

Boston Harbor Islands

Boston Harbor Islands
A National Park Area
Massachusetts

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Methinks an island would be the most desirable of landed property, for it seems like a little world by itself; and the water may answer for the atmosphere that surrounds planets.

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

HAWTHORNE caught the essence of this urban archipelago while visiting Thompson Island in 1837. Each island has its own natural environment, evokes a distinct mood, and tells its story of the past. Yet each shares the unusual quality of being both a place apart and a facet of the city's maritime character. Together these 34 islands and peninsulas encompass a broad swath of the Boston area's cultural and natural history.

Fort Warren, on Georges Island, guarded major shipping channels.
HARPER'S WEEKLY ILLUSTRATED

Its soldiers guarded Confederate POWs (right) during the Civil War.
NAVAL HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

American Indians sought out the islands for food, ritual, and recreation long before Europeans arrived. Since the 1600s newcomers have used them for everything from fishing settlements to harbor defense sites. Today, after a determined partnership effort to restore the health of the harbor and reclaim the islands from exploitation, they abound with things to do, ways to learn, and places to explore.

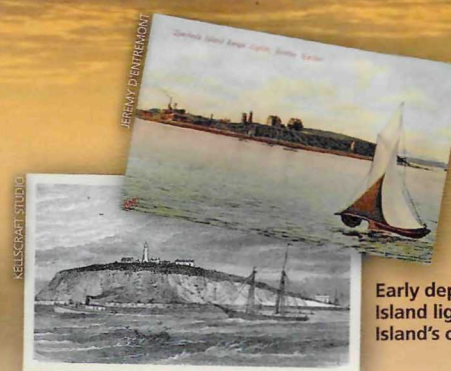
These Boston Harbor Islands, scattered across the expansive, bustling harbor they help to define, offer historical landscapes where structures from the 1800s can pull you back to an earlier time. They offer refuge where you can turn from the clock and immerse yourself in natural settings ranging from the dramatic to the intimate—each special, each “a little world by itself.”



THE BOSTON HARBOR ISLANDS PARTNERSHIP, a group of federal, state, city, and non-profit organizations, manages Boston Harbor Islands. The members have a long record of protection of natural and cultural resources. The Boston Harbor Islands Advisory Council advises the Partnership on park planning and operations. The Partnership also works with educational and for-profit groups to promote citizen stewardship of the islands.

LOGO ©BOSTON HARBOR ISLANDS PARTNERSHIP
COVER PHOTO ©BRIAN TADUE PHOTOGRAPHY
PIKER ©JUDITH JANGO-COHEN

The harbor in the early 1800s. Then as now, windmill blades turned above the water.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Early depictions of Spectacle Island lights (top) and Long Island's classic drumlin shape.

On a Drowned Drumlin Field They Built Lighthouses, Forts, and Harbor Homes . . .

When you look over Boston Harbor, you're seeing a drowned drumlin field, hills built during the last ice age and later covered by rising seas. Those whose tops remained above water are the Boston Harbor Islands. The harbor's great tidal swings and moderate salinity create environments hosting an array of land and marine wildlife: rabbits, raccoons, and other small mammals on the islands, harbor seals resting on the rocks of the outer islands, dozens of bird species perched on pilings, wheeling in the air, or feeding in the salt marshes.

For millennia Northeast coastal Indians fished, farmed, and hunted on the islands, and European settlers used them for much the same purposes. The large natural harbor and New England's transportation network have made Boston a thriving seaport since the 1600s. The port has its share of sea tales, as ships plying the harbor's sear lanes attracted pirates. Boston has also been a port of entry for early settlers and later immigrants seeking a better life in a new world.

THE DRUMLIN
Most of the Boston Harbor islands are glacial drumlins. Great Brewster (below) is a good example of their typical inverted spoon shape. These formations were created between 100,000 and 15,000 years ago when glaciers moved across the region. Deposits of glacial till beneath the ice were left behind as the glaciers retreated.
©JUDITH COHEN

Northeast Indians used beaded shells as currency.
PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM



These islands have historically been places where society has set apart unwelcome institutions and people on the margins. American Indians were interned on Deer Island during King Philip's War in 1675. Other islands were used to isolate quarantined immigrants, prisoners of war, and mental patients. They provided refuge in places like the Boston Asylum and Farm School for Indigent Boys on Thompson Island, visited by Hawthorne on the trip that prompted his hymn to island life.

Because the harbor was strategically important during conflicts from the Revolution to World War II, you will find remains of forts, gun batteries, and other military installations on the islands. Notoriously tricky shipping channels bristle with hazards, and buoys, range lights, and lighthouses still dot the harbor—most famously Boston Light on Little Brewster. Today Boston Harbor is a vibrant place alive with gliding gulls, sunning cormorants, and vessels ranging from ponderous container ships to tiny sailboats slipping out to see the islands.



Snowy egret
DAVID MADDEN
©ISTOCKPHOTO

We Come Now for Renewal

For over 300 years human activities have reshaped island terrain, degraded ecosystems, and polluted the harbor—once called the dirtiest in the nation. In 1995 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took on the job of cleaning it up, with the help of Deer Island's Wastewater Treatment Plant. The opening of parkland on Spectacle Island is another symbol of the harbor's renewal.

Local American Indian tribes, who have always seen the islands' ancient burial grounds and other sacred sites as vital links to their past, played an important role in their preservation. Commemorative events and park educational programs on American Indian culture help sustain the bond.

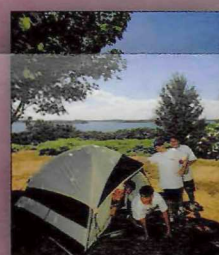
The revitalization of the harbor and continuing efforts to restore and preserve island habitats through biological research, green technologies, and public stewardship have again made them destinations for those seeking recreation, another perspective on the world, or solitude.



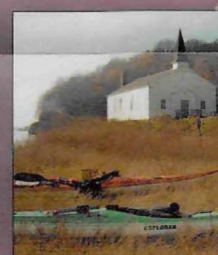
Thompson Island
NPS



Bumpkin Island
NPS



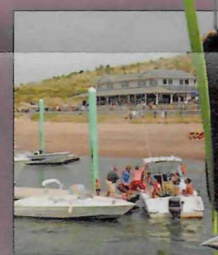
Lovells Island
NPS



Peddocks Island
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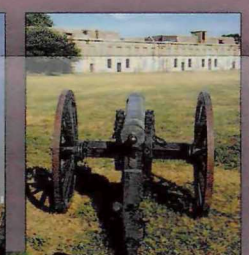
Grape Island
NPS



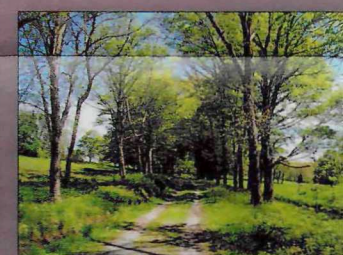
Spectacle Island
NPS



Little Brewster Island
©PAUL REZENDES



Georges Island
©JUDITH COHEN



Worlds End
©MARC HURWITZ/©TRAVEL GUIDE OF AMERICA

Waterbound Habitats

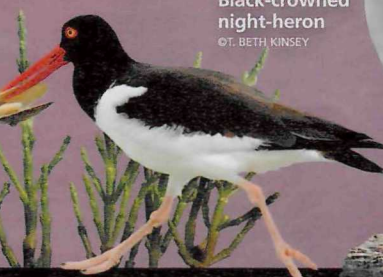
Minutes from a major urban area, the islands host a surprising array of plant and animal species.



Double-crested cormorant
©GLEN BLUMIN



Monarch butterfly
STEPHEN AUSMUS, USDA/ARS



American oystercatcher
©MARIE READ



Black-crowned night-heron
©T. BETH KINSEY



Red-winged blackbird
©MARIE READ



Cattails
©BET ZIMMERMAN



Broad-winged skipper
©RANDY EMMITT



Muskrat
SCOTT NIELSEN/©BRUCE COLEMAN, INC.

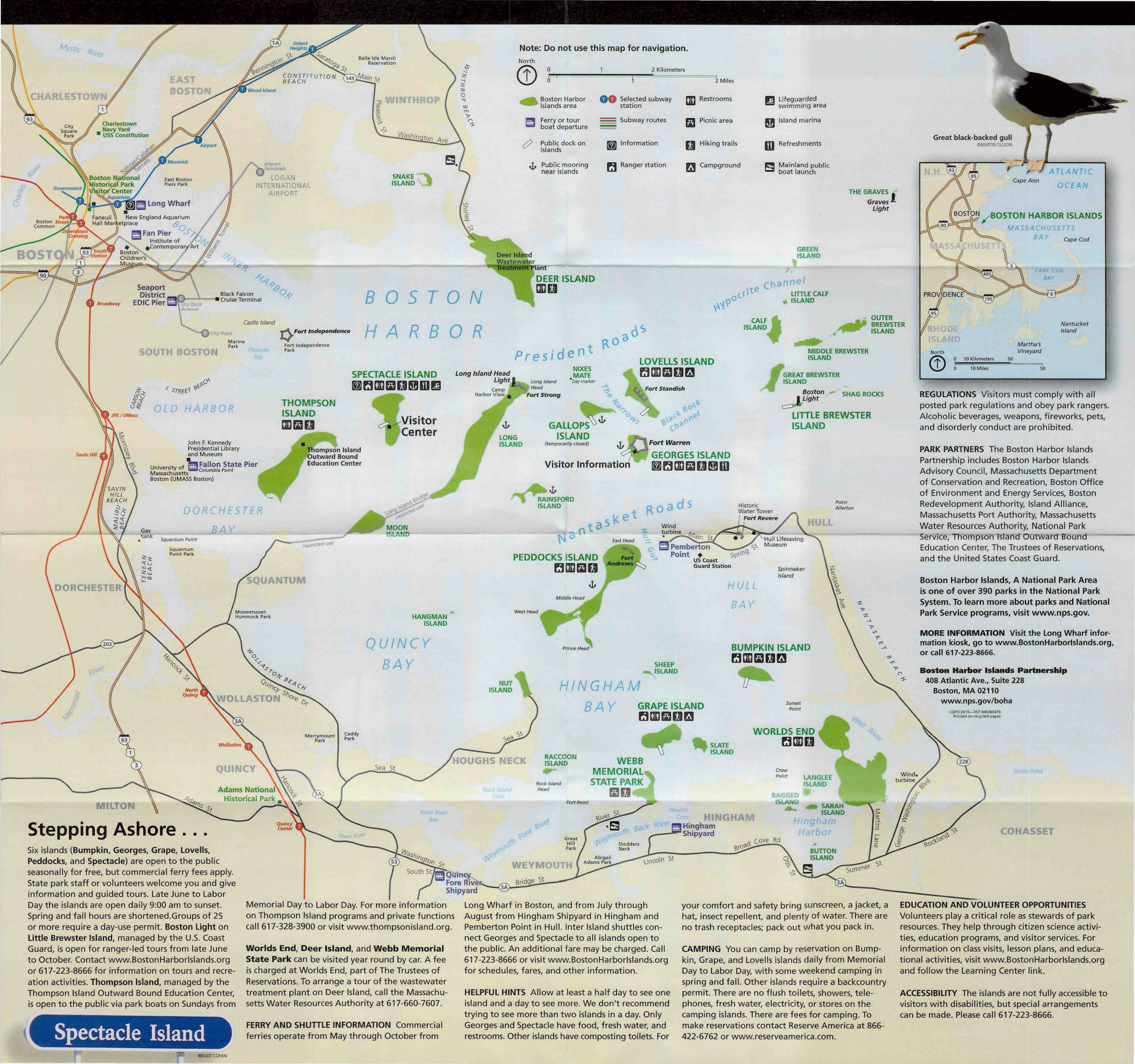


Eastern cottontail
©JOHN WHITE

Staghorn sumac
JIM BOHALL/©NATPHOTO



Harbor seal
KEN CANNING/©ISTOCKPHOTO



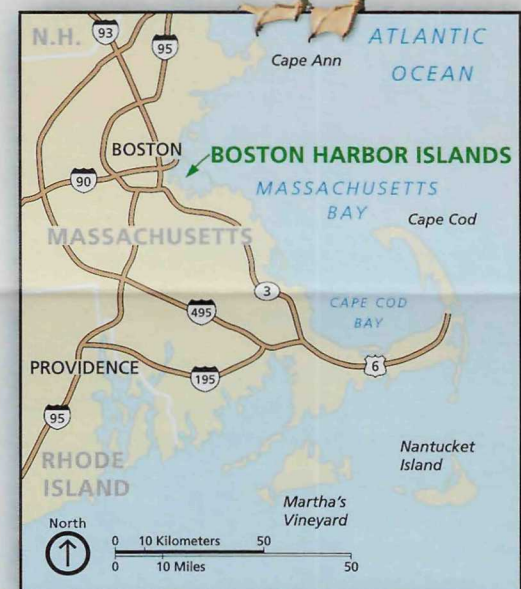
Note: Do not use this map for navigation.



0 1 2 Kilometers
0 1 2 Miles

- | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Boston Harbor Islands area | Selected subway station | Restrooms | Lifeguarded swimming area |
| Ferry or tour boat departure | Subway routes | Picnic area | Island marina |
| Public dock on islands | Information | Hiking trails | Refreshments |
| Public mooring near islands | Ranger station | Campground | Mainland public boat launch |

Great black-backed gull
©MARTIN OLSSON



REGULATIONS Visitors must comply with all posted park regulations and obey park rangers. Alcoholic beverages, weapons, fireworks, pets, and disorderly conduct are prohibited.

PARK PARTNERS The Boston Harbor Islands Partnership includes Boston Harbor Islands Advisory Council, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Boston Office of Environment and Energy Services, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Island Alliance, Massachusetts Port Authority, Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, National Park Service, Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, The Trustees of Reservations, and the United States Coast Guard.

Boston Harbor Islands, A National Park Area is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs, visit www.nps.gov.

MORE INFORMATION Visit the Long Wharf information kiosk, go to www.BostonHarborIslands.org, or call 617-223-8666.

Boston Harbor Islands Partnership
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www.nps.gov/boha

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Stepping Ashore . . .

Six islands (Bumpkin, Georges, Grape, Lovells, Peddocks, and Spectacle) are open to the public seasonally for free, but commercial ferry fees apply. State park staff or volunteers welcome you and give information and guided tours. Late June to Labor Day the islands are open daily 9:00 am to sunset. Spring and fall hours are shortened. Groups of 25 or more require a day-use permit. **Boston Light** on Little Brewster Island, managed by the U.S. Coast Guard, is open for ranger-led tours from late June to October. Contact www.BostonHarborIslands.org or 617-223-8666 for information on tours and recreation activities. **Thompson Island**, managed by the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, is open to the public via park boats on Sundays from

Memorial Day to Labor Day. For more information on Thompson Island programs and private functions call 617-328-3900 or visit www.thompsonisland.org.

Worlds End, Deer Island, and Webb Memorial State Park can be visited year round by car. A fee is charged at Worlds End, part of The Trustees of Reservations. To arrange a tour of the wastewater treatment plant on Deer Island, call the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority at 617-660-7607.

FERRY AND SHUTTLE INFORMATION Commercial ferries operate from May through October from

Long Wharf in Boston, and from July through August from Hingham Shipyard in Hingham and Pemberton Point in Hull. Inter Island shuttles connect Georges and Spectacle to all islands open to the public. An additional fare may be charged. Call 617-223-8666 or visit www.BostonHarborIslands.org for schedules, fares, and other information.

HELPFUL HINTS Allow at least a half day to see one island and a day to see more. We don't recommend trying to see more than two islands in a day. Only Georges and Spectacle have food, fresh water, and restrooms. Other islands have composting toilets. For

your comfort and safety bring sunscreen, a jacket, a hat, insect repellent, and plenty of water. There are no trash receptacles; pack out what you pack in.

CAMPING You can camp by reservation on Bumpkin, Grape, and Lovells islands daily from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with some weekend camping in spring and fall. Other islands require a backcountry permit. There are no flush toilets, showers, telephones, fresh water, electricity, or stores on the camping islands. There are fees for camping. To make reservations contact Reserve America at 866-422-6762 or www.reserveamerica.com.

EDUCATION AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES Volunteers play a critical role as stewards of park resources. They help through citizen science activities, education programs, and visitor services. For information on class visits, lesson plans, and educational activities, visit www.BostonHarborIslands.org and follow the Learning Center link.

ACCESSIBILITY The islands are not fully accessible to visitors with disabilities, but special arrangements can be made. Please call 617-223-8666.

Spectacle Island