permission from the copyright owner.

theme: FAMILY

One of the core aspects of what makes these places special is that they are shared with family. Drakes Island and Moody Beach are gathering places that foster intergenerational connections and serve as the backdrop for important family milestones. Nearly all participants described relationships with place that span across multiple generations of their families. In some cases, place itself is seen as a member of the family.



When I think of Drakes Island, I usually picture the *Rosa rugosa* bushes laden with flowers. This of course isn't always the case, but my favorite time of year is early summer when the days are getting longer and the bushes are in full bloom. It usually signals the time of year that my family arrives to visit, the island is bustling with people, and summer is finally here.



This house represents, for me, the most important aspect of Moody, specifically the fact that Moody has always been at the core of our family. It's where we go when we need each other. It's safe, it's nurturing. The house itself is built on what was once a small parking lot owned by my parents (who rented a couple of cabins). While we thought we'd lose access to Moody when it became necessary to sell their house, we discovered this undersized lot was grandfathered from prohibitive zoning requirements and we could build something 14 feet wide: in many respects, our salvation.



We gather as a family on the back deck for late night gatherings and can enjoy the most amazing light show! We have said as a group many times how lucky we are. We have been enjoying scenes of the "Marsh" as we called it for the last 20 years. The Rachel Carson Refuge is a place that we treasure and want to protect from any further erosion. We are always telling people to stay away and just look from afar.



Deep and meaningful family history at Moody Beach, 1911-2021. Owning beachfront property to low tide is a cherished and treasured gift spanning 5 generations of Merrill descendants.

theme: NATURE

The dynamic natural beauty of these places draws attention and appreciation. One participant called these dynamics the “personality of place.” Aspects of the environment like the tides, the lighting, and the weather change from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, season to season, reminding people of the natural rhythms and cycles of life. Witnessing the power and drama of coastal storms is even an exhilarating experience for some!

Drakes Island and Moody Beach are both regarded for their wide, flat, sandy beaches that can be enjoyed twice a day, as well as their tidal marshes that support an abundance of wildlife. Several participants described these land- and seascapes as unique places to observe natural phenomena. Many expressed a strong desire to be good stewards of these special environments.



K. Olson

This picture captures two extraordinary elements of Moody. First, the tidal difference. Where else on earth does one get a "new beach", hundreds of yards wide, a (mostly) hard and flat playground, twice a day? While tides elsewhere in Maine exceed the 9.5 foot average at Moody, nowhere north of Portland can match the beaches of Wells/Ogunquit/York for this extraordinary natural phenomenon. And second: Moody provides weather and sky watching vistas, constantly changing. Soothes my soul.

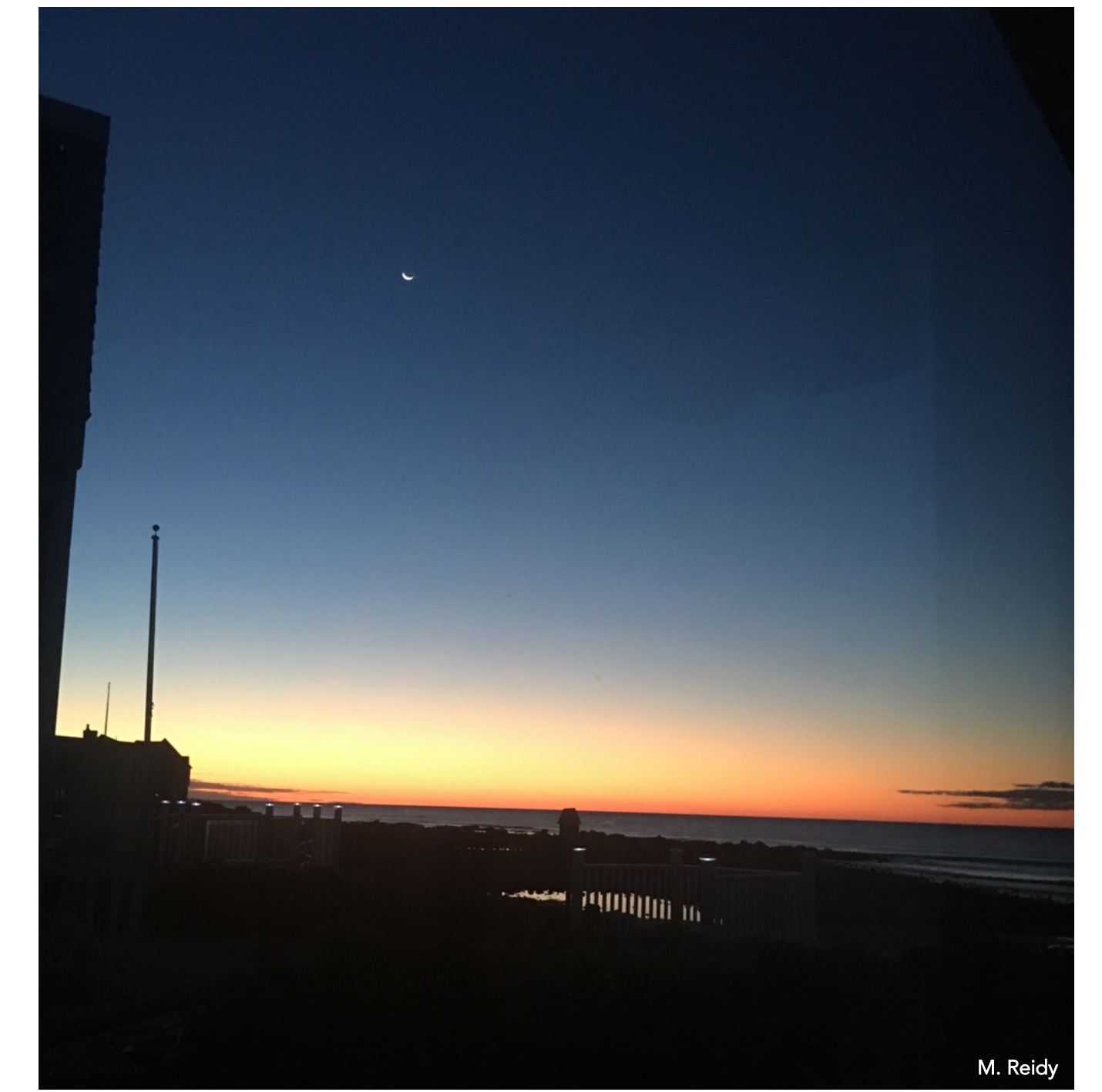


LWR

"Gale warning remains in effect until midnight EST."



I like this view of Drakes Island (from Laudholm Farm) because it shows how isolated our island is, and how it sits on a barrier reef. Here, the north end of the island looks like the end of the world.



M. Reidy

Moody Beach is a good place for sky watching because there is very little light pollution and no buildings block the view. I like star gazing at night in the summer because the constellations are clear to see. I've even seen shooting stars and satellites cross the night sky. In the morning there is nothing quite like seeing the horizon start to brighten and change color as the sun comes up. Until you see an unobstructed view of the sun coming up over the horizon, you have no idea of what a majestic sight it is.



Hamel

This is our view from our back deck in the fall...beautiful wildlife and scenery. This day I was able to catch the Heron. The beauty of the whole reserve and the amount of wildlife we get to see and watch is like no other place.



Drakes Island is the closest many city or suburbanites get to nature. This is especially valuable for the children. One of the great things about Drakes Island is that it gives kids the chance to learn directly about the sun and moon cycles as well as learning about tides. Sunrise and moonrise have true meaning. Because the Drakes Island beach is so flat, the concept of high and low tides has a strong visual meaning for kids that they would not necessarily get from watching the water on a marked post in a harbor, although the marked posts near the jetty do help distinguish high and low tide from the phrase the tide is the "in or out".



Being a fellow resident of the Moody Beach ecosystem, there are endless opportunities to witness the many creatures that also co-habitate here. Nature unfolds revealing evidence of molting, mating, feeding, predation, movement, migration, birth, and death.



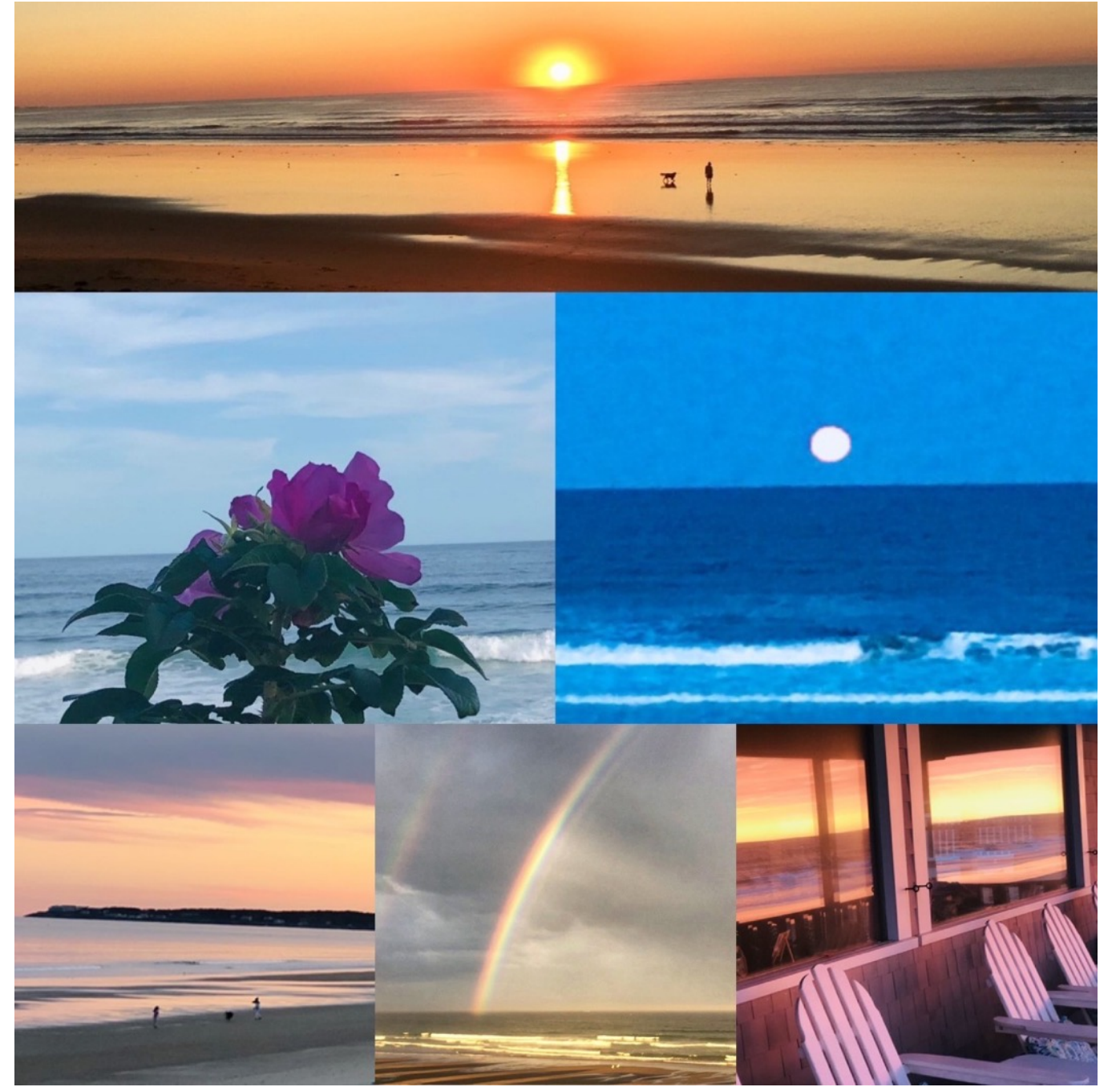
We must continue to protect the quiet places where you can see and feel the ebb of life as it has gone on for centuries.

theme: EMOTIONS

Places that are meaningful to us can evoke a range of thoughts, feelings, memories, and reflections. How places like Drakes Island and Moody Beach make people feel – fortunate, relaxed, grateful – is part of what draws people to live here or visit often. For some participants, place is also a kind of conduit between the past and the present, where they can still feel connected to people who are no longer physically with them.



One of the great things about Drakes Island is that regardless of individual wealth, a perfect view can make anyone feel they are, for that moment, the most fortunate person in the world.



Full of Gratitude and our place of true Restoration; spiritually, physically and emotionally.



Drakes Island and Laudholm Reserve are a place to rest, reflect and recharge on the path of life's journey. In today's busy world we need these refuges more than ever.



My father used to call this place heaven. Above the marsh, I spot an egret "angel" spreading its wings fully in flight. Moments like this make me think of my father and smile. Living here, enjoying our home and the beautiful nature and setting makes me feel a strong connection to him still.

theme: ACCESS

Considerations about access include how these special places are accessed and who has access to them. Drakes Island and Moody Beach are both surrounded by water, with tidal marshes on one side and the ocean shore on the other. During especially high tides or storm events, access to and from these places can be limited or even impossible due to road flooding. This is a concern for some participants, especially in Drakes Island where there is only one road connecting the community to the “mainland.”

Who has access to the beach can be a complicated question in Maine, where private property holders typically own to the low tide mark. Beach ownership is a sensitive issue in places like Moody Beach because it has a history of being divisive. However, most participants expressed that they could see the issue from both sides, suggesting there is middle ground to build from. As well, sections of the beaches are accessible via public parking lots and beach right-of-ways.



I'm reminded with the ever more frequent high tides that flood the estuary marshes along Drakes Island Road, that access is everything.



Another sign of the weather we experience at Moody Beach. Sometimes it means you have to find another way to the beach!



The greatest threat to the Moody Beach community; dividing waterfront owners from backlot, old time families from those newly discovering, values from valuations. Having a family that has owned on both sides of the street, across old and new local customs, all I can say is... sigh...



Although very ordinary, this picture of one of the two parking lots is a very important picture for me because it is a reminder of how those who are not lucky enough to own, or wealthy enough to rent, access Drakes Island. Drakes Island, for the most part, has a very white Anglo demographic. I hope that in the future people of all backgrounds will be able to own, rent and daily enjoy this beautiful setting.

theme: CHANGE OVER TIME

When people have long-standing connections to a place, they have an abundance of local knowledge about, observations of, and experience with change over time. The same dynamic characteristics that make Drakes Island and Moody Beach appealing to so many also make these places vulnerable to the effects of rising sea levels, stronger storms, and increased coastal erosion. Nearly all participants included personal observations of these types of changes.

The impacts of these observed changes, which some attribute specifically to climate change, are a major concern for most participants. There is a sense of uncertainty about what the future holds. However, given the depth of care that participants feel towards these places, there is also a strong interest in pursuing strategies and solutions that build resilience in the face of change.



This is a view from the patio looking out on the ocean. There are many chairs because part of the charm of this place is the people that share it. The view is one of the things that I most look forward to when I am not there. I could look out on that view for hours. The ocean constantly changes and is endlessly fascinating. At night, going to sleep to the sound of the ocean is a unique experience; I leave the window open unless it is extremely cold outside. This section of Moody Beach has changed over time, too. I remember it from 50 years ago. It seems like the level of the beach has dropped relative to the cottages on the beach. Also, at this point in the beach, the high tide now regularly comes up to the sea walls of the cottages; whereas 50 years ago that was a rare event. And there used to be about 30 feet of very fine sand that was almost always in front of the cottages, it would make a squeaking sound when you walked on it; that has now been replaced by sand that is wet and compressed due to the twice daily high tides.



The beach you see here in the foreground forty years ago was all dune, down to the person in white in the distance to the right by the ocean.



According to my grandparents, Drakes Island is a completely different place than the sleepy beach community of 50 years ago. The houses are bigger, the roads are busier, construction never ends, and the people are less familiar. The shape of the beach has changed since construction on Wells Harbor and the jetties began in the 1960s, with sand shifting dramatically from where it once was. Storms are more severe and weather is less predictable, and it seems like the seawalls will need to be fortified in coming decades. I sometimes worry about the future of my relationship to Drakes Island as it continues to change, but it's reassuring that even as things change around them, my family remains a constant.



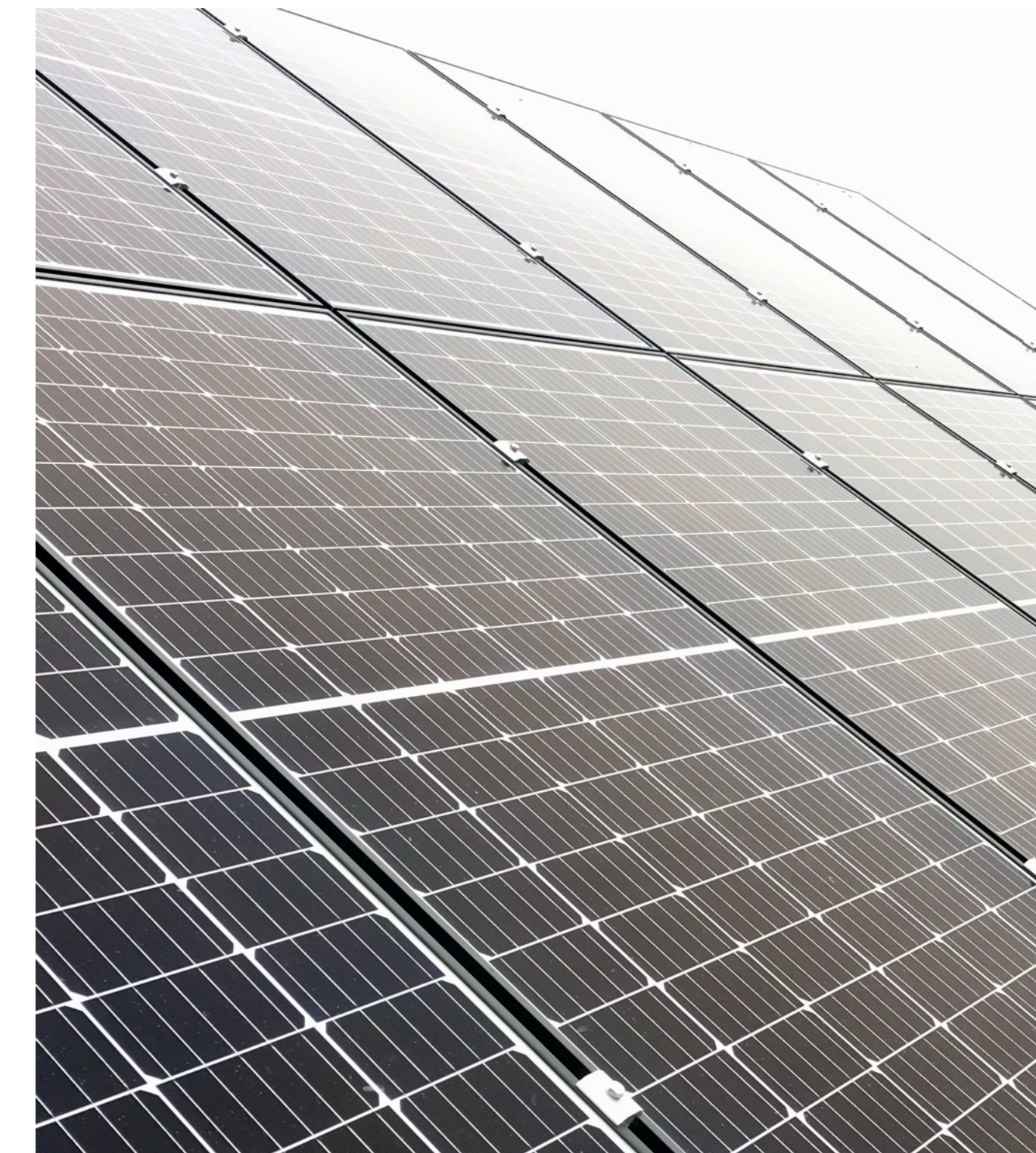
After a strong Nor'easter we lost about 12 feet of sand at Moody Beach exposing what was once a peat bog, 10,000 years ago the sea level was 400 feet lower than today.



Moody Beach has undergone some vast changes over time due to Climate Change. Shifting currents and increased severity of Nor'easter storms have played a major part in the shifting and height of sand. These two photos, taken in 1983 and 2021 at the same location exemplify the difference in sand height over a 38-year period. Both men were 6'2".



My biggest concern for Drakes Island is the consequence of global warming. I've been coming here for 74 years and paying attention to nature for about 60 years.



The Wells Reserve is powered 100% by solar energy. I appreciate this as reducing carbon emissions that cause climate change can help stop sea level rise that threatens homes here on Drakes Island. This year especially I have witnessed the effects of climate change on Drakes Island - on Laudholm Beach and north of the seawall. High tide is also much higher than when I was a child making it impossible now to walk the entire length of the beach during it.



Armed and Protected. Temporary straw bales sit atop my seawall providing an additional two feet to hold back the sea during winter storms. I tried this line of defense for the first time last year in 2020 and it worked so well that I plan to install them every fall.

theme: UNCERTAINTY

Drakes Island and Moody Beach are surrounded by water – ocean on one side and tidal marshes on the other. This proximity to water draws people to these places but it also exposes them to coastal hazards, including the impacts of sea level rise. Participants noted their feelings of uncertainty when considering what the future might hold for Drakes Island and Moody Beach as sea levels continue to rise. While they can be concerning, projections of change are also useful when developing strategic plans for managing coastal areas, now and into the future.



The weather that day was clear and sunny, mid-50's, winds out of the west at 5 MPH. By all accounts, a rather lovely day in November. A King Tide occurred around noon reaching heights of +11.4 feet. This aerial footage shows the impact of the sea, ON A GOOD DAY. Imagine adding to the mix rising sea levels or increasingly severe storms? These potential compounding effects could be even more devastating.



About a hundred yards from the "Drakes Island" marker on the Barrier Beach trail, this sign is a sobering reminder that future generations of Drakes Island residents will be displaced and lose their homes if sea levels continue to rise to their projected levels