Little Compton Landscapes

Newsletter of The Sakonnet Preservation Association — Spring 2000

Letter from the President

Meeting the Challenge of Land Conservation in Little Compton

by Larry Anderson
President, Sakonnet Preservation Association

The strong economy and real estate market in recent years have intensified the challenge of land conservation in Little Compton. During 1999, the members, directors and supporters of the Sakonnet Preservation Association (SPA) worked to meet that challenge in many ways:

- Through the generosity of property owners, we protected two significant parcels of land. Elizabeth Hough donated an 8.5-acre parcel just north of Taylor's Lane, abutting a substantial conservation easement on the Bissinger farm held by the Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust (LCACT). The Hough parcel is also close to an easement the SPA now holds at the end of Taylor's Lane, adjacent to the Sakonnet River.

A group of property owners donated the development rights to a 1.5 acre lot on Meadow Lane, south of Swamp Road. This parcel is close to other properties protected by the SPA, the Town of Little Compton and the LCACT. Tuck and Franny Buffum, Len and Rosemary Colt, Dick and Annie Farrington, Alan Stewart, Susan Hooker, Lisette Tillinghast and Randi von Steinwher were the donors. We are grateful for their gift of valuable property interests, a demonstration of their commitment to land conservation.

- In response to a June town-wide mailing, which included a handsome new brochure, almost 200 new members joined the SPA.
- Our July 22 annual meeting at the Stone House Club, to which the public was invited, attracted approximately 150 people. Peter Forbes, vice-president of the Trust for Public Land, a nationwide land conservation organization, gave an inspiring speech and slide presentation, titled "How Saving Land Can Save Our Communities."
- We recently replaced the sign at the SPA-owned Ponderosa on Meetinghouse Lane. Many Little Compton families have been able to enjoy ice skating for the last two winters during the intervals of sufficiently cold weather. The SPA is grateful to the Town of Little

Compton and its Maintenance Department for mowing the Ponderosa during the rest of the year. The control of aquatic vegetation in the pond has proven to be a challenge. We have talked with representatives of the R.I. Department of Environmental Management and aquatic vegetation contractors about cost-effective alternatives for maintaining this wetlands area for ice skating and other public uses.

- A Land Stewardship Committee has been gathering data about each of the SPA's more than 20 property holdings, as part of an ongoing program of managing and monitoring the approximately 210 acres for which we are responsible.

These are genuine accomplishments. But Little Compton's landscape remains under intense development pressure. The forces of "sprawl" don't stop at the borders of our community. During 1999 alone, for example, Little Compton approved "master plans" for three substantial subdivisions totaling 200 acres. How does the SPA hope to contribute to the conservation and protection of the qualities that make Little Compton an appealing place to call home?

Here are some of the SPA's plans:

A Planning Committee has been preparing a three-year

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Land Conservation Is a Cooperative Effort

The Sakonnet Preservation Association is one of several private groups and public agencies working to protect Little Compton's landscape and natural resources. Each of these organizations plays a different role; but together they have made significant progress in Little Compton's land conservation efforts:

The Sakonnet Preservation Association (SPA) was founded in 1972 as a private, nonprofit, tax-exempt land trust. Since then, the SPA has protected approximately 210 acres, either by outright ownership or by the acquisition of conservation restrictions. Some of the SPA's more than 20 properties include East and West Islands off Sakonnet Point, the Ponderosa on Meetinghouse Lane, the "Meehan Triangle" at West Main Road and Taylor's Lane, the Simone Blanchard property at the corner of John Dyer and Cole Brook roads, and several parcels on either side of Swamp Road adjacent to Wilbour Woods. Many of the SPA's properties have been acquired by donations; a few have been purchased. The SPA is a membership organization administered by a volunteer board of directors. All members (of which there are currently over 400) may vote on the election of SPA officers and directors. Membership dues, donations, grants, and loans have provided the SPA's financial resources.

The Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust (LCACT) was established by vote of the Little Compton financial town meeting in 1986, in accordance with the provisions of a 1985 special act of the Rhode Island General Assembly. There are seven Trustees: five are appointed directly by the Town Council for staggered five-year terms; the other two are the chairpersons of the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission, or their designees. The LCACT receives most of its funding from a 2-percent tax on real-estate transfers (after a $75,000 exemption). Under the state enabling law, voters at financial town meeting may set the transfer tax at any rate up to 5 percent. Since 1986, the LCACT has acquired property interests in almost 849 acres. Though a number of applications from property owners have been pending for several years, no land acquisitions were made by the Trust in 1999. The LCACT had approximately $1-million in its revolving account as of the beginning of this year.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) assumed a substantial role in Little Compton land conservation when it began acquiring the properties comprising the Simmons Mill Pond Management Area. This area of approximately 500 acres is open to the public. DEM also administers several grant programs that have helped purchase development rights to agricultural lands and open spaces in Little Compton.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a national land-conservation organization with an active Rhode Island office, has acquired some Little Compton property interests itself; and TNC has also provided funding to other agencies (such as DEM for the Simmons Mill Pond acquisition). TNC emphasizes the protection of natural habitat. A decade ago, TNC acquired Goosewing Beach and some adjacent upland areas, to protect threatened species such as the piping plover, least tern, and other species, while maintaining opportunities for

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public recreation. TNC continues to focus its land-protection efforts in the watersheds of Quicksand Pond and Briggs Marsh.

The Audubon Society of Rhode Island is another private land-conservation organization with some Little Compton holdings. These include, a 20-acre conservation easement on the eastern shore of Quicksand Pond, land on the western shore of Long Pond, and a recent 17-acre acquisition on Old Harbor Road.

The City of Newport Water Department has significant Little Compton land holdings, including and surrounding the Watson Reservoir. The Newport agency has recently participated in securing some development rights on farmland within the reservoir's watershed.

The Town of Little Compton itself owns certain public parcels, including Wilbour Woods, South Shore Beach, Town Landing and Veteran's Field.

None of these organizations can meet the challenge of land conservation alone. The SPA hopes to encourage cooperation among various agencies and groups, in order to make the most efficient use of limited financial and human resources. For instance, in 1989 the town developed a detailed and thoughtful Recreation, Conservation and Open Space (RCOS) Plan, which was incorporated into the Comprehensive Community Plan. The RCOS Plan and the town's Home Rule Charter call for creation of a nine-member Recreation, Conservation and Open Space Committee, including three Town Council appointees and representatives of six land-use boards or groups (including the SPA).

Unfortunately, the RCOS Committee has not met in several years. The RCOS Plan has not been updated to take into account changing conservation priorities. Most urgent among these are opportunities to qualify for matching funds if the $50 million state open space bond passes.

Upcoming Events

Dr. Peter August to Speak April 27th on Identifying Critical Conservation Lands

Dr. Peter August, specialist in Critical Lands Analysis, will speak at the Little Compton Community Center on Thursday, April 27th, 2000 at 7:00 p.m. Dr. August, a professor in the URI Natural Resources Science Dept., has developed a method for assisting Rhode Island conservation groups with their land evaluation decisions. His talk, titled "Identification of Critical Lands for Conservation," will feature a slide presentation of the maps and other materials the URI group has developed for such communities as Coventry, East Greenwich, Exeter and Hopkinton.

Many small land trusts, conservation commissions and other groups lack ready access to the scientific data they need to objectively evaluate the value of properties they may acquire. Dr. August and his colleagues have been working for three years to develop a simple analytic procedure for identifying the most critical lands for protection. Their project uses such resources as the digitized computer mapping data available from the Rhode Island Geographic Information System (RIGIS).

Their model is based on the premise that, while single-theme conservation--for example, groundwater, wetland, biodiversity, or cultural resource critieria--is good and appropriate, properties with multiple resources are of higher conservation value. Areas of the community with high co-occurrence of natural and cultural resources are critically important for protection.

The entire community is invited to Dr. August's talk. More information about his work is available on the web at ***http://www.edc.uri.edu/criticallands/.***

SPA Board Supports $50-Million State Open Space Bond

The Board of Directors of the Sakonnet Preservation Association voted on January 18 to declare the Association's support for the $50-million open space bond proposed for the November 2000 statewide ballot.

As proposed, the proceeds of the bond issue, a general obligation of the state, would be spent over a ten-year period for a variety of land-conservation efforts, including protection of working farms and forests; conservation of wildlife habitat; protection of natural and scenic landscapes; protection of rivers, streams and water supplies; and expanded and improved parks and bike paths. Approval of the bond would provide an important new source of funding for conservation partnerships between the State, cities and towns, and nonprofit organizations such as the SPA.

The SPA's Board resolution urged 1) that the General Assembly approve the $50-million open space bond measure for the November statewide ballot, and 2) that Rhode Island voters support its approval on November 7, 2000.

Tax Corner

Conservation Tax Savings

By Stetson W. Eddy and Charles G. Edwards

This article summarizes the various possible tax benefits of making a donation of land, or an interest therein, to the Sakonnet Preservation Association (SPA). The SPA is a qualified tax exempt organization.

If land is donated outright to the SPA, the donor's Little Compton property taxes would be eliminated. Property taxes would be greatly reduced if a partial interest is donated, such as the conveyance of a conservation easement or development rights. At present, the town'sTax Assessors provide an 80% reduction from the basic rate if an interest in more than five acres is donated, and a 50% reduction if the acreage is less. As this policy may be altered when the town goes through revaluation, it is suggested that a landowner talk directly with the Assessors about future property tax treatment.

A land donor is also eligible to receive income tax benefits. Unless subject to the Alternative Minimum Tax, a taxpayer is entitled to deduct a charitable donation of up to 30% of their annual adjusted gross income. If a taxpayer is unable to use up the entire amount of the donation in one year, the Tax Code currently allows five additional years in which to take a charitable deduction. The value of the gift of land, whether an outright donation or the conveyance of an interest therein, is determined by a qualified appraisal.

The third area of possible tax savings involves estate taxes. If a landowner gives to the SPA a conservation easement or conveys the development rights to all or a portion of their land, the value of their property will be reduced upon their death. Such a reduction will either eliminate or reduce the estate tax liability and thus increase the likelihood that that land will stay in the family (and not have to be sold to pay the estate taxes). If a tax is due, the conveyance of a qualified conservation easement, even by one's executor, may further reduce estate taxes. At present, there are no estate taxes when the value of the net taxable estate is less than $675,000. This exclusion amount is being gradually increased to $1 million by 2006. For estates greater than the exclusion amount, the effective tax rate starts at 37%.

As each taxpayer's situation is unique, we would urge prospective donors to seek the advice of their own attorney, accountant or financial advisor.

View from the Whitin easement on Taylor's Lane

Local Conservationists

Susan Burchard Shethar Whitin 1903-1998

by Ellie Hough

Susan Burchard Shethar Whitin's love affair with Little Compton began in her childhood. It all started in the big Victorian house, known as Oldacre, on the corner of Meeting House Lane and West Main Road. There she spent her childhood with her boisterous siblings--six in number. After graduating from Wheeler School, she attended Vassar College and spent her junior year at the Sorbonne in France. She and Prentice Shethar were married that April in Paris. Returning to Little Compton to a house on Taylor's Lane, they founded Shethar Real Estate, which they ran together for many years.

After Prentice's death Susan carried on as always with careful consideration for the town's rural character and the preservation of its natural resources. Susan married Richard Whitin in the early 60's after 11 years of widowhood.

We are proud to have had Susan as a founding director of the SPA with which she has left the legacy of a conservation easement to land on the Sakonnet River at Taylor's Lane. This waterfront parcel comprising 4 acres is located on the south side of the lane.

Membership News

Many Thanks

The Sakonnet Preservation association would like to thank the new members who joined us in 1999 and our regular members for their continued support. A special thank you goes out to those members who made Special Gift contributions. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the members and directors who donated money and time for our public information campaign.

At right is a membership form for any prospective individuals who would like to join the SPA. Current members please note that our membership year begins July 1. You will receive a separate membership renewal in the mail.

We have also initiated a new Land Aquisition Fund Drive and we look forward to your generous support this Spring. Thanks again everyone!

President's Letter *continued from page 1*

program emphasizing three parallel SPA objectives: 1) Public Information; 2) Land Preservation; 3)Management and Administration. This plan will provide the basis for the SPA's activities in the future.

A Public Information Committee has also been at work. This newsletter is one product of the Committee's efforts. A video about the SPA, a lecture series on land conservation, and the distribution of literature to landowners and citizens are also planned.

The SPA will continue to work closely with property owners who are interested in protecting their undeveloped land. We will also seek ways to work constructively with other land conservation agencies and organizations. And we will encourage town officials to implement the land conservation objectives and action items included in the Comprehensive Community Plan.

The decisions and actions of Little Compton citizens, landowners and public officials in the immediate future will have a significant long-term impact on our community and landscape. The challenge is great. But the concern, resources and skills of the community are considerable as well. The Sakonnet Preservation Association, through its active board and concerned membership, will strive in the years ahead to fulfill the organization's mission as a private land trust dedicated to the Little Compton community.

New Members

Yes! I would like to become a member of

Sakonnet
Preservation Association

Enclosed is my tax deductible membership contribution.

___ Individual	$20
___ Family	$25
___ Sustaining	$35
___ Special Gift	$_____

Please make checks payable to:
Sakonnet Preservation Association
P. O. Box 945
Little Compton, Rhode Island 02837

Name_____

Address_____

Town_____

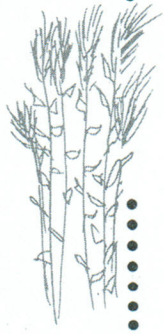
State _____

Zip_____

Phone_____

E-mail_____

The Sakonnet Preservation Association depends on volunteers. Would you like to help? _____yes
_____no



Your support helps to insure that future generations will enjoy the beauty and benefits of Little Compton's natural landscape.

The Land Ethic and the Land Aesthetic

by Luke Wallin

In his great 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold proposed that we extend ethical thinking and action from fellow human beings to nature. "An ethic, ecologically," he wrote, "is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence." Limiting our activities for the sake of other species, and their habitats, he called "a land ethic." When Leopold wrote these words they sounded strange, but half a century later many people embrace the idea. In our wetlands and woods, in our gardens and ponds, we take pleasure in restraint which protects nature.

The land ethic is widely embraced, as is the land aesthetic—guiding our efforts to promote landscape beauty. Yet these are only the starting points of land protection activities. How do we make practical decisions about when to leave a site completely alone, and when to introduce mowing or planting, for example? And what happens when the needs of different species conflict—how can we choose between them? A first step might be to list the cultural and natural values one respects. Later, one might revise the list as understanding grows.

Cultural Values

When management strategies like mowing, thinning, stream-clearing, etc., are undertaken for aesthetic goals, one must choose the historical moment whose 'look' is sought. Consider two brief cases which illustrate this:

On Cape Cod, in a state park, rangers needed to protect several landscapes (fields, woods, etc.) and several historic houses. They chose the date of origin of a single one of these houses, then sought to make the surrounding landscapes conform to the way they had looked in that period. It wasn't possible to preserve the landscape aesthetics of all the houses; the attempt to do so would have resulted in a patchwork of views (and 'ecologies') which would have lacked coherence. By selecting a single period for guidance in landscape practices, the rangers achieved a measure of ecological and aesthetic unity. They couldn't have it all. This example shows how historic preservation is subtly entwined with nature conservation.

Consider the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in upper Michigan. This park is maintained so that a canoeist may glide along beneath huge trees with an open understory. To the uninitiated, this experience seems to touch 'true wilderness.' But actually management practices have created and sustained the forest in this 'stasis' condition which mimics the ecosystem and aesthetics of the historical moment when European fur trappers first contacted the Indigenous people of the region. The forest is magnificent, visually satisfying, and offers the visitor a sense of travel back in time to an unspoiled day. (Although the land managers undoubtedly made a good choice in their target date for landscape practices, their cleverness in erasing subsequent history might tempt the visitor to imagine there was also no previous history. In other words, the canoeist might believe these parklike forest banks were a natural ideal, or 'climax' forest. In fact they were probably shaped by Native Americans through regular burning.)

When one first embarks upon a land conservation project it is tempting to imagine one is saving 'nature as it ought to be.' But usually this goal includes an aesthetic component—'nature as it ought to look.' When one acknowledges this cultural element, the next step is to recognize that cultural history plays an important role in management goals and strategies. This, in turn, requires choices: not every moment of past succession, or landscape configuration, can be represented.

An important part of the conservation task is historic preservation; to achieve this consistently, one must choose a date and manage for the 'correct look of that history.' Such choices shouldn't discourage us. They are part of the creative challenge of conservation, and they give us a meaningful role to play in the unfolding of nature. We can't avoid this role, but we can enjoy it.

Natural Values

There are conflicts which cannot be evaded. For example, recently Massachusetts land managers had a painful choice between actions to support sea gulls or piping plovers. A 'no action' policy would support the gulls.

Similarly, in western Massachusetts managers had to face the fact that domestic dogs were killing

numbers of deer. 'No action' would have supported the dogs.

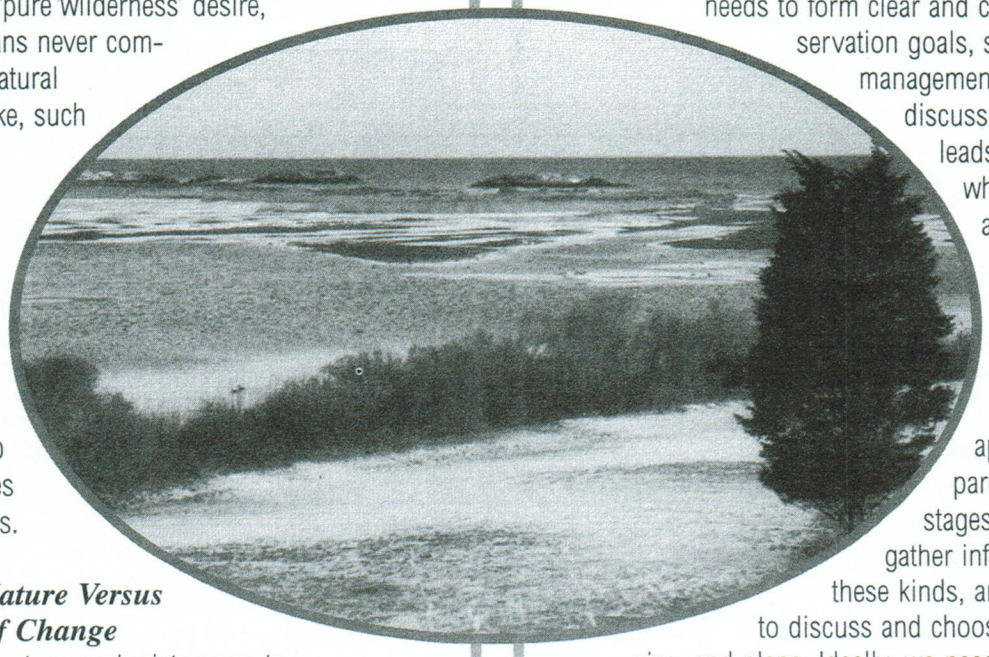
With regard to any piece of property one can choose:

(1) to make the needs of a single species paramount (e.g., an endangered species),

(2) to craft policies which will favor several species, ranked in a particular order,

(3) one may attempt what is called 'integrated management,' in which one seeks a rough balance of species needs, without selecting any one of these for special treatment,

(4) we may treat a parcel as a baseline in a scientific study, which means it must be left alone, no matter what happens. While this sounds attractive and appeals to our 'pure wilderness' desire, in reality it means never compensating for natural events we dislike, such as devastating invasions of exotic species, windstorm damage or fire. Just as in the case of cultural values, the stewardship of natural values requires choices.



States of Nature Versus Rates of Change

Early in this century ecologists came to believe in the idea of forest succession: that every forest goes through stages until it reaches a grand 'climax' state. This idea was applied to all sorts of ecosystems, with the result that each was believed to have a proper, final, long-lasting, and most favorable stage. It became the goal of conservation to identify and protect such climax states of nature.

Recently ecologists have realized that much of the focus on preserving climax states was really driven by aesthetics, as in the case of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area discussed above. In the real world, climax states change eventually, perhaps in response to hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, volcanoes, diseases, or invasion by exotics; they often shift dynamics, beginning a new succession, in response to influences like bulldozers and chainsaws.

What this means for conservationists is that we should protect slow rates of change, rather than no change at all. We need an historical account of each parcel which will include intelligent guesses about where it is 'going' with, and without, our interventions. Our goal should be wise stewardship of slow rates of change. Toward this understanding, the Sakonnet Preservation Association has begun to compile histories for all the parcels of land we protect.

Conclusions

These are some of the kinds of information one needs to form clear and consistent conservation goals, strategies, and management plans. Not to discuss such matters leads to 'no action,' which of course is an action—one which supports current trends, whatever they are.

We might approach each parcel in two stages: the first to gather information of these kinds, and the second to discuss and choose goals, strategies, and plans. Ideally, we need information from many sources, such as neighbors of the property, oral histories of the town, stories from hunters and fishers, and so forth. We also need the perspectives of professional ecologists, biologists, landscape planners and others. Initially, each stage might be approached along these lines:

Stage One

1. Describe the place at landscape scale (that is, the way it appears to humans).

A. Include Natural Features, such as landforms and species.

B. Include Cultural Features, such as agriculture, stonewalls and buildings.

continued next page

The Land Ethic *continued from page 7*

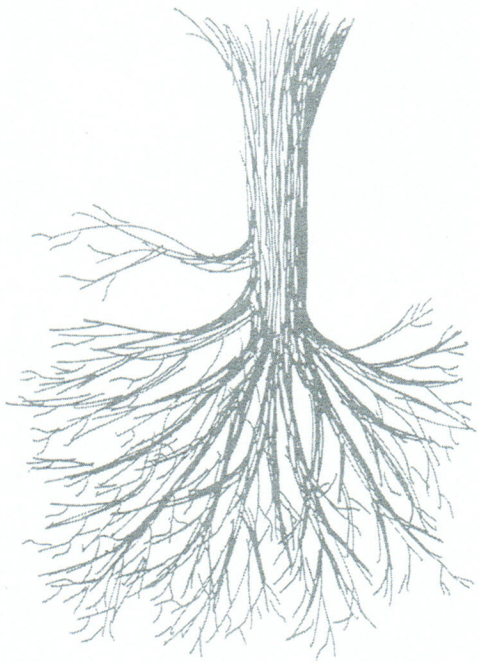
2. Give the history of the place.
    A. Include human factors, such farming uses.
    B. Include non-human factors, such as plant successions.
    C. Describe rates of change for species in the past.
3. Describe conflicts:
    A. Between species.
    B. Between other species and the human species.
4. List possible land stewardship goals, such as:
    A. Management for a certain stage of nature (through annual mowing or flooding, for example).
    B. Management to encourage a particular succession.
    C. Management to encourage a particular rate of succession.
5. Prioritize goals, such as:
    A. Aesthetics for human pleasure.
    B. Single-species benefit.
    C. Multiple-species benefit in ranked order.
    D. Mixed-species integrated and equal benefit.
    E. 'No action,' as part of a scientific baseline study.

Stage Two

1. Discuss the state of our knowledge, decide whether we need additional data, or can make provisional decisions. If we need data, plan for these with a timetable. Project the consequences of no action, and of various actions.
2. Choose goals, strategies and management plans. Set a date at which to revisit these decisions in the light of new data.

All this takes time, and many of us have to make decisions about our landscapes without the rich information we desire. But no matter how much information we have, creative decisions are always necessary. A useful short book that offers practical help is *Landscape Ecology Principles in Landscape Architecture and Land-Use Planning*, by Dramstad, Olson and Forman, 1996.

(Luke Wallin teaches Environmental Writing and Literature at UMass Dartmouth. His most recent book is *Nature and Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, coedited with Anne Buttimer, University College Dublin, Ireland.)



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