

NEW HAMPSHIRE

WEEKLY



GLOBE PHOTO / NANCY HORTON

A view of Great Bay in Durham, said to be one of the most fragile estuarine systems on the eastern seaboard.

Saving one of the last great places

By Lois R. Shea
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DURHAM - Soon there may not be many places left like this.

Heron feed in the mud flats; an osprey soars overhead, a fish dangling from its talons. Salt hay meets the sea here, wind and sun dance across the surface of the bay.

It has almost become cliché, this phrase about "the last great places." But

in every cliché lurks a shred of truth. And New Hampshire's Great Bay is truly one of those places.

For the past four years, the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership has been working to make sure at least one place like this survives.

The wide-ranging partnership of nine organizations has been quietly, persistently and effectively preserving chunks of land on the Great Bay estuary and in its watershed. In some cases, the part-

nership has literally bought land out from under the bulldozers sent to subdivide it.

The partnership has preserved more than 1,200 acres on Great Bay's waterfront and in its watershed through outright ownership and/or conservation easements.

Approximately 2,000 more acres are in negotiation - including seven bayfront tracts. At its current clip, the group's

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goal of preserving 3,000 acres here will likely be exceeded by far.

"It hasn't gotten a huge amount of attention," said outgoing Nature Conservancy director Henry Tepper, whose group has taken a lead role in the partnership. "And it's a really big deal."

The eastern seaboard, from Baltimore to Boston, has become near-megalopolis. But the encroaching cities have not spoiled Great Bay nor its environs.

But while its shorelines remain relatively undeveloped, Tepper says, Great Bay is one of the most fragile estuarine systems on the eastern seaboard — and one of the most unprotected.

Though Great Bay flows over 21 square miles and touches shore in Durham, Newmarket, Newington, Greenland and Stratham, it is easy to miss. No major road passes along its shores, no bridge traverses its width.

And that, perhaps, is why it has remained relatively pristine — but is also why it has become vulnerable.

"Great Bay has been overlooked as a focus area for comprehensive conservation," Tepper said. "When you think about New Hampshire, you think about the White Mountains, you think about the northern forests," Tepper said. "When you think about the [18-mile] Seacoast, people chuckle."

But the partnership — which consists of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, Duck Unlimited Inc., the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, the New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game, the New Hampshire Nature Conservancy, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service — has succeeded in getting people to take conservation around Great Bay very seriously.

Few people are chuckling now. New Hampshire's secret coast stands at a precipice. It has been discovered, and at a time when the economy is shrieking ahead at full-throttle. People are flocking to the Seacoast, and they all have to live somewhere.

"We don't really have the luxury of time," said Tepper. "There's nobody who thinks we're being hyperbolic when we say if we don't do this now, it's gone."

Landowners, some of whom have had Great Bay land in their families for generations, have come under pressure to sell to developers. The partnership wants people to sell to them instead.

On more than one occasion, said Bob Miller, the Great Bay Partnership's lead land acquisition man, developers have been driving out of a



GLOBE PHOTO / NANCY HORTON

The pristine waters of Great Bay reflect sky and surroundings.

landowner's driveway as he was driving in.

A 97-acre tract of land that starts as fresh water wetlands, meanders through rare oak-hickory forest and ends, eventually, in a great sweep of bayfront land with redolent apple trees and old salt hay fields, has been in Eleanor C. Knox's family from the late 1700s.

Her grandfather and great-grandfather farmed and quarried this land. When her mother and aunt were children, they would come back to visit the family farm, in horse-drawn buggies, from Haverhill.

Now it belongs to the Great Bay Partnership.

"It's a nice chunk of land for forevermore preservation," Knox said. "I just couldn't see tacky-tacky houses being all bunched up in that area."

Knox had any number of opportunities to turn this land into high-end house lots. She also had offers on the timber.

"My heart wasn't in it," she said. In one dramatic case, the partnership recently literally bought land out from under the earth-movers.

A 57-acre parcel on Great Bay's

southeast shore had been chopped into 26 house lots. A road was already built and houses were soon to follow — nice ones, too, with magnificent views.

The partnership held its collective breath and sank \$1.1 million into making that would-be subdivision a tract of forever-to-be-open space.

The road that was already built to accommodate the future homes is being ripped up.

The land around Great Bay, said Rich Cook of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, "still represents a good chunk of the remaining natural land in a coastal plain setting in the Northeast." There are salt and brackish marshes here, eel grass beds, mudflats and adjoining freshwater wetlands. "It's a very important waterfowl habitat," Cook said.

The Great Bay watershed encompasses 25 percent of New Hampshire's land mass. Five rivers feed the bay, which pulls east to the ocean with each tide. Birds live in the upland fresh-water wetlands here, and feed in the salt water. They flock here on annual migrations. Black ducks, herons, egrets, the pie-billed grebe, upland sandpiper, northern harrier, arctic tern. Blanding's and

spotted turtles depend on this habitat; so do the banded bog-skimmer, the common loon, the bald eagle.

Some 155 rare plants exist in and around Great Bay, according to the Nature Conservancy, as well as 35 types of rare "natural communities," like the Atlantic white cedar swamps and red maple flood-plain forest.

Senator Judd Gregg, who makes his home on the Seacoast, has brought home the bacon for Great Bay.

Gregg is chairman of the powerful Senate Appropriations' subcommittee on commerce, justice, state and the judiciary, which funds the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which in turn controls the National Estuarine Research Reserve. Over the past two years, Gregg has been instrumental in securing \$7 million in federal funds for the partnership's efforts; and \$6 million more is now in the budgetary pipeline. Gregg's staff says he is and will remain committed to land conservation around Great Bay.

"To [Gregg's] credit, we have not had to explain this twice," Tepper said of the urgent need to protect land around Great Bay. "He gets it."

Funding for the partnership's efforts has also come through the National Wetlands Conservation Council (\$1.2 million, with \$1 million more tentative); and through private Nature Conservancy Fund Drive.

Land on Great Bay is among the most expensive in the state. A house lot with a water view here can cost upwards of \$350,000, Miller said. So the same \$1 million that could buy and preserve thousands of North Country acres can buy tens of Seacoast acres.

"You don't get as much bang for your buck," Tepper said.

The preserved land will be owned and managed by various agencies in the partnership — from the New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game to The Nature Conservancy.

"The next big challenge for us is to agree on management of these lands," said Rich Cook, the Audubon Society of New Hampshire's vice president for conservation. But ultimately, nearly all of the preserved land on the secret coast will be available for public use.

"I guess what's happened in our society," said one Great Bay landowner who sold to the partnership "is we're all moving so fast we've disassociated ourselves from the land. Everything's turned into dollar bill.

"I drive by fields every day that are now developments ... somewhere in the equation there has to be open space left."