

Norwalk, Connecticut

Maritime Aquarium Hearing Tuesday, June 6, 2000

The third hearing occurred at the Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, Connecticut. More than 50 attendees paused to listen to the testimony of nearly 30 spokespersons. The hearing was chaired by John Atkin, president of Save the Sound, Inc.

“Just imagine what Long Island Sound waters will look like in 75 to 100 years if we don’t really encourage the preservation of critical watershed corridors.”

~ Michael Aurelia

Jake Wise, education assistant at Save the Sound, emphasized the importance of habitat restoration and community involvement in restoration projects. Save the Sound published a Long Island Sound Conservation Blueprint, a manual designed for community groups, local governments and individuals that are interested in beginning a restoration project, which Wise referenced.

“There are various examples of reserves throughout our country, which provide guidance and inspiration. These include, but are not limited to, reserves focusing on habitat, no-take zones, underwater areas and scenic vistas,” suggested Wise. “In our testimony, we have chosen to highlight local potential habitat restoration sites, which were chosen as part of a habitat initiative restoration collaborate.”

Charmaine Rawsthorne of Stamford brought pictures from 38 years ago when the area

contained a natural wetland. She spoke of a highly pleasant, duck and gull inhabited area full of wonder and unspoiled by developmental contamination. Then she sadly reminisced of how the once natural marsh of Cove Island was transformed into a dump. Rawsthorne concluded with the stinging reality that she’ll never be able to share with her children the beauty and exhilaration of the property.

Louise Golub, environmental co-chair of the League of Women Voters of Norwalk, also offered a personal statement of support for the reserve, in addition to voicing the League’s longstanding position of open space with respect to acquisition and restoration.

Wetland director for the Town of Greenwich and representative of the Connecticut Conservation Association, Michael Aurelia presented ideas for funding and tax incentives to restore lawns to fields and forest areas. Aurelia prophesized the Sound’s irreparable



devastation because of the encroachment of industry on nature. “I think we’ve seen a short-term blip in the improvement in Long Island Sound because we’ve spent hundreds of millions of dollars on sewage treatment, but as we continue to develop all the upland that runs into the Sound, I think the long-term prognosis is not good,” stated Aurelia. “Just imagine what Long Island Sound waters will look like in 75 to 100 years if we don’t really encourage the preservation of critical watershed corridors.”

Comments on the Reserve Concept

Hope Hageman, president of the Friends of Sherwood Island State Park, said the reserve concept should be an effort to build a “comprehensive system of open space protection to



safeguard habitat and water quality and to make the Sound more accessible to the public.”

Hageman continued, stating that, “The Friends of Sherwood Island believe that knowledge can break the gap between the goals of preservation and recreation, and that education can help to make public access compatible with conservation. We cannot overemphasize the need to educate the public about the fragility and complexity of our shoreline ecology. We envision a Long Island Sound readily accessible to a public who understands it, respects it and knows how to care for it.”

Jessica A. Kaplan, watershed coordinator of the Norwalk River Watershed Initiative, voiced her support for the Long Island Sound Reserve concept. This effort must be “intended to safeguard and enhance habitat, protect and enhance water quality, and make the Sound more accessible to the public.”

Various federal and state partners adopted the Norwalk River Watershed

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Action Plan and signed a pledge for the watershed. The pledge recognizes “that rivers and watersheds need to be viewed as a central feature in our landscape that require organized, public and private efforts along watershed, as well as political boundaries,” said Kaplan. “We believe that the establishment of the Long Island Sound Reserve supports the goal of our Norwalk River initiative and will lead to the healthy and

dynamic watershed envisioned in our action plan.”

Norwalk resident Gary Sorge supported the reserve “110%” if it meant the public would be educated concerning non-point pollution control, proper lawn care and wetlands. “If the reserve means education, if the reserve means that more people will understand what a healthy tidal environment is all about...I’m all for it.”

Attendees listed various reasons in support of the selection of their preferred sites, such as Long and Pleasure Beaches. Charles Barnard, Jr., board member of Saugatuck Valley Audubon, said, “I think this area is very important because it is one of the very few remaining dune habitat areas that is left undeveloped certainly in western Connecticut, and, as such, it’s host to such important species as federally protected plovers.”

Sites in the area for the Reserve System

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~ Gary Sorge

Many participants mentioned possible sites for restoration. Jake Wise listed 11 potential habitat restoration sites in the Norwalk area. They included Chimmon Island, Flock Process Dam, Sheffield Island, Darien Gorams Pond, Holly Pond, the Rowayton River, North Scott Cove and the Arrow Headway site. In Westport he advocates for nine sites including Calkino Island, Sasco Brook Dam and the Saugatuck River north of Route 1. In Fairfield, he suggested 14 sites including Mill River, Tide Mill Dam and Pine Creek East. In Bridgeport, he recommended six sites including Pleasure Beach. All in all, he identified 40 habitat restoration sites that could be part of the reserve system in this region of Long Island Sound.

Barnard also asked for consideration of the restoration of Black Rock Harbor and Pine Creek East. He also suggested the 40-acre field adjacent to the McKinney Great Meadows, Connecticut’s only confirmed nesting habitat of the northern harrier. “I know one of the criteria here is that you’re supposed to have support in the community, and I believe that a lot of the community supports the marsh restoration,” concluded Barnard.

Other bird enthusiasts proposed their preferences. “From the bird point of view, I am particularly interested in a number of sites,” said Jack Faulkner, board member and past president of the Darien Audubon Society. “We have, for example at Weed Beach, a small, sort of a pearl, a few acres of woods behind the beach. And, in the spring a couple of years

ago when we happened to hit the warbler migration right, in a couple of hours, we saw 16 varieties of warblers there and more than 60 varieties of birds.”

“I would like to see ways that we continue to protect all that land along the way and protect the water that is coming in to purify it through the marshes and through forests along the edge rather than just being poured out between houses,” Faulkner concluded.

Also in support of breeding habitats, Elizabeth Johnson of the New Canaan Audubon Society added, “We need a good back log of data in order to be able to determine the success or the failure of the species, and so please try and save and preserve any and every island where such breeding is occurring or stop over is occurring.”

Some participants maintained that the reserve concept should be inclusive of developed areas. “I’d like to see the Long Island Sound Reserve system adopt city spaces, like town parks and school yards and golf courses

and highway corridors, as part of the reserve system and then begin to help them learn how to manage for bio-diversity,” said Jeff Cordulack, representative of SoundWaters, Environmental Council of Stamford and Stamford Land Trust. “We’ve been managing those areas for the other purposes for a very long time and the reserve concept stretches beyond the shores up into the watersheds.”

Grace W. Lichtenstein, president of Preserve the Wetlands, went on record supporting the Long Island



Jeff Cordulack/Soundwaters.org

Sound Reserve and open space initiative. She also described an opportunity to continue restoration of the tidal habitat in Norwalk at Wilson Cove. “This habitat restoration for the Wilton Brook Watershed area ending at Wilson Cove is an area of about 650 acres, the probability of another amount of funding being needed to complete the job is very real,” said Lichtenstein.



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Diane Selditch of SoundWaters supported the reserve concept with respect to urban parks and urban spaces. “I think that Cove Island in Stamford represents what the uses of the Sound have been through history...from Native Americans through the Industrial Revolution, and then the possibility that land can be returned to the public to use as a park,” stated Selditch.

“Planning and Zoning Commission as well as Conservation Commission staffing is so important. We want a balanced approach to development.”

~ Diane Lauricella

She maintained that all of SoundWaters supported the reserve system, “especially so that the people in urban areas could come in and enjoy the area.”

Mechanisms to protect open space

Speakers such as Don Nelson, president of Norwalk Clean and Green and Greenways council member, mentioned other successful area restoration projects that incited community interest, “There’s an organization called Rails to Trails which helps convert old railroad tracks into greenways,” said Nelson. “Folks who are dedicated to try to find ways to make certain that the Norwalk River survives for all of us.”

Alan McKissock, Norwalk Land Trust, urged preservation of significant buffers along rivers. “They have a sort of an understanding among the Wetlands Commission to keep a buffer from the inland wetlands to the first building that might be developed, and I think in Norwalk we should have a buffer along the remaining open space.”

Alicia Betty of the Trust for Public Land named three essential elements that aid successful implementation of a program: prioritization of land, lever-

aging accounts and forming partnerships. “According to the EPA, from 1982–92, Connecticut has developed in an average, 8,400 acres a year. To counter the pressure of development, we need to look at protecting land for open space conservation, and certainly a comprehensive system of land preservation on the Sound serves that purpose.”

Betty continued, stating, “Large land conservation projects most often require an assemblage of funds from various sources – state, local and federal. Through this Long Island Sound Reserve concept, we hope to focus some of the federal dollars directly to our state and directly to Long Island Sound for open space acquisition. We’re in the midst of a five-year program in which Governor Rowland of Connecticut has pledged to spend \$166 million on open space funding alone.”

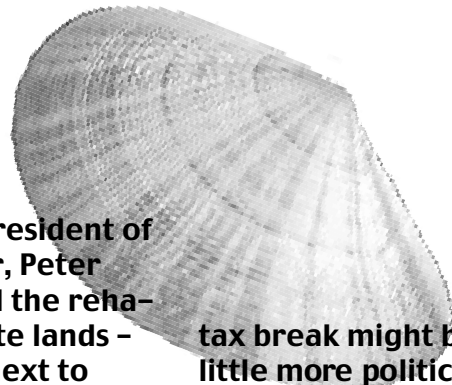
Others mentioned the importance of zoning. Marny Smith testified about strictly-enforced zoning for protection of coastal wetlands. Smith suggested that what is needed is “some kind of stipulation in the zoning regulations for waterfront property that says housing developments of certain kinds must be eliminated, or must not be permitted.”

Diane Lauricella, vice president of Norwalk River Watershed Association, called for a greenway along the Route 7 right-of-way and said open space protects watersheds. “Access by the public must be balanced, but you have to include the tourism value of having a reserve system because that brings in the dollars that will also be the causation of people caring about the reserve,” said Lauricella. “Planning and Zoning Commission as well as Conservation Commission staffing is so important. We want a balanced approach to development.”

Thomas Aikenhead, vice president of Preserve the Wetlands, submitted written testimony in support of wetland preservation. He recommended that, as various governmental bodies “continue monitoring clean-up efforts in the Sound, that special attention be given to the needs of those men in businesses whose work and crops have as their first requirement, clean water.”

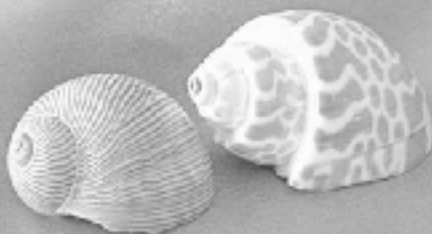


North Fork Audubon Society



Sailor and resident of the Norwalk River, Peter Libre encouraged the rehabilitation of private lands - especially areas next to streams. “There are lots of forests that have been reduced to lawns and I think that we can consider giving tax breaks to homeowners that decide to allow a lawn to become a forest again,” said Libre. “Maybe it will come that zoning would be another way to do it, but a

tax break might be a little more politically appetizing way of doing that.” He suggested that forested buffers rather than lawn that must be fertilized and kept pest free, could greatly contribute to water quality in the Sound.



Concluding Remarks

Paul Saviano of Norwalk, chairman of the Water Quality Committee for the Harbor Management Commission, stated, “The challenge now lies inland with non-point source pollution. We need to change the way we view our waterways and how we have to care for habitat.”

Jalne Jaeger, vice president of Saugatuck Valley Audubon Society expressed concern over the impact of lawn care practices on the Sound and highlighted the need for sensitive management of our state parks to protect habitat.

Morgan Silk of Westport highlighted the need to support our state parks and pointed out that air quality also affects us.

Reasons for reserve support varied from loss of habitat to loss of natural resources. “I would just like to reiterate...the importance of doing things in urban areas. Over time, natural habitat has a chance re-establish itself. If you go in to places where that has happened, you feel like you’re in a refuge of birds flying all around, birds you never see in other parts of Stamford that are more developed,” said Richard Nichols of the Shippan Point Association in Stamford.

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~ Paul Saviano

Save the Sound president John Atkin concluded the hearing by stating that based on testimonies so far, the reserve concept is definitely one worth pursuing.

