The Nature Conservancy

LONG ISLAND UPDATE | FALL/WINTER | 2020

Long Island depends on us.

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Conservation Success on Long Island

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Dear Supporter,

After nearly 22 years as Long Island Chapter Director, Nancy Kelley is taking on a new and different role as The Nature Conservancy in New York's Learning and Development Manager. This is a new position that reflects the needs of our time; plays to Nancy's strengths as a mentor, coach and facilitator; and is designed to help cultivate and strengthen our most important asset—our team members. I am excited for Nancy and the Conservancy.

We are deeply grateful for Nancy's leadership. During her tenure, The Nature Conservancy on Long Island has been a powerful, catalytic force for conservation and sustaining what is so special about Long Island's lands and waters. She has generated a remarkable legacy that we will continue to build upon, channeling the momentum that Nancy has helped lead.

With your support, we have made a remarkable and lasting difference on the land, including conserving many special and iconic places across Long Island. We have helped turn the tide on water pollution to bring back healthy bays, coastal waters and estuaries in order to keep what is so special about Long Island. Whales and marine mammals have returned to local waters thanks to changes in fisheries management that we helped spearhead. And thanks to leading science, awareness building, funding and public and private partnerships—and most importantly, our robust community of supporters like you—we are charting a course for a sustainable future for Long Island.

We thank Nancy for helping us get this far. Conservation success on Long Island and in Long Island waters is fundamentally important to The Nature Conservancy's mission success.

Going forward we will actively promote the role of nature in making the people and wildlife of Long Island safer in a climate changing world. We will work closely with communities across Long Island and assist with a dramatic and essential build out of renewable energy infrastructure. We will continue to push for clean, drinkable water and healthy water quality in our bays and harbors. And we will create healthier, more resilient coasts to protect Long Islanders as sea levels rise.

Please join me in congratulating and thanking Nancy. And, as always, we thank you for your support as we work together to protect the lands and water that sustain us all.

Sincerely,

Bill Ulfelder
Executive Director, The Nature Conservancy in New York

COVER Snowy owl on a Long Island beach. © Yaron Schmid

Nitrogen pollution from residential cesspools and septic systems is the largest single cause of degraded water quality on Long Island. To keep local waters safe for swimming, fishing and drinking, The Nature Conservancy has been working with partners to reduce nitrogen pollution entering our creeks, bays, harbors and drinking waters.

New Wastewater Systems Improve Water Quality

In April 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Justin Jobin, Environmental Projects Coordinator for the Suffolk County Department of Health Services was swamped. Jobin runs Suffolk County's Septic Improvement Program, which provides financial incentives to residents who elect to replace residential cesspools and septic systems with new, alternative systems to improve water quality. The program saw a threefold uptick in the number of applicants reporting a failed cesspool or septic systems compared to the prior year.

People working from home and urbanites fleeing to summer homes means a lot more load on their systems. More volume causes aging systems on the brink of failure to crash—often leading to sewage backups into homes.

"These old cesspool systems were never designed to handle the increased volume of flushes, showers, laundry and dishwashing that stay-at-home orders brought along with them," explains Jobin.

The recent flurry of failed systems points to a larger problem. Cesspools and septic systems, whether functioning or not, don't remove nitrogen, which is linked to water quality woes in Suffolk County. They are responsible for approximately 64% of nitrogen pollution from local groundwater to surface waters. New, alternative systems successfully reduce nitrogen in wastewater by over 70%. Upgrading cesspools and conventional septic systems is necessary to ensure healthy local waters.

"Wastewater containing nitrogen pollution leaches into our bays, harbors and drinking water. In high amounts, it fuels harmful algae blooms," says Kevin McDonald, Conservation Policy Advisor for The Nature Conservancy in New York. "This, in turn, poses severe public health issues. It contaminates fish and shellfish, threatens our drinking water supply, closes beaches to swimming and threatens the Long Island way of life."

Fortunately, in concert with town and state government, the Suffolk County Health Department has replaced 557 residential septic systems as part of the County's Septic Improvement Program, which offers County and State grants of up to $30,000 to residents who wish to voluntarily upgrade to these new technologies. The Department recently secured an additional $3.7 million for this purpose from the Suffolk County Legislature.

"Demand exceeded capacity for 2020 but thanks to the Suffolk County Legislature and Program partners, we've received an additional $3.7 million in County funds. The exponential growth of the program speaks to the need for a reoccurring revenue source to replace outdated systems, and it also speaks to the public demand for adequate wastewater treatment across Long Island," adds Jobin.

Conservation and Communities

We sat down with Marcela Maldonado, one of The Nature Conservancy's Preserve Coordinators in New York to get her perspectives on current events as they relate to conservation.

What do you see as your biggest ah-ha moment in recent times related to conservation and communities?

During Covid-19, the week the stay-at-home orders were issued for New York, our preserves across the state were very busy. People coming from dawn to dusk. Our trail counter later confirmed that visitation increased by three times to the prior year. Not many of the people coming were Black or people of color. As a land manager of color, this moment forced me to explore and deconstruct how we, the environmental movement and land management organizations, both protect and provide access to land. As stewards of this land, we must provide equitable access to traditionally excluded demographics and protect the ecological health and resource sustainability of the preserves we manage. Access and protection are not mutually exclusive. In fact, creating equitable access without responsible stewardship is dooming equitable access to fail.

What are some of the issues limiting access and equity?

There are many barriers to access: for example where preserves are located, how to get there and how outdoor spaces are designed and maintained. Limited uses exclude how many cultures experience nature. Add to that racism and acts of discrimination in nature, etc. Even before the pandemic hit these barriers were having real impacts on access. In fact, the 2010 National Park Service Visitor Services Project and the 2018 Outdoor Industry Association Participation Report showed non-white users were underrepresented in the National Parks and in outdoor recreation in general. The people who are most impacted by lack of access to nature are also those who have been systematically excluded from outdoor spaces and nature and, ironically who would benefit most from access.

As a land-owning organization, we need to have a real conversation about where our preserves are located, how hard they are to get to, and how they are managed. We need to examine how these facts and practices are part of the reason why inequities in access exist. Only then can we start to bridge the gap in how people of all races and ethnicities are able to access and use outdoor spaces and nature.

What are some things that we can change in terms of how our preserves better serve local communities?

Modern land stewardship must rise to meet modern challenges. The good news is The Nature Conservancy in New York is working on putting many of these actions into play. The way I see it, there are three principles guiding our work:

1. Manage for sustainable, not idealized, use

2. Embrace a wider idea of what nature and outdoor spaces look like and who they serve; and

3. Prioritize communities that have been historically excluded and invest in equity of access.

With all of these measures in place we can offer the best experience of nature to a wide variety of people and inspire the next generation of conservationist to get involved.

Google "Modern Land Stewardship Requires a Modern Philosophy by Marcela Maldonado" to learn more.

"In 2020 we are dealing with a reckoning. Covid-19 has laid bare the inequities in every aspect of our society and they are impossible to ignore. This reckoning is happening everywhere and that includes outdoor spaces and nature."

– Marcela Maldonado

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Conservancy Preserves are Crucial to Science and Solace

The Nature Conservancy has created the largest network of private preserves in the world—providing opportunities for people to connect with nature while protecting wildlife and the natural resources that bring us clean air and water. And this powerful network is more than just a host of pretty places.

Many of our New York preserves are living laboratories where scientists are studying the most pressing conservation challenges of our time. Conservancy lands and waters are increasingly being used as model sites for developing new tools and solutions for dealing with a changing climate.

"It's an exciting time at The Nature Conservancy as we are using our preserves for research and to advance a future where nature and people thrive," says Mathew Levine, Director of Stewardship for The Nature Conservancy in New York.

Our preserves are also inspiring the next generation of outdoor lovers and conservationists. The Nature Conservancy's publicly accessible sites in New York collectively draw hundreds of thousands of people annually. This year, they're playing a critical role to help people cope with the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The experience of the outdoors has never been more important," explains Marcela Maldonado, The Nature Conservancy's Preserve Coordinator in New York. "Most of our flagship preserves are seeing three to four times the visitation they typically receive. We're delighted that we can provide people with a respite from the stress they are feeling."

And Conservancy sites are increasingly being used to provide new access opportunities for underrepresented communities and for people with mobility challenges.

We're managing our flagship preserves as a network of publicly accessible places that provide access to multi-use outdoor recreation opportunities. We're engaging our visitors with new signage and better trails. And importantly, we are working to create equitable access for people that have been traditionally excluded from enjoying such places.

"In an effort to expand our reach and bring nature to more people, we are starting up partnerships with organizations that represent or serve communities of color like Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro and Westmoreland Sanctuary. We're piloting these partnerships in the greater New York City area, and hope to grow meaningful relationships across New York state," Maldonado continues.

Soon, we will be making more preserves accessible to low-mobility users. Currently, Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island, our Boquet River Preserve in Essex County and Thompson Pond in Duchess County have wheelchair-compliant trails.

By the Numbers

From Montauk's coast to the Adirondacks' High Peaks to the Great Lakes' shoreline and beyond, The Nature Conservancy in New York is leading the way to building a resilient future. We are united in the need to protect land, water and all the life it sustains.

As 2020 was a challenging year for all of us, we are so grateful for your support in helping us tackle the greatest environmental threats of our time. Here's a look at the recent accomplishments and cumulative efforts of our New York team. With special thanks to the multitude of partners that we work with in support of our efforts.

8,500

native trees planted for climate resilience in the important Tug Hill region this year.

1.1

miles of vital native fish habitat reconnected in the Finger Lakes region.

700+

volunteers in New York now enrolled and advancing our mission on the ground and in the water.

15

states from Maine to Florida voted to protect Atlantic Menhaden using holistic fishing management approach.

3,350

trees identified and measured to study the health of Mashomack Preserve's forests.

11%

of trees in the Adirondacks threatened by hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive insect that we're mobilizing to control.

1,000+

supporters attended our Power of Nature virtual event series.

$3.7 million

approved in Suffolk County to fund its landmark septic system replacement program to improve water quality.

© William Madden

106

vacant parcels, totaling 22 acres of valuable wetlands conserved in a flood-prone area of Mastic Beach, Long Island.

28,000

saplings planted in Jamaica Bay, New York City as part of an effort to expand the urban forest.

For more information, visit **nature.org/newyork**

There has never been a detailed map of the extensive network of nearshore reefs and coastal habitats throughout the Caribbean—until now. The Nature Conservancy is using aerial technologies to create precise visualizations of important marine environments, like coral reefs, throughout the region.

Taking to the Skies to Protect the Seas

Thanks to satellites, a high-tech aircraft, aerial drones and scuba divers, The Nature Conservancy is building three-dimensional habitat models, revealing the location and condition of the Caribbean's coral reefs, seagrass beds and other oases of underwater life—in order to best protect these vital habitats.

The maps will help guide solutions that address the unique environmental threats faced by each island nation and prioritize climate adaptation for the 44 million people who call the region home.

"Well-managed natural resources are critical to the economic security of any country—especially those in the Caribbean that are so heavily dependent on reef-associated tourism. But you cannot protect what you do not know is there. These state-of-the-art maps provide a new level of detail about reefs and other important habitats that will help us make smarter investments in conservation. The Nature Conservancy and our partners will use the maps to guide our work in the Caribbean, and we believe this can serve as a model for other protection and management efforts around the world," explains Dr. Robert Brumbaugh, Executive Director for The Nature Conservancy's Caribbean Division.

Caribbean communities depend on more than one million square miles of marine resources that have sustained them for generations, including the essential coral reefs that provide livelihoods, food and tourism revenue. In fact, half of all jobs in the Caribbean region rely on healthy marine habitats. A recent Conservancy-led study found that reef-associated tourism generates close to $8 billion annually for local economies.

NEW YORK – CARIBBEAN CONNECTIONS

One of New York's most vulnerable birds, the Bicknell's thrush, spends its summers in the Adirondacks and winters in the Caribbean. This migratory songbird is facing severe loss of habitat due to deforestation and climate change. But to help populations rebound, The Nature Conservancy is protecting its specialized breeding spots: high-elevation spruce-fir forests in the Adirondacks. And in the Caribbean, we're supporting management of Haiti's Parc National La Visite. In addition, we're restoring the native forests in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica which provide food and habitat for Bicknell's thrush and a host of other migratory species.

The Nature Conservancy

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WE'LL BRING NATURE TO YOU

Can't get out on the trails this fall? No sweat. We'll bring nature to you.

To learn about our exciting work in New York and in more than 70 countries around the world, join a virtual event, read our latest blog, or check out The Nature Conservancy's award-winning magazine.

Visit nature.org/newyork

The world we depend on depends on us.