

GREEN LIVING: GOING GREEN

At the Ocean's Edge

A Natural Tour of Cape Cod

by Jim Motavalli

It was low tide on Cape Cod, and coastal naturalist **Dick Hilmer** was getting his feet wet a half mile off the Brewster shoreline. "Cape Cod was formed by glaciers 18,000 years ago," he told his small audience of journalists. "A mile-high sheet of ice moved down from the top of the world, and as it dropped rocks they formed the Cape. As the glacier went north, a mile and a half of sand dropped into Cape Cod Bay." And that is why current visitors to the Cape can walk so far out on the tidal flats at low tide, and stroll along 40 miles of sandy beaches that are now part of the U.S. National Seashore. As we walked, Hilmer pointed out the life all around us, from strands of sea lettuce to hermit crabs to periwinkles. The kids picked up razor clams, quahogs and other ephemera, some if it delightfully alive.

Red tide (*Alexandrium fundyense*) on the Cape and north as far as Isle au Haut in Maine played havoc with many of these filter feeders in 2005. It was the most widespread outbreak since 1972. Red tide produces a potent neurotoxin that accumulates in the tissue of bivalves, and while it doesn't harm its host it can cause paralysis or respiratory problems for seafood fans. Many clam, oyster and mussel beds were shut down as a result. It's unclear what causes the phenomenon.