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Lighthouses Illuminate Area's Richness

by Stephen Jones

If you go to the top of Fort Hill in Groton, Connecticut, after dark and stand among the briars on the wobbly stone wall that more or less marks off the old burial ground, and look downhill toward the blackness that is the sea, you will discern–shining in the pattern of their various characteristics–no less than nine lighthouses.

Is there another place on the Atlantic Coast where you can stand and see such a spectacle?

Moving from left to right, you have Watch Hill Light, Latimer's Reef, Montauk Point, North Dumpling, Race Rock, Little Gull, Plum Island, Plum Gut and New London Ledge. If you were on the top rung of a hook and ladder, you might well add New London Harbor Light and by next year you could have the Avery Point Light. Go a little higher and you'd add Block Island Southwest Light and the light at the end of the Connecticut River breakwater at Saybrook.

Aside from a lighthouse trivia question, what does this accumulation of major aids to navigation imply? First, the presence of a lighthouse suggests some sort of navigational obstacle. Rocks, reefs, shallows, sandbars; all are productions of geological phenomenon, in our case the glacier plays a heavy role. Most of what these lighthouses mark are products of the terminal moraine. Once set up, these glacial deposits affect the currents, which in turn scour and transport material about in intriguing patterns. The Fishers Island Sound and Southeast Connecticut coast is a rare combination of shorelines of submergence and emerging shorelines. These two basic patterns seem to alternate in creating estuaries and barrier beaches.

The geology in turn creates habitat for a variety of biological species. Eelgrass and other sea plants find nooks and crannies, which in turn favor finfish and shellfish. Wading birds and sea birds become part of the system: egrets, great blue herons, night herons. Even the reclusive bittern and the cacophonous kingfisher haunt the shallows while ospreys, herring gulls, terns, Canada Geese, mute swans, mallards, black ducks, and cormorants abound. In the "shoulder seasons" the occasional loon works the deeper waters. In winter come buffle heads, mergansers and scoters.

But natural forces do not build the lighthouses. That people build and maintain them implies a culture that is concerned with the sea. And indeed a great human response to the sea has grown up in the area of the nine lighthouses. We are talking about the submarine industry and the one person lobster boat; mom and pop with the clam rake and the half dozen yacht clubs with their spinnakers and gadgets. In the later half of the previous century a number of educational institutions have grown up around the water's edge. Students range from grade school to graduate school and older persons form groups to investigate what they had perhaps taken for granted in their earlier years.

Scientists like to look for "indicators", quick signposts that offer promise of hidden complexities. Next time you want to survey an area for its potential as a place to do business on the water, start by counting the lighthouses.

The Watch Hill lighthouse, in the popular seaside resort village of Watch Hill in Westerly, Rhode Island, marks the entrance to Fishers Island Sound.

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For more, visit "Lighthouses: A Photographic Journey" web site at http://www.ipl.org/div/light/

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A Pictorial Tour of the Lighthouses

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Orient Point Lighthouse

photo: UCONN

Avery Point Lighthouse, before recent restoration efforts began

Professor Stephen Jones is the author of *Harbor of Refuge*, *Working Thin Waters*, and other literary works. He is Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, and chairman of the curriculum committee for the UConn Maritime Studies Program at Avery Point in Groton, Connecticut – and was once a lighthouse keeper.

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Latimer Point Lighthouse

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Montauk Point Lighthouse

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

North Dumpling Lighthouse

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Race Rock Lighthouse

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Little Gull Lighthouse

photo: W. Barnard/Proj. O

Plum Island Lighthouse

photo: P. Van Patten

New London Ledge Light

photo: P. Van Patten

New London Harbor Light

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