

GREAT BAY MATTERS

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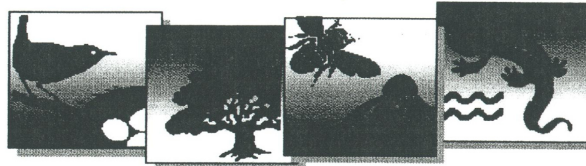
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The Power of Community Action: Giving the Land a Voice.

The Great Bay Reserve has come full circle. It was created through the power of community action when some talented and determined individuals fought against the corporate might of the Olympic Oil Company. Under the leadership of Aristotle Onassis, Olympic Oil obtained options to purchase 3,500 acres of land around Great Bay as the first step in building the world's largest oil refinery.

After successfully defeating this industrial Goliath, a group of conservation-minded citizens rallied to form the Great Bay Estuarine System Trust and laid the foundation for Great Bay to be nominated as the seventeenth National Estuarine Research Reserve in 1989. Since then, the Reserve has blossomed in its efforts to promote stewardship of the estuary through education and research. Today community action, land acquisition, and Great Bay are once again inextricably linked.

One of our biggest successes has been participation in the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership. Since 1996, this coalition of natural resource and conservation agencies has worked together to protect over



*Rachel Stevens,
GBNERR Land
Stewardship Coordinator*

4,000 acres of land in the Great Bay Region, ironically a similar acreage to what Aristotle needed to build his oil refinery. Lands protected include some of the finest examples of salt and brackish marsh, freshwater wetlands, and oak-hickory forests remaining in New Hampshire. They support a diversity of wildlife and provide a myriad of recreational opportunities. However, due to the threat of invasive species and inappropriate human use, true land protection does not just mean acquisition and setting aside, but requires active, and long-term, stewardship. At Great Bay this vital piece of the puzzle has been taken on by an amazing corps of volunteers; The Community Land Stewards. Fanning out across the uplands and shorelines of Great Bay, these quiet conservationists have become the "eyes and ears" of each property and so give the land the voice it needs.

Each Steward adopts a small parcel of land. Seasonally, they walk the boundaries, pick up trash, look for invasive species, and let us know of any other work that needs to be done.

Most importantly, they get to know their property in depth and to a level of detail that could never be done by a biologist occasionally cruising by. They have shared with us their experience of watching a heron taking flight from the salt marsh, witnessing the early morning mists across the bay, seeing a salt marsh sparrow gathering material to build its nest, and many more of the amazing things discovered as they walk their land. The work of the Community Land Stewards is pivotal in maintaining the rural nature of Great Bay in this time of rapid development and population growth. Land conservation is more than about preserving wildlife and scenic views, it allows us to connect with the land and instills a sense of community.

I wonder if the founding members of the Great Bay Trust ever imagined that their fight against an oil company would grow into such a legacy and inspire so many others to care for the land around us?