



## Weather a Major Factor in Tourism Industry

Mark Brodeur, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation's Director of Tourism said, "Tourism is probably the most affected sector by weather." The most vulnerable areas of the state are those that rely primarily on outdoor recreation activities, such as Block Island, Aquidneck Island (home to Newport and two other communities) and ocean-fronting South County. Changing weather conditions could potentially disrupt or discourage visits to these areas.

Block Island, a longtime tourist destination, advertises its "long public beaches and 365 freshwater ponds" as the premier attractions of the small island 10 miles off the Rhode Island mainland. But sea level rise and more extreme storms could pose a threat to harbor infrastructure and that of its Great Salt Pond—with some models even predicting a "splitting of the land mass of the island—where thousands of boats moor each summer.

### Newport as a Poster Child for Impacts

Newport is a huge tourist and even in-state visitor attraction, and is a perfect example of the far-ranging impacts of climate change.

Its surf beaches attract millions of tourists every summer, some only yards away from a barrier that separates the Atlantic Ocean from a freshwater drinking supply reservoir that would be inundated and in practical terms "poisoned" by saltwater intrusion from either sea level rise or storm surge, and rendered useless as a drinking water supply. In 2012, Newport narrowly dodged a warning bullet shot across its bow by Superstorm Sandy's sea level rise.

The Gatsby-era mansions that make the Newport Historical Society and the Newport Preservation Society among the best known, popular and most economically successful in the country, overlook

the Atlantic atop high cliffs that provide little storm protection and make them susceptible to erosion.

The waterfront, which has been the world-renowned focal point of the international sailing community for decades, abutting streets full of upscale restaurants and boutiques, is already portrayed as totally underwater in maps showing what a projected 2-meter rise in sea level by 2100 would do to the area. The impact on the city and its harbor and sailing, fishing and marine trade industries would be devastating, to say nothing of its role as a destination port of call for high-end cruise ships,

including the Queen Mary II, which stay overnight anchored off shore while ferrying their own version of tourists ashore to spend money in local shops and restaurants.

While new permitting laws require structures to be built up above traditional water levels, the waterfront and its tourist trade are sitting ducks for disaster.

The Newport Harbormaster has said that continued sea level rise in Newport could require the replacement of older docks and an increase in mooring chain length for the hundreds of boats that tie up there year round.

The only redeeming potential positive affect of sea level rise is that part of Newport Harbor is too shallow for boat traffic, so with a few more inches of water, there would be a larger harbor, perhaps as much as 25 percent bigger.

All of Newport's examples of worst case scenarios for tourist attractions for overnight and day-trip visitors are played out incrementally at other Rhode Island beaches, harbors and marinas, as well as the downtown commercial section of Providence, with dozens of shops, malls and historic sites. Following the legendary hurricanes of 1938 and 1954, which left water neck-deep in some parts of downtown Providence, a hurricane barrier was built, but as the city sits next to



*Photo Credit: Ted Sorlien*

and over two rivers and Narragansett Bay, the more intense storms generated in the future by climate change conditions bode equally catastrophic results unless major steps toward adaptation of infrastructure are begun immediately.

## Can the Industry Protect Itself?

While climate change adaptation has not emerged within the tourist industry—a classic case of hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil by business people—there are efforts to integrate mitigation into Rhode Island’s tourism sector.

Rhode Island is promoting the concept of geotourism or ecotourism, which is tourism based on promoting the natural resources and history of the state. As this concept is based in preservation and sustainability, geotourism has encouraged the establishment of mitigation programs.

For example, Rhode Island has developed the [Hospitality Green Certification](#) for the Hospitality & Tourism Industry. This program encourages restaurants and hospitality businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices, such as serving locally grown food. The state is also pursuing creative and resourceful programs to increase tourism without large investments of capital.

An initiative to transform local citizens into “ambassadors” of their state is underway. Simply put, the state is calling on everyday citizens to propose Rhode Island as the site to host an upcoming conference, meeting or event. Dollars are earned for the city or state through:

- Hotels as visitors rent rooms
- Restaurants as patrons dine out
- Shops as visitors buy souvenirs
- Destination site as RI promotes its quality of life
- Increased awareness as guests experience all that Rhode Island has to offer

As the RIEDC Tourism Division itself says, “All it takes is a little awareness of our potential to become ambassadors for our state, and a small gesture to make it happen. The outcome, with all of us contributing, could have profound effects on this economy.”

## Warmer Is Better

Well, warmer water and air temperatures sure won’t hurt the tourists who want to lie on the beach or go body-surfing when you come to think of it. A small price to pay for losing your drinking water supply and waterfront, no? Not so fast when the UV rays must be avoided or temperatures create dangerous conditions for whole swaths of the population.

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Although Rhode Island’s tourist industry is more vulnerable to climate change because of its base in coastal resources, adaptation to the changing climate may simultaneously provide a unique area for growth. If climate change results in longer seasons of warmer weather, the Rhode Island tourism industry could benefit substantially.

The RIEDC says, “When it tends to stay warmer through November, [hotel] occupancy stays up.” A large percentage of tourism in Rhode Island is comprised

of travelers from the New England region who make spontaneous travel decisions based on good weather reports. Warmer weather in Rhode Island, particularly through late fall and early spring, could help generate increased tourism.

However the “leaf peepers” from as far away as Europe, who come to the state in the fall for the explosion of color in the local forests, and add a trip to stay at a B&B while they also visit the mansions and the site where Roger Williams made his peace pact with the local Native American tribe in the 1600s, may find their schedules changed by an earlier turning of the trees and a hurricane season that has jumped the gun, blowing the objects of their affection down the storm drains.



“The Towers” at Narragansett Beach, a popular Rhode Island tourist destination.