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On Sacred Ground: Photographing Toward Conservation

The Great Marsh of New England is the subject of a new book

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by Alysha Sideman

It's 5 a.m. Dorothy Kerper Monnelly, 70, finishes coffee in her Ipswich, Mass. kitchen. She grabs her large-format camera, film pack and tripod and piles them in a cart. She opens the door to leave. Morning air rushes in. Just feet from her kitchen table, Monnelly steps into nature's classroom. It's the Great Marsh of New England.

"I know this place. I have wonderful access," she says. "I am able to be in the marsh before it gets light out. I love working predawn. You get gorgeous light."

Some of the results: Sculpted landscapes with highlights of black and white; icing-like waterways glowing with white light; and dunes patterned with garnet-colored sand waves.

Her home of 30 years is surrounded by The Great Marsh, a collection of government-protected marshes, barrier islands, beaches, dunes, estuaries and tidal creeks that span more than 20,000 acres from Cape Ann in the north to the New Hampshire border. It is also home to endangered species, like the piping plover bird, and a nursery for marine life. The constellation-like landscape of the marsh has been an object of inspiration for years. Pulitzer Prize-winning author and former-resident John Updike loved sunbathing in the dunes. Weary, Tshirt-clad Harvard students come looking for an escape.

"It's never the same here," says Monnelly, a former Harvard grad and teacher. "The water at high tide continues to change where the horizon line is."

For her newly-published book, "Between Land and Sea: The Great Marsh," Monnelly drew upon her work documenting the marsh and its changes for more than six years. Her first foray into book publishing, the tome has already received rave reviews--Pulitzer Prize winners to assorted conservation groups have heralded its merits. With an essay on conservation by Smithsonian writer Doug Stewart, Monnelly wanted the book to be a comprehensive package of the marsh--part ecological, part beautiful photos, part Dorothy. "A lot of the book brought out who I am," she says. Like the marsh, she takes on life at an intuitive level.

Her book focuses on the multilayered physical world that exists right in her backyard and how it translates into the layers of her life. "There are lots of layers in this community for me. I've lived in the same house where I brought my children up, I'm involved in the conservation efforts and I've become aware of the nuances of the environment here," she says.

According to her, an intimate knowledge of the place where you photograph makes all the difference. "You know the changes in the light, the seasons, the tides," she says, adding that this is why her book is so unique. Of all the places she's had the opportunity to capture-Big Sur, Yosemite, Mount Kilauea-this is the work that matters most because of her unimpeded access.

This particular week in April has been one of those times that access and opportunity make for perfect photos on the beach. Spring's fickleness summoned stormy weather as well as nicely packed sand.

"I've been whizzing along the beach with my new jogging cart full of 35 pounds of equipment. I love the impact the wind has on the water and sand and the interaction of the elements on the face of the landscape," she says.

Huge dunes with sands cascading down its face with swirls of red patterns are just one of the ecological miracles of this weather.

Although Monnelly is an environmentalist, she didn't set out to make a statement on rising sea levels or global warming with the book. Without the doom and gloom statistics, however, the book has evolved into a wake-up call celebrating a jewel as well as an ecosystem of critical importance.

Currently on a multi-city book tour, she recently added an educational PowerPoint to her talk. "People enjoy hearing about the book and talking about it," she says.

That's probably why Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard professor Edward O. Wilson has called her "the Ansel Adams of the wetlands."

"I have a unique feeling for this place--a depth of awareness that I don't have anywhere else," she adds.

For more information on Monnelly or her book visit www.dorothykerpermonnelly.com.



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