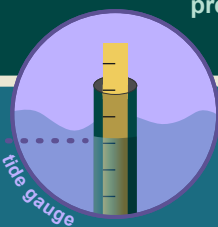


Rhode Island's shoreline is public land

It's in the Rhode Island Constitution—Rhode Islanders are entitled to enjoy access to the shoreline so they may fish, swim, gather seaweed, and simply walk along the shore. (*Article 1, Section 17*)

But where is the shoreline?

The shoreline is always changing under shifting tides, waves, winds, and sands. A 1982 RI Supreme Court legally defined the shoreline at “mean high water” to preserve alongshore passage. All land below this boundary is public.



What does mean high water ...mean?

Mean high water is measured at a tide gauge. It is the average of all high tides over a 19-year record.

Tide gauges remove wind and waves, so statistics like mean high water do not translate well to a real shoreline.

two low tides each day

mean high water

high tide - seaweed line

two high tides each day

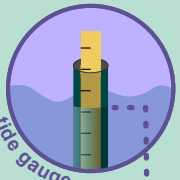
How do you know where to legally walk on the shoreline?

Mean high water is tough to locate because it is a statistic. It can't be seen on the shore. And to further complicate things, the boundary moves daily as waves roll in, as beaches erode and rebuild, and with each new tide. In theory, mean high water represents high tide. On a real shoreline, it falls closer to low tide. That puts the boundary underwater for much of the day, leaving little room or time for public access.



where the heck is mean high water?

How much public access is protected under current law?

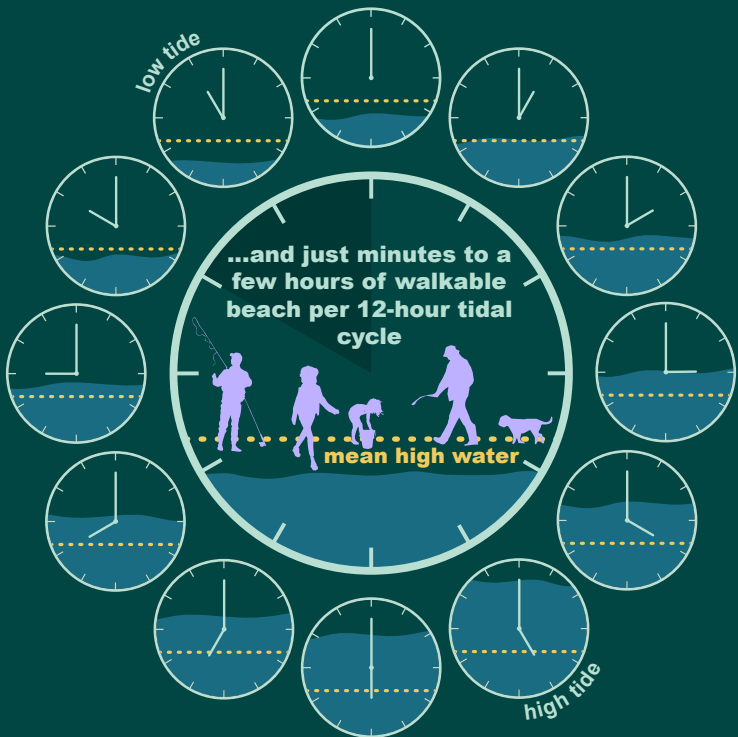


tide gauge

high tide line
(marked by seaweed)

mean high water
low tide

Formal surveys of mean high water reveal just a narrow ribbon of dry sand available on the beach around low tide...



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Want to know more about public access in Rhode Island?



Visit ci.uri.edu/access to learn about the science and policy of coastal access in the Ocean State.