

The Islanders

The hassles are large for the small group of superintendents who tend turf on tiny territories surrounded by water. But they wouldn't want to be anywhere else

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANTHONY PIOPPA

While it may be true that no man is an island, don't try telling that to the handful of superintendents in the United States whose only lifeline to the world is a ferry.

For this small number of superintendents who ply their trade on tiny pieces of land only accessible by watercraft, even the most mundane of activities, such as ordering a replacement part, can turn into an ordeal. Consider:

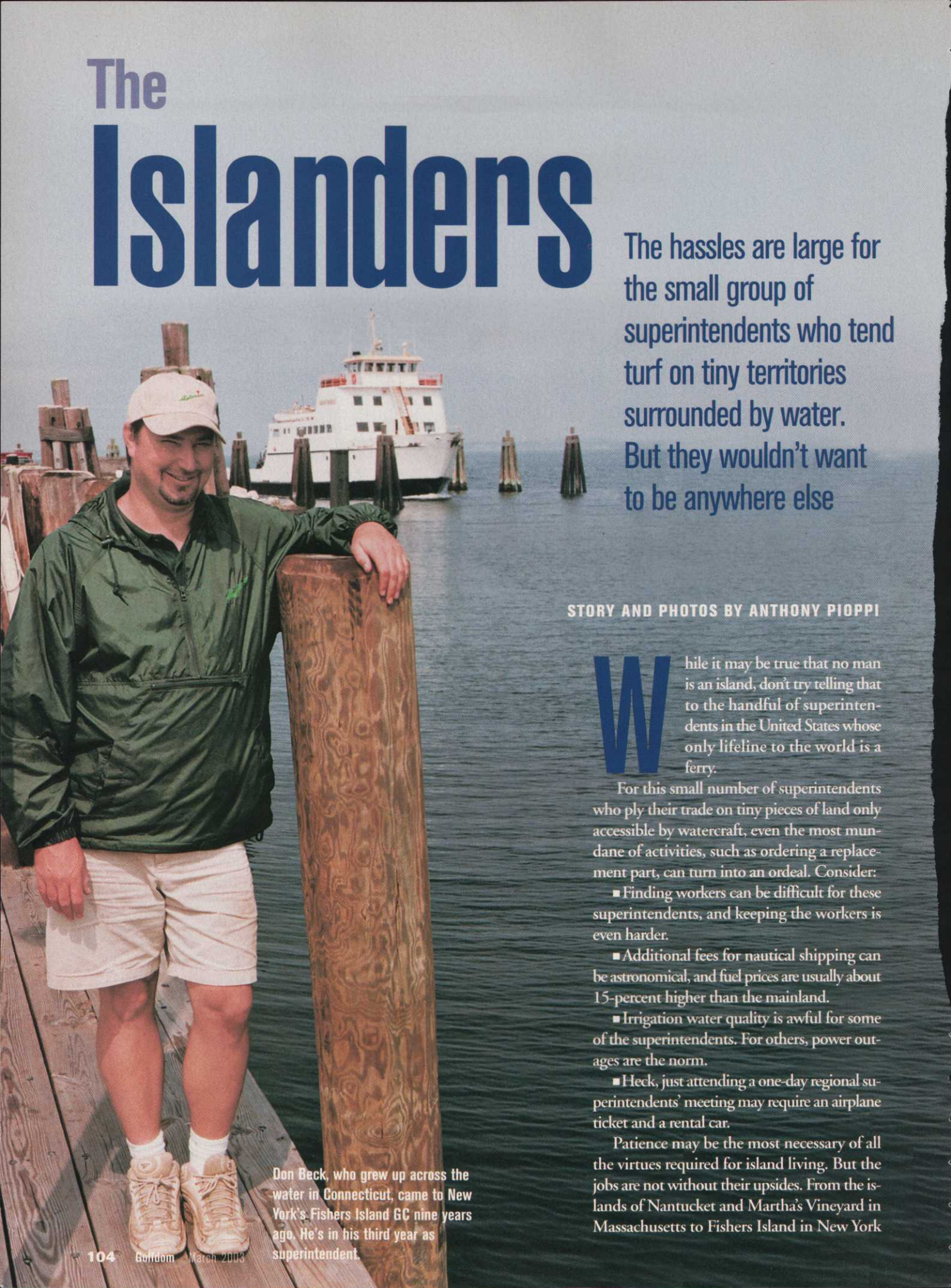
- Finding workers can be difficult for these superintendents, and keeping the workers is even harder.

- Additional fees for nautical shipping can be astronomical, and fuel prices are usually about 15-percent higher than the mainland.

- Irrigation water quality is awful for some of the superintendents. For others, power outages are the norm.

- Heck, just attending a one-day regional superintendents' meeting may require an airplane ticket and a rental car.

Patience may be the most necessary of all the virtues required for island living. But the jobs are not without their upsides. From the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts to Fishers Island in New York



Don Beck, who grew up across the water in Connecticut, came to New York's Fishers Island GC nine years ago. He's in his third year as superintendent.

and Washington state's Puget Sound, the superintendents who tend island layouts say they love their jobs.

Don Beck, superintendent at Fishers Island GC, grew up across the water in Connecticut and came to work at Fishers nine seasons ago as an operator. He is now in his third season as superintendent.

Beck and his counterpart, Dave Denison, superintendent of the nine-hole Hay Harbor Club, may be the most isolated of all the islanders. During peak season, ferries make their way to and from the island nearly eight times a day. In the off-season, when the island's 5,000 summer-only inhabitants leave, only three ferries a day serve an island population that drops to 250.

There are no restaurants open from October through April. The lone general store is open about six hours a day and the only place to get a beer is at the American Legion hall.

While there is work going on year-round at Fishers, Denison is also a science teacher at the island's single school as well as a lobsterman.

"You should have seen it before the Internet and satellite TV," Beck says, shaking his head at the not-too-distant-past. "You could get three or four TV stations and the rest were all static."

Beck says he spends much of his free time reading or on his 17-foot Boston Whaler. "I like to fish and that's my only peace of mind," he adds.

Challenges abound

After learning the price Beck pays for his island existence — both in money and time — it's easy to understand why he needs peace of mind. Beck pays \$700 to get one load of topdressing to the docks of the picturesque seaside town of New London, Conn., from which the ferry departs. From there, add nearly \$800 for the sand's 45-minute ride to the island. Part of that expense involves paying the truck driver for an additional four hours while he waits at the dock for the next ferry back to the mainland after delivering his load.

Other superintendents echo Beck's dilemma. At Sankaty Head GC on Nantucket Island, superintendent Chris Ryder's

budget includes nearly \$17,000 a year for topdressing and bunker sand. He orders a year's supply at the beginning of the season for the more than two-hour trip from Hyannis on Cape Cod to Nantucket.

Some of the shipping costs to Nantucket can be divided if Ryder and other island superintendents work together. For instance, if Mark Lucas, superintendent at Nantucket GC, needs a half truck of sod, he'll check with Ryder to see if he wants the other half. Ryder, Lucas and Miacomet

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GC superintendent Bill Affinito often attempt to work together in getting equipment demonstrations out to the island. Distributors are more likely to send equipment if three courses are testing the product. Distributors for some small-ticket items often don't make sales calls.

"They figure if they're not going to get any business they might as well skip it," Ryder said. "Some guys like to come to Nantucket. Some really hate it."

Consequently, the islanders will have to order at either the New England regional or national superintendent shows.

Affinito, whose nine-hole public access Miacomet is in the process of expanding to 18 holes, said Sankaty Head and Nantucket have a much easier time getting attention from distributors than he does.

"They have a lot more pull than I do. Those are two top-100 golf courses and have huge budgets," he adds.

Even when equipment gets to the island there can be problems. Ryder recently made one distributor add an extra year onto the warranty of a mower after it spent the entire ride to Nantucket on the deck

of the ship and as a result was covered in salt spray. Ryder said he told the distributor to make sure the mower was placed inside the ship.

At San Juan Golf and CC, a semi-private nine-hole course located on Washington state's San Juan Island, superintendent Brian Germain faces many of the same problems. Not only does he have a difficult time getting demos, he also runs into trouble when major repairs are needed to vital mowers.

Two years ago, his only fairway unit on the nine-hole course had to be shipped off-island for repairs. During the two weeks it was being fixed, Germain was forced to mow fairways with a seven-gang unit that up to that point had been used only on roughs. "You have to learn to improvise a lot," Germain says.

It's nearly a two-hour boat ride to the island town of Anacortes, which is located just off the coast of Washington and is connected to the mainland by a bridge. Although the islands of Lopez and Orcas are near San Juan and each have nine-hole mom-and-pop courses, Germain says there is little communication between the three courses' superintendents.

Hoping the rain holds up

Getting parts and supplies are just one problem for Germain. Irrigation is another. With the ocean surrounding the golf course, getting quality fresh water can be a nightmare.

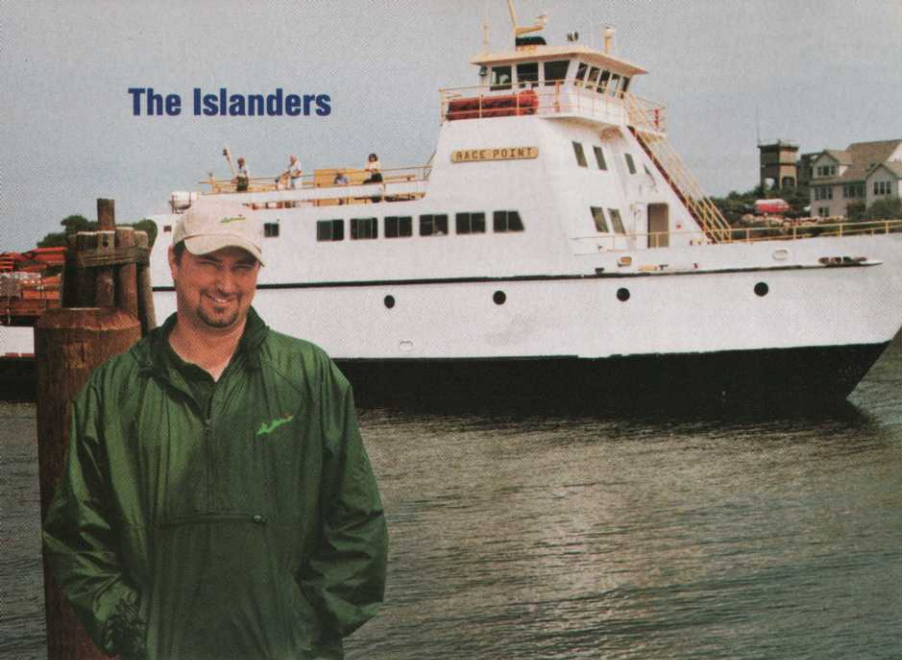
Germain must rely on holding ponds that fill during Washington's rainy months. In a dry year such as 2002, he has to manage his water efficiently to make sure it lasts. At one point in August, he was using 110,000 gallons a day.

"I do a lot of hand-watering," he says. "It's labor-intensive, but it's efficient." He also admits it's nerve-wracking. "I wake up at night thinking about it."

On Fishers Island, Beck's water problems don't just have to do with salt content, but with his power supply — or lack thereof. Because the electrical cable running to the island first takes care of Groton, Conn., any power drain — such as

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There's no mall to go to on Fishers Island, so Beck spends a lot of his free time reading and fishing.

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those during heat waves — sends Fishers into brownouts or even blackouts, as Groton sucks up the electricity. To avoid irrigation catastrophes, the course's irrigation pumps are powered by diesel engines.

Courses face labor problems

The worst of all problems, however, appears to be keeping labor, most of which is seasonal.

Sankaty, Nantucket and Fishers all provide housing for seasonal help, necessitated by the lack of available space as well as the astronomical rents. Because of the small year-round population, Fishers must import almost all its help. Only mechanic Jim Clemens, who travels to work every morning on the 4:30 a.m. ferry and returns home each afternoon, can be considered a commuter. The courses in Washington and Massachusetts have larger permanent populations to augment the staff, but the core is seasonal.

Ryder and Germain do employ a few retirees who live on the respective islands and work part-time, but not just for the money. There is another perk that many of the courses offer.

"There are a lot of guys looking for free golf. That makes a big difference," Germain says.

Getting seasonal help to the course is one thing, but having them stay is another. "Some just can't handle living on an island," Beck adds.

Since there are no stores to speak of on Fishers, all shopping must be done on the mainland. Because of the limited ferry schedule, shopping can only be accomplished on the worker's one day off a week. Beck says the key is to stock up on the essentials. He keeps meat in a large freezer in his cellar.

With no restaurants, every meal must be

home-cooked, a daunting task for some. Beck has had workers leave after just two weeks when faced with the reality of living on an island.

For some superintendents, part-time help is nonexistent. Trying to convince college kids to rake bunkers for \$10 an hour when they can wait tables and take home \$1,000 a week is futile.

Beck's first assistant Jim Easton is in his first year at Fishers after spending a season at Lahontan GC in Truckee, Calif., near Lake Tahoe, Nev. He is adjusting to the culture shock of isolated living. Beck warned him of what he would face.

"It's one of the things you understand before you get here," Beck says. "There's no more binge shopping when you just go to the mall."

Lucas and his crew have the same problems on the larger island of Nantucket, although groceries can be purchased without a boat ride. Even if some essential items are available, the expensive nature of items on Nantucket makes it necessary to purchase them on the mainland.

"It's tough to buy clothing," he says. "There are no chain stores. A pair of work boots, for instance, can cost nearly double what they cost on the Cape. I miss Home Depot."

There are other parts of mainland life the islanders find they miss, like fast food. "That's the first thing we do when we get off the ferry is go to McDonald's or Wendy's, and sometimes it's the last stop we make on the way back," Lucas said.

Why they stay

There appears to be no rhyme or reason to those superintendents who head for the islands. Ryder is a native of Nantucket, but Germain hails from Idaho and Lucas from Indiana. Beck grew up on the Connecticut coastline and Affinito was raised in Massachusetts.

What makes life more bearable for many is the accompaniment of a spouse. Ryder, Germain and Affinito are married. Beck lives with his girlfriend. Easton's girlfriend recently moved to Fishers. According to Affinito, he and his wife had trepidations about moving to Nantucket.

"There are a lot of unknowns," he says. "You're 30 miles out to sea."

With all the hassles, however, those who work the island courses stay where they are by choice. "It's a different way of life," Beck says.

And it is their way of life. ■

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