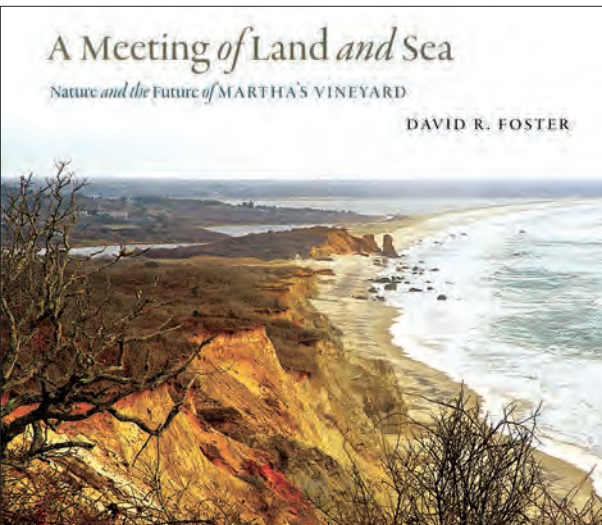


# A Meeting of Land and Sea: Nature and the Future of Martha's Vineyard

By David R. Foster '72 | Reviewed by William Nowak '06



**A MEETING OF LAND AND SEA:  
NATURE AND THE FUTURE OF  
MARTHA'S VINEYARD**

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Know what bathymetry is? I didn't either. But regardless of whether you currently do, David Foster '72's *A Meeting of Land and Sea* will serve as a gentle guide to this ecological concept, while also delightfully touring you through several millennia of ecological history on Martha's Vineyard island.

This attractive hardcover volume gives a multi-disciplinary, ecological account of Martha's Vineyard, interspersing alluring full-page color photographs, also taken by Foster, neatly annotated maps, technical charts (with accessible explanations), and charming historical anecdotes.

Throughout, Foster tactfully combines his reverence for nature with a broader and ecocentric perspective, allowing him to provide the reader with valuable insights into the Vineyard's natural environment. For example, many Vineyard residents see island erosion as a persistent worry, with recent accelerations in sea level rise only heightening the threat. Foster, however, highlights that, to some extent, this is a natural process. Indeed, after being carved out by Miocene glaciers, the Vineyard has been sinking in rising ocean waters for the past 20,000 years. Though perhaps possible to delay, this process cannot be stopped.

*A Meeting of Land and Sea* reminds the reader that, despite human technological advances, we must still defer to nature. Some threats to the status quo are known, but entirely unavoidable: Seas will continue to rise, regardless. And some threats, very simply, are unknowable. From coyotes to caterpillars, Foster takes time to detail the ecological impacts of some of these previously unforeseen stimuli. While working to intelligently prepare for the future, Foster does also seem to advocate a peaceful acceptance of human limits. "Overall, we could benefit from less hubris," he writes. "Except in our actions to conserve it from ourselves, nature doesn't need us to care for it." Such Zen-like wisdom permeates this work.

Before even considering future conservation strategies, though, Foster delves deep into the ecological history of the island. Citing Teddy Roosevelt ("The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future"), Foster uses his own

and others' ecological research to paint a comprehensive picture of the various island ecosystems. Soil cores and pollen counts allow Foster to broaden his time perspective, and the reader comes away with a clear sense of what the Vineyard-scape looked like, even in prehistoric times.

More recently, Foster is able to rely on the historical record, and his comprehensive investigation of historical documents delineates how human interactions impacted the land. The reader learns of the precipitous rise and fall of agrarian land use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, the decline in this industry was met with much local consternation. In retrospect, though, the nation's Midwestern agricultural outsourcing was seen as, perhaps, a boon for the Vineyard and New England more broadly, as it allowed the region to take the forefront on issues of environmental conservation.

In more recent times, the island has come under environmental stress from commercial development, making it the vacation destination it's known as today. Foster reports on historical and current conservation efforts: failures like Senator Ted Kennedy's dropped Island Trust bill, and successes like the establishment and efficacy of the Martha's Vineyard Commission.

Seeking balance, Foster advocates an increase in sustainable agrarian land use, hypothesizing that "when we oversee the source of our food and other products, it is likely that we will apply greater care – environmentally, ethically, socially." Further, he includes specific, policy-oriented solutions for moving M.V. towards this more harmonious future.

Foster makes continual reference to legacy and inertia – in essence, reminding us that today's ecological processes are derivative. Yet the reader reflects, upon concluding *A Meeting of Land and Sea*, that legacy and inertia apply in a broader sense. We see the legacy of these past environmental stewards present in his work. Surely, Foster's reverence for the place and his passion for sustainable progress sustain this noble inertia, and *A Meeting of Land and Sea* confirms his legacy.